

By Peter Graffagnino

THE RAIL YARDS OF BERLIN

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In February 35 years ago we were walking, some one thousand American prisoners of war, across the frozen plains of Northern Poland. Our German hosts had evacuated Oflag 64, the American ground-force officers' camp near Bromberg, a scant 24 hours before the rapidly advancing Russians overran it. Presumably the idea was to "save" us from the barbaric Russian army, but probably there was also some imagined bargaining value in retaining us as prisoner-hostages under German control as the war's end approached. All of us would have preferred being left in the camp to await liberation by our then Russian allies, but the Germans had the guns and we were in no position to argue.

Actually, we did leave about a hundred or so prisoners in the camp—infirmity patients, some doctors, men who couldn't walk or who feigned illness and a group of others who hid out in the half-dug, escape-tunnel projects or somehow managed to get lost in the confusion of the hurried departure.

As we walked, day after day, the marching column grew smaller and smaller. We were not properly clad to withstand continuous daily exposure to such unremitting cold temperatures—that ranged from 40 below zero during two days of blizzard winds up to a warmer 10 below on milder days. We wore regular government-issue woolens and overcoats, supplemented by odds and ends of sweaters, combat zoot-suits, knitted caps and gloves, and makeshift head and face coverings of blankets and whatever else we could salvage from our meager prison possessions. Unfortunately, our feet gave the most trouble; there was no way to keep them warm in regular GI shoes, which could not accommodate more than one or two extra pairs of socks. Consequently, each morning as the march progressed, after sleeping out in ditches, haystacks, or in deserted, unheated barns and sheds, there were always 30 to 40 men with frozen feet who could walk no longer and who had to be left behind to whatever fate awaited them.

After 14 days of marching, about half the column made it to Stettin, some 160 miles away toward the west. We left the column there to look after another hundred men who had an accumulation of ailments and infirmities. Later we were moved with them in two small rail cars (one a slatted cattle car, the other an open coal car) to the Berlin rail yards, and, after a few stationary days there, we moved again to Stalag III-A, the large collecting camp at Luckenwalde some 30 miles south of the capital. What was left of the walking column, which continued on from Stettin, eventually turned up, still on foot, at Luckenwalde three weeks later.

There were about 50 of us packed into each of the rail cars, which sat for two or three days and nights on a siding in the Berlin rail yards. Routinely, every night, the Allied planes came over and plastered the rail yards with bombs. Most of us, confined in the cars except for two short relief-function periods morning and evening under the watchful eyes of armed guards, were resigned to the hopelessness of our predicament. It became a matter of enduring another terrifying night huddled together, hoping the bombs would miss our siding and praying that sometime soon the cars would get moving again toward a safer location. Immobilized by self-concern, we were too cold and numb and intimidated to do more than suffer silently and hope to stay alive.

It was an experience in cold and hunger and misery that few of us have forgotten. However, all of this rather long introductory description (most of which was recorded in a couple of *Bulletin* articles back in 1968) serves only as background for an amusing story to illustrate that

one man's memory of and reaction to the same experience do not always coincide with those of another.

Last year, talking to and comparing notes with another former POW who marched in that same column out of Oflag 64, we were surprised to discover that he, too, remembered the two cars and the nights in the rail yards of Berlin. He wasn't in the coal car with us, but in the other open cattle car. Sure, he remembered being cold and miserable too, but wasn't it a wild and hilarious time?

Wild? Hilarious?

John, who might easily have stepped out of the television cast of Hogan's Heroes, was a happy, extrovertish first lieutenant then; a manic, wheeler-dealer type who had spent most of his time back in the prison camp horse-trading cigarettes for food and whatever else caught his fancy. He was one of the rare ones who stayed busy constantly during his year of captivity, never seeming to have a depressed moment. Before leaving the camp, and in preparation for the march, he traded everything he possessed back into tobacco, filling his backpack and pockets with cigarette packages and stuffing many more into the space between his combat coveralls and his woolens beneath to the point where he could barely waddle. He still had a good supply left by the time we reached Berlin.

When darkness came and while the rest of us were hunkering down in fear and wishing the night would end, John had bribed his guards with cigarettes and was on the loose wandering all over the rail yards. He looked for German troop trains and when he found one would boldly climb aboard and parade up and down the aisles, a vendor hawking his wares in atrocious German, trading cigarettes to the German GIs for bread and cheese and jam and schnapps. No one seemed to mind his audacity, not even the one indignant German officer he ran into who wanted to know what the hell was going on and booted him off his troop train. But not before an exchange of liverwurst for two packs of cigarettes.

So you see, even a bleak experience has its lighter moments. It may all go to prove that misery is what you make of it, and that it helps to be born with a little self-confidence and a sense of the ridiculous.