

This account of being captured and taken to Oflag 64 and then going home through Russia was sent in by Bob Cheatham. The author...Jonel Hill... has been to the last two or three reunions and is just getting acquainted with everybody. Both Bob Cheatham and Jonel Hill were members of the Big Red One- 1st Infantry Division. Jonel did a super job of describing his experiences.

A Personal Reminiscence About My Adventures as a 19 year Old Draftee from Southern Minnesota, an Infantry Private in Europe in World War II by Jonel C. Hill, Co F

October 1944

Replacement infantryman assigned to Company F, 26 Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division fighting at Aachen - first major German city to fall to allies. 1st Division had been constantly in combat since D-Day, June 6, 1944.

Regimental Chaplain—Fire and Brimstone warning about failing the 1st Division in any way. 1st Division elan—The Big Red One. Pride and pressure to perform.

October 1944 Huertgen Forest

50 square mile hilly pine forest south and east of Aachen. We were given three days to go through and reach the Cologne Plain where tanks would burst to the Rhine. 8th Air Force to saturation bombing on November 16 to support attack launch. Pooh! Lots of noise and no observable result. Mud.Rain. Disgracefully poor intelligence. Soaked shoes and leggings. Weeks in wet, cold foxholes. two or three days at an abandoned old castle in the forest' Cold food—C-rations mostly. Tanks and trucks stuck in mud. German log bunkers well placed, tough and dangerous. Tree bursts of mortar and artillery shells - shrapnel. Sniper fire confined us to foxholes in daylight. Once we had a-bath, clean clothes and tetanus shots.Stupid American attack played into German strength and gave up our air and armor superiority. Huertgen could have been sealed off and ignored. Battle started in September and continued until March. Battle of the Bulge came and went. Censors kept grim details from the press. Worst losses of WWII, yet it is unknown to most people. Ten U.S. Divisions tied up there in the longest single battle in the history of the U.S. Army. Thirty thousand U.S. casualties. Became experienced in combat, wary, scared, professional. Realized it was fair to pray for souls on both sides and still fight hard.

November 28, 1944

Mail call—Lois' photo arrived, joy—felt immortal. She was a freshman, U. of Minnesota. We met just prior to my being shipped to basic training. I was dazzled. Carried photo over my heart.

November 29, 1944

Merode (a village a few miles east of Aachen)—Tanks supposed to follow and break through to Cologne plain. Daylong attack by E and F companies stalled. Disgust. Dusk attack through shallow defile. BAR jammed- no tool. Disorganized entry into village. Six of us in one house. Took wounded friend's BAR. I was only one in my squad unscathed by shrapnel or bullets. My battle weary sergeant had not been seen since the attack stalled. Darkness fell. Then we gradually discovered—no officers, radios, water. I had the only ammo (seven bullets). No Noncoms. food, tanks. TD's, just empty rifles and two or three grenades. Intermittent shelling.

Around midnight could hear tanks moving. Ours? No. Then fear as inevitable counterattack came. Germans blocked the defile we had come through and went house to house. We huddled in garage, listening. High wall around street side. Tank wheeled into driveway-fired one round at house. Accented shouts."Yankees surrender." Tank traversed gun, breach opened, slammed shut. Schmeisser burp guns blistered walls. No wounds. We rejected thought I could fire seven BAR rounds into tank cannon muzzle. Laid down arms, walked fearfully out of garage, hands up. Surrendered to German paratroopers working as Panzer Infantry. Companies E and F were wiped out. — lined us up against a wall—hands up. Fully expected to be executed—but they wanted wristwatches and food. Overlooked a concussion grenade in my jacket. I considered using it for diversion, but moonlight too bright to escape. Ditched grenade. Marched to rear. Talked with young guard who envied us—"War is over for you; I will die"—he wanted to be a veterinarian. Bedded down in barn. Fell asleep to growling of Tiger Tank engines. Oddly comforting.

I was to U.S.—MIA, Missing in Action; to the Germans- KGF, Kriegsgefangener

November 30, 1944

In the morning, collected with 40 or 50 others captured in Merode. We were marched for days through village after village, being pointed out as prisoners of elite 1st U.S. infantry Division—to boost morale. .One morning, German guard told Hitler youth to give us close order drill. We refused. Guard pulled slide on Schmeisser and aimed into ground at our feet. Drill was sullen shambles and quickly over... no fun for the little SOB. Another day, slogging through a village, a grandma on a bicycle rode past us and spat right in my face. Memorable!

One day, guards promised big feed if we marched fast. Feed was greasy sauerkraut—we all threw up. Took me 43 years to try sauerkraut again. One night we were held at the Bonn airfield and could hear and glimpse twin engine Dorniers taking off singly for harassment bombing. Next morning, interrogation.

Another night we were told to climb into large moving van type trucks which were fueled, as many trucks were, from methane bags on top of the vehicles. We had heard rumors that Nazis gassed Jews to death in vans and refused to climb in until reassured several times that we would not be gassed. A one armed Austrian Captain, who was an Afrika Korps veteran, and was wearing a beautiful light grey uniform with many decorations, grinned and chuckled while telling us we would be all right. We trusted him. Nevertheless, it was frightening when the doors were closed—pitch darkness inside.

December, 5-24, 1944

About December 5 or 6, arrived at a huge transit camp, Stalag 12A, Limburg an der Lahn river. Town between Coblenz and Frankfurt an Main, East of Rhine. Interrogation—cigarettes offered as answer bait. Then uniforms taken, possibly for later use in Bulge." We were issued old Balkan army ill fitting clothes and wooden shoes, to prevent escape. No overcoats or gloves—ersatz socks. First shave since capture. Icy water from a horse trough. No soap. No bunks, just dirty straw on the floor. Cigarettes very hard to get. Bartered with guards—smoked tea in pipes. Boredom was stupefying. Day after day nothing to do. Hunger constant. Talked about family and friends. POW's never talked about sex. One day, guards bragged about a big victory. We didn't believe them. Then prisoners from the 106th Infantry Division came in. Unknown division to us. Had surrendered in the Bulge by Company, Battalion and one whole Regiment quit without fighting. Rest of us shunned and isolated them as cowards. One officer from my Company was also in the camp. Somehow, I was selected to be shipped with a large group of Officer POWs as an orderly.

December 24, 1944

Christmas Eve afternoon a large group of officer POWs and a few EM like me were marched down the hill to the railroad yards and crammed into unmarked box cars (no Red Cross on roof) with a little straw on the floor and a stove at one end where six guards stayed. We each carried a large sandwich we were told should last us for six days.

The train sat there. After dark, we and the guards sang Christmas Carols. Suddenly the sky was bright with beautiful light. We rushed to the tiny windows to see. It wasn't Santa. It was Bomber Harris, British Air Force, come to saturation bomb the railroad yards. All hell broke loose. Panic. Even the bomb explosions and ack-ack were overwhelmingly loud. People shouted, "Head for the caves!" Where? I started running with the rest—jumping rails, crawling under cars, around cars. People falling, yelling. Fear adrenaline. POWs and guards in common flight. Finally we got into some caves on a hillside. As the raid ended the guards resumed control and we went back to the box cars. Some POWs got away but most were quickly caught. Hard to run in wooden shoes or hide in comic opera uniforms with huge KGF on leg and jacket. Christmas night the train moved back down to the Rhine at Coblenz and parked. In the morning, discovered German Flak Car 60 feet away. Watched crew drill. Suit glinted on six or eight airplanes. American P38s after targets of opportunity. Then Flak Car opened up on P38s. P38s spotted it and plane after plane dove on the flak car. We stopped cheering. "Those who still had sandwiches ate them. Why die hungry? Afterward, flak crew jumped down and picked up shell and machine gun splinters, laughing and joking. We talked about our moral dilemma—and why we felt such a need to live now when we'd been fatalistic in combat. Then days and nights of travel—we knew not where, but always east. Occasional meals—one by German Red Cross handing up soup bowls in Schweinfurt. Then a meal of sorts in Frankfurt an der Oder River, east of Berlin. One cold, snowy afternoon, train stopped in a city. It felt different and we looked out. Not so grim. Later learned was Polish, not German. Bydgoszcz. Late that night, New Year's Eve, it pulled into a brilliantly lit siding. Raus! Dazed, dirty, hungry, exhausted, climbed out and herded into building. Name, rank, serial number. Photo of girl friend stamped on back. Still have it—says Oflag 64.

January, 1945

Offizierslager Vierundsechzig Szubin, Poland

Old school—five or six acres. 100-man barracks, one for EM. Bunk beds, straw mattresses, one or two blankets, two stoves in aisle, one latrine for the whole prison heard that bodies of recaptured escapees hung there. POWs mostly American officers, one Atlanta Constitution war correspondent—whose obituary I read in 1992. A few British, Italian, French officers. Wrote letters home. Mother, who was running the USO Club in Ventura, California, and girl friend learned I was POW, not MIA or KIA. Today, Oflag 64 is a Memorial. Our son, Geoff, and his wife Rita, photographed it in 1989. Days routine. Swept officers' barracks and served the two meals per day in mess hall. Twice a day Appell. 100% body count of all POWs in formation. Bitter cold, inadequate clothes. Count never went smoothly. Done over and over until correct. German guards all bundled up. Some POWs crying with pain on going inside. Salvation Army helped mentally—sent books and records. Read constantly, mostly about music. Imagined concerts patterned on Sunday radio programs I grew up with. NY Philharmonic

and Mormon Tabernacle Choir. Every day, 7:30 p.m. BBC News bulletins- clandestine radio. Red Cross helped body. They supplied weekly food parcels. German punctured all cans—prevented stockpiling food for escape. Crackers, coffee, candy, corned beef and Vienna Sausage. Still can't stand those little sausages. Always hungry. fantasy meals—vowed to keep hundreds of chocolate bars nearby after the war. Food pooled by 4 to 8 guys. Ingenious blower built from coffee cans expedited cooking meals with scraps of paper. Once even chocolate pie.

Sometimes noticed column of black smoke rising miles to the south. Stared at it often. We speculated it was a death camp. Still don't know. One day had a short uncomfortable conversation with officer from my company. Don't recall his name. We felt ashamed at being prisoners.

January 19, 1945

I became violently ill. Threw up. Fainted. Prison hospital. High fever. During night- hallucinations- girl in photo bathed my brow. Fever broke. Exhausted—weak.

January 21, 1945

Rumors of evacuation heard. Evening—American Doctor and German doctor went bed to bed deciding who was well enough to march. Several told to get dressed. Doctors stood at foot of my bed. American Doctor pleaded with German to leave one set of operating tools as I had appendicitis. High white cell count. German Doctor shook his head "NO" and turned away. I was scared stiff—too weak to even move. Guards marched out all POWs who could walk (including Doctors). Snowing. Cold. Miserable. Survivors found in mines in Czechoslovakia as laborers, when war ended in May. Eerie silence in empty camp. Worried about those marched out. I felt a little better.

January 22, 1945

Hospital orderly said I only had gastritis. Felt a lot better. Scrounged American pants and shoes. Noticed cartload off abandoned fur lined German ski trooper hats. Elegant trophy. Reluctantly decided it would be dumb to wear German equipment.

Soviet Army arrived. Tartar Infantry- Katyusha rocket trucks. Jeeps with Jerry cans for gasoline- some filled with Vodka. Studebaker trucks by the thousands. Russians liked "Studebaker" it was a code word we used to identify us as Americans.

Next day a huge bear of a Combat Engineer Captain walked in and said in broken English, "Anybody here from Minnesota?" We talked for hours. Captain Kakkonen's family had gone from Minnesota to Soviet Union in early '30s. responding to Soviet appeals to ethnic Russians overseas. He talked about his family, all killed, his job, salary, prospects—but was wistful. Anxious to hear about U.S. He questioned me at length about Minnesota and Wisconsin. Billeted his Company in the Oflag, gave me a tour of his command. Met a twelve-year-old mine disposal soldier—small hands. Next day, wandered around Szubin. Found U.S. butter in market—how come? Seemed like all Poles I met had U.S. relatives. All asked when American army would liberate Poland. Excited old man invited three of us Americans into home to celebrate German defeat. Punched hole in wall—cigarettes hidden in 1939. We smoked and cheered victory. Rumors about Americans who shacked up and stayed there. Russian atrocities to German residents, shooting through ears and hands of those they didn't kill, according to some—I can't verify. Declined offer from Soviet soldiers to "visit" the front.

January 25, 1945

Guards mounted around the camp by Soviets. Prisoners again!

January 26 or 27, 1945

Boredom, rumors, disgust, hope. No news. Officious City College of New York—educated Soviet 3rd Lt. took charge. Soviet propaganda filmed us simulating joy at being recaptured. We did it knowingly in hope someone would see it and expedite release. Interesting ethical question. Going to Warsaw. Loaded onto open Studebaker trucks. Bitter cold. Journey of several days. One night in a peasant house, featherbed. One in nice, but empty, apartment in a town square. Another in an empty office building where a drunken Shturmovik pilot strafed the area a few times. Passed through Warsaw at night. Destruction seemed total. Lifeless city. Germans had used heavy guns to defeat Jewish ghetto uprising of April and May Of 1943 and Polish Underground uprising of summer of 1945 seemed total. Lifeless city.

Praga, Poland

Trucks crossed Vistula River to Warsaw suburb of Praga.

Unloaded us at DP camp. Large six or seven story buildings. Guards. Barbed Wire. Formerly Polish Army OCS, then SS Headquarters, now our home. No news or information given us, but assigned a space literally on the 4th floor. No beds- and told when we'd be leaving. Two outside latrine buildings. Horrible. Thousands of DPs. Dysentery common in DPs. Identified nationals from 21 countries. Meals twice a day on rigid schedules. Groups marched in-ate- marched out. Picnic type tables sat 20. Sat down—uniformed Soviet giant females

served. One lacquered spoon handed to each DP. Serving ladies seized wooden poles, 10-12 feet long, and lined up at kitchen. Large 31 ounce tin cans, each with a wire loop handle lined up at serving bar and filled with soup—more or less. Serving ladies ran pole through 10 handles and went to end of table, swung pole length of table, set cans on table, and withdrew pole—Voila- 10 DPs served. Bon Appetit. Whistle blew at end of meal— DPs raised wire handle on can. Serving ladies ran pole through, took cans back to serving line for refill for next seating. Cans not dumped or washed. Oh—no napkins either! Soup was hearty— once I got a nice piece of meat. I hoped it was horse. Was I envied! Thank God for our shots. No Americans died. One day I found a group of British soldiers who had been captured at Dunkerque in 1940. They had been in Stalag XXA in Torun. They were grand to me—and so well organized and disciplined. Real survivors. They forced me to raise my spirits. American failed to teach POW survival, physical or emotional.

March, 1945

Sometime in March we were marched under guard to the railroad. Loaded into boxcars with guards, and were told we were going home. I think we went through Kiev—but we did not know destination. Trip took five or six days—hungry days. Arrived Odessa on Black Sea. Marched to huge mansion, devoid of furniture or heat. Boredom. Prisoners. Boredom. Hope and despair. No news. Rumors -one was that Roosevelt, Stalin and Churchill had met someplace called Yalta in February. Much later, learned that —Roosevelt at Yalta had urged Stalin to send American POWs home. Roosevelt knew location of POW camps.

Once under heavy guard, we were marched to a delousing facility. First bath since Oflag 64. Probably we needed it. On way back to mansion, met a long column of German prisoners—they were, as always, singing beautifully. Impressive. Soviets treated Germans brutally. We had learned to mistrust. In fact, detest, Soviets.

Late March 1945

Excitement. A ship coming. Delirious anticipation. Delays for days. Disbelief. Anger. Then marched to harbor. Suspected trick Filed on board British ship. Smelled bread baking. Excitement. Ship cast off. Odessa faded. Captain came on loudspeaker and offered prayers of thanks for our deliverance. Then angrily recited obstacles and delays Soviets had put in his way. Voice rose. Bitterness spilled out about dealing with Soviets- lack of trust, pettiness, etc. We clapped and cheered him. Then dinner. We ate and ate and ate. Slept in hammocks. Showered. WOW! In the morning we woke up to find we were anchored in harbor at gorgeous Istanbul. We were not allowed to go ashore.. Sailed out past Golden Horn through the straits past German-held Crete and into harbor at Port Said, Egypt. Huge Johnnie Walker sign dominated harbor and we suddenly believed we were free!! British Army tent camp—blowing sand, but three meals a day. Two days later, boarded a British ship and sailed to Naples past smoking Mt. Etna. Everyone hit the deck when unannounced gunnery practice opened up. Returned to U.S. Army control in Naples. Billeted in Old Bersaglieri Fort on viewpoint downtown near RR station. Weighed 130 pounds. I'd been building back up. Shots. Paid a bit of back pay. Concealed infections for fear of being hospitalized and separated from group. Wandered all over town. Ordered custom uniform. Eisenhower jacket style—yet rarely seen in Europe and not at all in U.S.—but with silver buckle. Bow tie. Flashy, and MPs ignored or believed me that it was the latest dress uniform. Opera—2 or 3 times at San Carlo Teatro—Royal Box cost only \$2.00.

April, 1945

Boarded American ship for Boston. First WWII POWs returned to States -Reporters. Roosevelt died while we were processing through Fort Devens. Debriefing by Army Intelligence. 90 day furlough .Home to Minnesota. Serenity overwhelming, sometimes tears.

VE Day, May 8, 1945.

Visited that beautiful girl at her home in Wyoming—engaged— sort of. Visited relatives in Oregon—then relatives in San Francisco. Big celebration. Took me to Top of the Mark. Me in my custom uniform. Decorations, Combat Infantry Badge. French Fourragere on left shoulder, Belgian Fourragere on right shoulder. Gloves. Polished Boots. The whole load. We excitedly sat down to enjoy the great 360 degree view of San Francisco and the Bay!! Ordered drinks. Manager came over .introduced himself, and ordered us to leave because I was under age.

Oh-by the way—that beautiful girl and I have been married since August 1946.