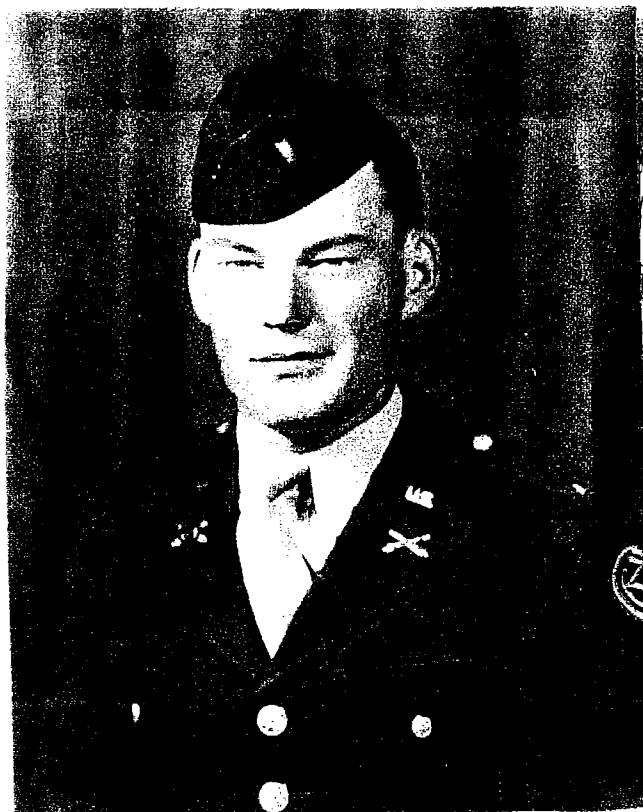


Dear Major Baum,
I am pleased for this opportunity
to thank you and all the Task Force
men for the daring rescue mission
freeing the P.O.W.'s of Oflag 13B on
March 27, 1945.

This date and your Task Force
will live in my memory forever.

My sincere thanks,
Jay A. Drake
102nd Infantry Division



NINE DAYS TO FREEDOM

March 9, 1945

I, Jay Drake, arrived at Oflag XIII B located near Hammelburg, Germany with 423 American POW's completing a journey that started from Oflag 64 in Szubin, Poland on January 21, 1945. On that January 21st date, 1459 American officer POW's left Oflag 64, a German prisoner-of-war camp for American ground force officers, carrying all their survival possessions and walked into a snow storm with temperatures at -20 degrees F. below zero. We were to march west to keep us from being overtaken by the advancing Russian army. After 45 days on the road covering 570 K.m., 1,200 POW's reached Parchim, Germany. Along the way 260 POW's had escaped to await the Russian Army or were sent to other camps because they were too sick to travel, 423 of the total 1200 men were sent by box car to Oflag XIII B, about 400 were sent by rail to a camp near Berlin, while the remainder of the 1,200 men continued to walk from Parchim to Oflag XIII B. I arrived with the group of 423 in the box car.

March 27 1945

An American task force from the 4th Armored Division liberated Oflag XIII B. The task force was commanded by Captain Baum and consisted of 53 vehicles including tanks, armored half tracks, maintenance vehicles, and two command jeeps and employed a force of 294 men. Their mission was to penetrate the German defenses, fight their way 50 miles inland and liberate our POW camp, then return to the main American forces with as many POW's as they could carry.

Upon the arrival of the American task force, the German commander of Oflag XIII B ordered his guard troops out of the camp and set up a defensive position well to the rear. This action was taken to eliminate an exchange of gunfire that could have caused many POW casualties. This same camp (in a separate compound) contained 6,000 Yugoslavian officers. These officers stayed in their compound during and after the liberation. The only POW wounded during the liberation was Col. Waters who was shot through the hips while attempting to contact the task force under a white flag to advise them of the German commanders decision not to defend the camp.

The task force commander had been told to expect about 300 American POW's. What a shock when 1500 POW's streamed out of camp and up to the waiting task force vehicles. In addition to the 800 officers from Oflag 64, the camp also housed 700 officers from the American 28th and 106th Infantry Divisions which had taken the brunt of the recent German offensive in the Battle of the Bulge.

In the gathering dusk of this liberation day and climaxing what seemed to be hours of waiting and milling around the task force, we were finally assembled and told what the situation was and that we had three choices: 1-Head west on foot in small groups to the main American forces about 50 miles away; 2-Ride back with the task force if you were fortunate enough to be one of the 300 they had the room to take; 3-Return to the POW camp and German control. Many of the POW's concluded that since the main American force was so distant, the safest and surest way home was to return to the POW camp. A few left in groups of 2 to 4 heading west on foot. I was one of those hoping to return with the task force.

March 28, 1945

After several unsuccessful night attempts to break through road blocks the Germans now had in place, the task force commander regrouped his remaining vehicles and announced he planned to fight through the road blocks at first light. This final attempt would be made with a limited number of POW's that could fill in for his injured or missing troops. They would leave with about half the task force vehicles cannibalizing those left behind for ammunition and gasoline. At this point Col. Goode, the senior American POW officer announced that he felt that most of the task force POW's wanted to return to the camp and they started the walk back. A few POW's, mostly former armored force people stayed with the task force. I turned to Edward Lockert who had been my travel buddy since leaving Oflag 64 and said, "Let's head west!" Ed replied that he was going back to camp with the others. Two fellow POW's overheard my conversation with Ed and said that they would go with me. So Robert Corbin, Warren Smith and I became a team and we headed west on foot.

Our first thought was to put as much distance between us and the task force as possible before first light. It was now 0300 hours. We traveled at a fast pace for about two hours until the first hint of daylight, then we found a good hiding place in thick bushes to wait out the day. We had left Oflag XIII B with our Polish great coats, gloves, and hats but no blankets. Our food supply consisted of one loaf of bread that I had taken from a German truck the task force had knocked out. I also had an "escape compass" that the Germans had not found since leaving Oflag 64.

A little before mid morning we heard the German 88's firing at the task force. In a short while the firing ceased. A couple hours later we observed members of the task force heading west on foot and knew the task force was destroyed or captured. All that first day we saw POW's and German soldiers playing hide and seek. We stayed put close to the ground and well hidden throughout the day.

DAY 2:

When full darkness closed in we left our hiding place and traveled southwest. We masked the white of our face and hands at the first opportunity that mud was available. We did not travel on roads or pass through villages. When we came to a road or village we backtracked and went around it, or changed direction. For every mile we traveled west we went two miles north or south. As night progressed we entered extensive pine forest plantations and found that the only way to travel through the pines was to follow in the fire lanes. Every mile or two there would be a wide fire break some traversing north-south and some east-west. We followed the east-west fire lanes. It was so dark the only way we could maintain our direction was to look up and observe the pine trees on each side silhouetting the fire lane boundaries against the sky.

I was the "point man". Corbin walked ten yards behind me and he was to watch and listen to the flanks. Smitty brought up the rear ten yards behind Corbin and kept a watchful eye and listened to the rear so that we would not be overtaken. The darkness was so intense in the pine forests that when I stopped to listen or consider a change in direction I would first feel Corbin bump into me and then Smitty bump into Corbin. Occasionally the moon would shine through and we could see the dim path we were

following in the center of the fire-break. On one rest period we moved from the moonlight path to the cover of the pines. Shortly after we sat down to rest, a German patrol came down the path we had just vacated. Lesson No. 1: Don't take a rest break unless you are well hidden. After that close encounter we kept watch on the traveled portion of the firebreak and moved north or south to a east-west lane that indicated minimal travel paths.

DAY 3:

We ate the last of our bread before leaving our daylight hideout. This was the night of the river crossings. We made three river crossings. I am sure it was the same river meandering back and forth across our westerly path. Using the bridges was out as the rivers formed a natural funnel and the Germans had placed guards on each bridge to pick up the fleeing POW's. At each river crossing we would disrobe, tie our clothes and shoes in a bundle and swim or walk across the river. Upon reaching the opposite side we used our hands as a squeegee to remove the water from our bodies, then we would dress again. After the three river crossings, our cloths were damp and we started looking for our "day-hide". We came to a RR track and a 10'X10' frame story and a half building located next to the tracks. The first floor was vacant. The attic floor was accessible through a door in the gable end and we climbed up through this door into the attic. This wasn't the best hiding place but we were cold and the building was dry and warmer than the ground.

DAY 4:

At full light we awoke. Daylight was shining through the spaces between the vertical board siding. We observed that we were on one side of a wide and fairly open valley. The RR tracks were on one side and a road paralleled the tracks about 2000 yards away on the other side. A river ran through the center of the valley. A road cut across the valley over the river and RR tracks.

This day brought a fortunate find for us and also the closest encounter to recapture. About mid morning we observed a German army truck stop on the road on the far side. A squad of men left the truck and traveled in formation across the river bridge and entered a wooded area on our side of the valley.. After a few minutes they returned bringing ten Russian POW's with them. The task force had liberated a Russian work camp on the way to Oflag XIII B. They loaded the captives into the truck and drove off. That afternoon another German Army truck appeared with six soldiers. They proceeded to place mines in the bridge road bed. While they were busy placing the mines, the soldier that appeared to be in charge noticed our building and walked over to investigate. The inquisitive soldier entered the first floor then came out and started to the opposite end where the door to the attic was located. We crouched by the door each armed with a short wood club waiting for him to open the door. Just as he was about to round the corner one of his men called to him and he returned to the bridge and they all left. The remainder of the day was spent resting with one man on guard. Lesson No.2: Don't choose a day hide without a back door.

When darkness arrived we opened the gable door and there laying on the ground was one of Corbin's U.S. Army issue gloves. The wool knit glove with a leather facing

was easily identified as U.S. Army. If the inquisitive soldier had seen the glove and had known of the POW release, I am sure he would have summoned his squad and made an armed check of the attic. Before leaving the valley we decided to check out the wooded area where the Russian POW's had been just in case they left anything of value. On the floor of the wooded area, we found a number of small party food packets. Each was a cellophane wrapped package containing five cookies, a fruit bar, some dextrose wafers, and small candies the flavor of coffee. After eating our fill and dividing the remaining packets we continued west. This "find" provided nourishment for the next three days.

DAY 5:

The terrain was now becoming more open with rolling hills. The open grass areas had been terraced years ago forming pastures for cattle. The terrace walls were from 1 to 10 feet tall and they became our greatest hazard. The nights were still overcast and dark. As point man I was the first to fall over the terrace walls. From the base I would call up to warn Corbin and Smitty of the impending danger at the same time trying not to alert any Germans that may be near by. We encountered several terraces but fortunately did not get injured except for scratches and bruises.

DAY 6:

As day light approached we were back in the hilly pine forests and looked for our daylight hide. We had noticed that late evening and early morning was a time of increased German activity. Therefore, it was necessary to locate our day hide each morning before it was light enough to always pick the best spot. This morning we found a dense growth of bushes, we moved in covering our bodies with pine needles, leaves, and sticks. We fell asleep. Sometime in the early morning I was awakened. I slowly turned my head and noticed our hide was located on the edge of a deep cut in the earth. The cut ran from the top of a large hill to the bottom. We later determined it was a log slide. I then saw what awakened me. A platoon of German soldiers in full field gear was climbing up the hill in the log slide and would pass within six feet of us. It was too late to warn Corbin and Smith who were still sleeping. Fortunately the Germans were tired and interested in their footing on the rocky path so they passed by us with their heads down. If they had looked up and our way they would have spotted us as we were laying at their eye level. After a few minutes passed I alerted the others and we moved to a better hide.

DAY 7:

On the night of this day 7 we met a uniformed German nearly face to face. We were approaching a road when I saw the moon light reflect from his belt buckle. The German stood still and apparently was also aware of my presence. I stopped and soon felt Corbin and Smith as they arrived. We were still armed with the log clubs from the RR house. At this point the German decided his best course of action was to say "Goot Morgen" and proceeded on his way. We left in the opposite direction, found a stream in which we walked for quite a distance to mask our scent in case the German returned with dogs and help.

Early this morning we came upon an isolated farm and decided to spend the day in the barn. The cold nights and hard ground were beginning to take their toll and we

needed a warm rest. We moved slowly into the barn and up into the hay mow. Knowing the farmer would be up in the mow to fork hay down to the stock we moved to the outside walls and dug deep into the hay. During the day we could overhear the farmer and his wife making many reference to the "Americans" and we assumed our army was getting close.

When darkness arrived, we left the barn but not before filling our pockets with feed potatoes. We were still in a semi wooded area but it was becoming increasingly difficult to keep to the woods. We made good progress this night because we had no rivers, terraces, or encounters. The night treks were punctuated by many rest periods as we were getting weaker and weaker due to the lack of food. We found our day hide early.

DAY 8:

This was to be our last day hide. It was uneventful except for seeing a German civilian walking through the woods. He stopped and dug into the ground removing a rifle wrapped in a blanket, then proceeded on his way. We knew that this guy was not one we would want to meet.

DAY 9:

After traveling about four hours we again found our day hide early as we were getting so weak. Our stomachs had rejected the potatoes, our water supply had been from rivers and irrigation ditches and slowly our strength was ebbing away. When morning arrived we found our hide was on the edge of a cultivated field and a large village was located to the south-west. A road ran south-east towards the village. As we watched the road, we thought we were seeing American army vehicles but they were too distant to be certain. At this point we decided to take a chance and walk to the road. A German farmer was plowing the field with oxen. We waved as we walked by. The first vehicle to come by was a U.S. army jeep with two signal men. We stopped the jeep and told them we were American POW's and that they were the first American military people we had seen. We must have looked rough with our beards, muddied faces, and Polish army great coats. Their response was "Where are the front lines?" Then the driver put the jeep in reverse turned around and headed back down the road. This didn't bother us as we were elated that we were now in American controlled territory.

The next vehicle was a 3/4 ton with two combat engineers. After relating our story they told us that General Patton had set up a receiving station for the Hammelburg POW's and they drove us there. We had a big breakfast then we showered, shaved, and were issued clean clothing. We were the last POW's and task force people to arrive at the station. We brought the number to 17 (15 POW's and 2 from the task force, an officer and a 1st. sgt.) After returning to American control on April 5, we were sent to Camp Lucky Strike and then home. On May 5 we arrived in New York harbor on a ship with 900 former POW's.

EPILOGUE

Why were we successful when so many POW's failed to reach the main American forces and were eventually recaptured? The following could have played a part:

Our fortunate find of the food packets and the loaf of bread we started with was a definite advantage as we did not need to take risks to obtain food.

Wilderness skills had long been a hobby of mine. I was first introduced to the woods as a Boy Scout and had developed an interest in wilderness skills and the ability to live comfortably in the woods with the minimum of equipment and supplies. These skills served me well on family camping trips, army field maneuvers, wilderness canoe trips to Canada, hunting in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, and again on this nine day trek.

A number of the other POW accounts I have read concerning their attempts to evade recapture indicated trouble in choosing a leader and trouble in choosing which direction to travel. This was not a problem with our team. My roll as leader was established at the onset without any urging on my part. When Corbin and Smitty said, "We will go with you!" they noticed my hesitation. I felt that traveling solo offered the best chance of success. They immediately followed with "We will do anything you tell us!" So I became the lead man. We often discussed options enroute but there was never any argument when the final decision was made. The fact that I was the only one with a compass helped establish my roll. Also, since we were all second lieutenants, rank did not play a part.

We traveled at night, only occasionally in the early darkness of evening or morning. We did not travel roads or trails in the woods that indicated repeated use. We stayed in the wooded areas as much as possible.

I am sure the following was not unique to our group. We noticed an increasing keenness in our senses of sight hearing and smell as the days of being "the hunted" progressed. Success and possibly life itself was predicated on seeing the enemy first. In addition I believe we all possess senses that were developed during the thousands of years man was a hunter-gatherer (and often the hunted) which lay dormant within us and are tapped into on occasions such as this. There were three occasions not related in my story where we actually sensed danger before we caught sight of it; a hunter and his dog, a woodcutter, and a soldier and his girl. In each instance we felt the danger concealed ourselves and waited as they came into view. Have you ever been at the edge of a mountain ski run looking down over virgin snow and considering whether to take the run or not? Then something deep within you says "Don't do it!" and you listen. I believe this is the primordial sense I am referring to. I have always made it a point to listen to this inner voice.

No record was found on the number of casualties incurred by the task force or the POW's in this liberation attempt. The task force lost a few men on the way to Oflag XIII B. There were casualties in the attempts to run the road blocks and quite a few during the battle and capture of the task force on the morning of March 28th. Capt. Baum was wounded that morning. He removed his division insignia and blended in with the other

POW's. He was left at the POW camp infirmary with the other wounded. He eventually returned to his unit and the states.

The POW's that returned to camp on the liberation day and those subsequently recaptured were sent east by rail or on foot and were liberated within three weeks.

Ed Lockert returned home safely. Col. Waters recovered and continued his military career, however, the old hip wound was a source of constant pain. He died on the operating table in 1994 in an attempt to relieve the pain by surgery.

General Patton later stated that sending in the task force was a mistake. Col. Waters was General Patton's son-in-law and Capt. Baum believed Patton knew of Waters location and this was the primary reason for the liberation attempt. Capt. Baum was of the opinion that the task force should have been a force large enough to take and hold the POW camp until the main U.S. forces arrived. General Patton died as a result of an auto accident while still in Europe.

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