

STALAG LUFT IV

by Harold B. Farrar

the side of the runway. Bettie tried to start the out board engine to miss the roller, but could not. We hit the roller and broke plexiglass on the lower part of the nose. The nose gear also hit and stopped us. An ambulance arrived quickly as well as a truck and tractor.

Two other crews were lost because of flak so in the end with all our problems we felt lucky.

On June 7th, the next day, we went to the flight line to look at the plane. We counted 159 holes. Old Yellow D looked pretty bad. On the right wing about a foot from the leading edge I noticed 3 or 4 ricochet bullet tracks across this part of the wing. This probably came from the fighters. These hit between No. 1 and 2 engine. Somehow, the propellers were not hit. On the leading edge of the wing was a large hole badly chewed up. Mallory Simmons, our crew chief, gave me a big piece of flak he had removed. This piece of flak is about one inch by 1/2 inch thick and 4 1/2 inches long. I still have it as a souvenir.

Simmons, Becnel and Ferich, our ground crew, placed about a dozen cans of beer they had saved up on our plane to get cool. They were placed forward of the camera hatch. We had a few hits there and they lost all but three cans.

As pilot of the crew of Sacajawea, I felt a great pride in the work these guys did. It brought us home. Luck helped too, but we made it. The June 6th Floesti mission was a tough one for the Group and the 781st. Two aircraft from the Squadron were lost over Rumania on this mission. Lt. Martin's crew bailed out and survived with some injuries as did Lt. MacFarland's crew.

Bennie Naticchioni, our injured tail gunner, said to me after landing, "Thanks, Lieutenant. I really didn't want to walk home." How in the world can you thank any one person for a performance like that? They - all 10 - did it, and did it damn well!

Through the rest of June, July and August 1944, the crew flew 26 more missions. Three more times over Floesti. Although damaged many times over, never as seriously as the June 6 mission.

John Forham caught flak in the nose turret over Linz, Austria, while we bombed the Herman Goering Tank Works. A flak wound in his right lower leg resulted in a compound fracture. Both John and Bennie recovered fully and completed their missions and returned stateside in 1944.

All members, except Lt. William Magowan who had a non-flying injury, completed all missions and returned to the states and survived the war and many years after. Today, some 52 years later, four of the ten guys that kept Sacajawea flying are still living the good life.

On July 16, 1944 on a mission to Vienna the Tipton crew began to have problems with their aircraft. By the time they left the target two engines were out and they were forced to leave the formation. After an encounter with a Me 109 they had to bail out near Zagreb, Yugoslavia. They were captured by the Ustachi troops and turned over to the German soldiers. Two days later they were taken to Budapest, Hungary for interrogation. From here the officers, Lt Dale Tipton, Lt Eugene Weiss, Lt Vernon Burda and Lt Eugene Krzyzynski, were sent by train to Stalag Luft III at Sagan, Germany. The enlisted men, T/Sgt Frank Jasicko, T/Sgt Hulitt Holcombe, S/Sgt Harold Farrar, S/Sgt Albert Ralston, S/Sgt Paul Brady and S/Sgt Michael Deironimi along with 20 other enlisted men, were sent by box car to Stalag Luft IV. Harold Farrar will tell about life as a POW. Editor.

It was now August 4, 1944 and the Tipton Crew's enlisted men had traveled over 600 miles north since they left the prison in Budapest. They uncoupled our box car at a small train station called Kiefheide near the town of Grosstychow about 25 miles inland from the Baltic Sea in the Province of Pomerania. When we got out of the box car we were hungry, weak, stiff, very tired, and somewhat scared. Our guards were replaced by soldiers dressed in the blue uniform of the Luftwaffe as we were lined up and ordered to start marching down a dirt road. We walked along the road for over a mile and a half through a heavy forest until we broke out into a large clearing and off in the distance we could see a large compound of many wooden buildings completely surrounded by double fences of barbed wire. After they opened a large locked gate we were led into an outer camp that contained the German administration/housing portion of the camp called the Vorlager. We were told we were in Kriegsgefangenenlager der Luftwaffe Nr IV, a prisoner of war camp for enlisted airmen. We were stripped of all of our clothes and completely searched. After we dressed we were photographed, finger printed, and assigned a prisoner of war number for identification purposes. My POW number was # 649 I.

This was a new prison camp that had just been activated in early May. Learning from their earlier experiences at other camps, this camp was located, designed, and constructed to eliminate as many escape and tunneling routes as possible. First it was located as far North and East as possible to keep it a great distance from the Western front, so you would have a very long and dangerous walk if you did escape. Next it was located on sandy soil in the center of a very large cleared area in the middle of a forest of trees, so you would have to dig a tunnel in sandy soil that would have to be shored up, so that it would not collapse.

About 350 acres had been cleared of trees and the camp was built in the middle 150 acres, so a tunnel would have to extend a long ways just to get to the edge of the camp and a lot farther to reach the safety of the trees. The barracks floors were raised about 30 inches off of the ground, so they could see underneath the barracks and also turn their dogs loose under there to sniff out any possible escapees. We also found out that the floors were made of two layers of wood. The planks were running in one direction on the lower floor and the planks on top were placed in the opposite direction. So you could not just remove the upper planks over a small area and still get through

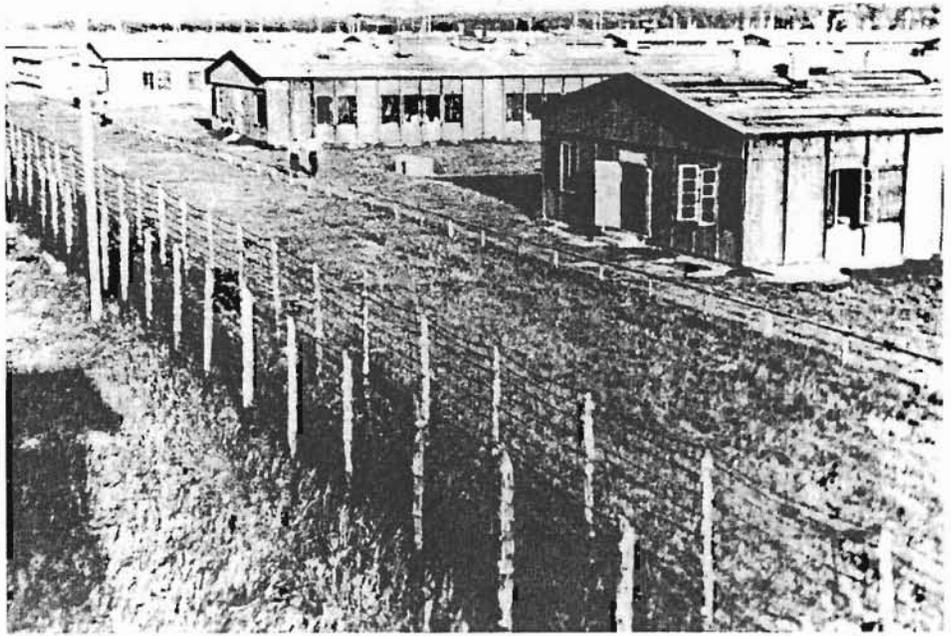
the bottom layer because they were running in the wrong direction.

The camp was divided into four compounds, or lagers, and each was a separate and self contained unit. Lagers designated "A" and "B" were side by side and lagers designated "C" and "D" were right behind them. There was a road and single gate leading into each lager. Around each lager were double barbed wire fences about ten feet high. High towers with guards, machine guns, and search lights were evenly spaced around the perimeter of the camp. These same type towers were also located behind the double fences between the lagers, so each lager had machine gun towers on all four sides. At this time Lagers "C" and "D" were still under construction, but "C" was nearing completion.

Around all of this, guards on foot with large vicious police dogs patrolled at night. There was one large guard called "Big Stoop" that was the most vicious and injured several prisoners while they were being processed into the camp. He had very big hands and liked to cuff prisoners on the ears with an open hand which caused a lot of pressure on the ear, sometimes puncturing the ear drum. He was generally brutal in everything that he did during our stay here and also later on during our forced march.

At sundown each night we had to install wooden shutters over the windows, the barracks doors were locked, and during the night we could hear the guards and dogs as they patrolled this area inside our compound.

Our crew at this time was told that we would now be living in Lager A, Barracks #9, so I will try to describe the general layout of our new home. Our lager was laid out in a more or less conventional military manner, with the buildings facing a combination athletic field and parade ground. There were ten barracks, five on each side of the field with a latrine and wash room and water pump located in the center of each row. There were no buildings across the far end as it looked out across the cleared area towards the forest and the guard towers. Across



Luft IV during construction. You can see the double barbed-wire fence between compounds and the warning line creating a no man's land area in which no prisoners could trespass. Later a prisoner from my barracks went insane and tried to climb over the fence in broad daylight and was shot by the guard. The German's then added more sloped barbed wire along the top of the existing fence.

the near end of the compound there was a large building housing the kitchen, two sleeping rooms, two offices, and a large general-purpose room that we called the "Red Cross Room" Also, located right outside this building was a shallow concrete structure that looked somewhat like a swimming pool and was full of very dirty rain-water. We never found out for sure what it was for, but some thought it was a water supply in case there was a fire, but we never saw any kind of pump and all we had to carry water in was buckets. Some of the guys made small sailboats and had some boat races, but they did not seem to draw very large crowds.

The barracks were constructed of wood and were about 40 x 130 feet, each containing ten living areas, five rooms on each side with a central hallway running down the center of the building, and at the far end there was a small wash room and a pit latrine that was only open for use at night. During the day you had to use the large out-house type latrines. Each room had eight double deck bunk beds spaced around the perimeter of the

room. There was a small round heating stove with a flat iron top that used a compressed coal brick as fuel. Only a limited number of the coal brickets were issued per room, so during the winter they had to be used very sparingly as they were also our only source of heat. There also were two tables, some stools, and a small light bulb in the center of the room that had to be turned off at 10:00 o'clock each night. All of the rooms in Lager A were already full, so they told our crew that we would have to move into the small wash room at the end of Barracks # 9.

The Tipton crew's enlisted men (Jasicko, Holcombe, Ralston, Brady, Deironimi, and myself) were still together and we all felt very lucky that we had not been split-up as we had been through a lot together in the past nine months. We had no idea where our officers were, but we were praying they were alright. When the guards opened the gate and led us into Lager A, a large crowd of prisoners started milling around us and they were all asking a lot of questions about the war, where the front lines were, etc., and where we were from? That was the first time that I found out that I did not know hardly any-

thing about the ground war and realized that I had probably been avoiding thinking about the war and was just living from mission to mission and not worrying about anything else. A few days later I was out there greeting the new POW's just like everybody else, but now I had learned a lot more about the progress of the war and other current war news about the Eastern and Western front lines.

We were issued two blankets, one American G1 wool blanket and one German blanket that was very coarse and made from horse hair. At this time or perhaps a little later Deironimi was issued a pair of black English shoes with hob-nail soles to wear in place of his heated boots. They were a lot better than what he was wearing, but not as good as our G1 shoes because when you were standing around on frozen ground which we did a lot of later on, the hob-nails transferred the freezing cold right through the shoe soles to the bottom of his feet. Some of the prisoners that came in from Dulug Luft 11 had been issued a capture kit with extra clothes and some toilet articles, but those of us arriving from Budapest had only what we were wearing when we were captured.

From the Vorlager we were escorted into Lager A and then over to Barracks # 9. We entered the barracks through the double doors into a wide central hallway and were led down to the far end to a small wash room on the right hand side of the barracks. We entered through a single door into the small wash room with four double-deck bunk beds jammed inside and there was one window looking outside on the opposite wall.

Each lager was governed somewhat differently and since the majority of the prisoners in this compound had just recently transferred here under very severe conditions from Luft V1, we were governed by the rules they had developed and operated under at that camp. Our Lager A leader was named Richard M. Chapman from Daytona Beach, FL. and he had been trained by the British airmen at Luft V1. Many of

the British airmen had been prisoners of the Germans for three or four years and had learned the hard way how to best benefit from the rules established at the International Convention Relating to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, signed at Geneva, July 27, 1929, by 47 nations. The U.S. ratified these laws in 1932 but Japan and Russia never signed this agreement. The British used these rules to usually stop obvious abuses when they were dealing with the older regular army German officers, but with officers with ties to the Nazi party nothing seemed to work.

We had an elected "American Man of Confidence", Frances Paules from Lansdale, PA., over all of the lagers, a camp leader for each lager and a leader for each room. He had signed a pledge that he would not try to escape, so he was allowed to travel between lagers when problems arose. Our lager had an all volunteer kitchen force that prepared and cooked all of our food. The kitchen in our lager had only two or three large vats and no other utensils in which to cook the food, so everything had to be mixed together and cooked like a stew or mush.

Shortly after you become a prisoner you begin to realize that probably the most important thing in your life becomes when and if you are going to get your next meal. When you read stories about young service men running around in foreign lands, they always write that all they are interested in is that famous four letter word that begins with an "F". Once you become a prisoner I can tell you with some certainty that the most important "F" words that most of us were thinking about was food, family, friends and freedom. With that in mind I will try to describe our typical first days as we were trying to learn to survive with very little food, lots of support from our friends, worrying about our family, and our complete loss of freedom. You do not realize how important freedom is until you find yourself in a situation where all the decisions are made for you by a man carrying a gun that is pointed in your direction.

Early in the morning the guards

removed the wooden braces that locked the doors at each end of our barracks and someone from our barracks removed the outside shutters that had been installed over our windows the night before. When you first woke up, if you wanted to wash up you had to take a pan outside to the well and draw the water by using the hand pump. Even though it was only August we were pretty far North, so the water was already pretty cold and by December it was near freezing. There was no breakfast as such, but the kitchen crew every morning at about 7:30 am. did prepare either hot tea (it did not taste like Lipton) or ertaz coffee. They were both hard to get used to, but eventually we decided they were better than nothing. Each room had a metal beverage container and we took turns standing in line to get our room's ration and then brought it back and our room leader made sure everyone got the same amount.

Most days we were each issued one-seventh of a loaf of a heavy grain black bread that was covered with saw-dust and sometimes we would even find pieces of wood inside. It did not taste too bad and it was somewhat moist, but if you tried to save it too long and it dried up, it got a lot of surface cracks and looked like dried clay. The Germans brought the bare loaves into camp stacked in an open wagon pulled by oxen or sometimes by cows. Sometimes they also issued us a white margarine to spread on our bread and I thought it was one of the better tasting things they gave us to eat. So usually I had one piece of bread spread with some of the margarine and either the coffee or tea and called it breakfast. We next were busy trying to become familiar with the camp layout and determine what was expected of us and how best to adjust to this very restrictive prison life. About 50 feet from the barbed wire fence was a warning line, a 2 x 4 board that was raised about 18 inches above the ground, that extended around the perimeter of the lager. Anyone that crossed over this line into the "no man's land" area would be shot on sight by the guards in the tower. This warning line around the lager

became the outside guide line for a common exercise path for all of us. Also later on some airmen would come back to the room after walking around the exercise path and announce that there was 10,220 barbs on the top row of barbed wire around the perimeter of the compound and usually someone else would tell him he made a mistake and quote some other large number as being the correct count. Also if you sat on the rear steps of your barracks and watched the passing prisoners often times you were re-united with other friends from your squadron crews that had gone down recently and sometimes you saw airmen that you had met in the various schools during earlier training.

stood at attention. One of the German counters was an older Sergeant who had lived in Chicago, spoke very good English, was somewhat friendly, wore a Green Army uniform, and he was called the "Green Hornet". We also heard that one of his sons was a fighter pilot. Most of the time the count did not come out right, so we all had to stand there until it was straightened out. In the rain and during the winter this caused a lot of hardship particularly on those that were sick from colds and various ailments, so our Camp Leader assigned a couple of our airmen to help them complete the count. Each room leader was responsible to make sure everyone was out of the barracks, but many times after a couple of mis-

filled with food that had been prepared in the large vats. The best tasting food we received for lunch was a barley cereal similar to cooked oatmeal. Nearly everyone agreed that the barley cereal was by far the best food we received. After the war when I was back home on a normal diet I tried some and it was terrible. That gives you an idea as to what the other food tasted like. Usually lunch was either potato soup, cabbage soup, a dehydrated sauerkraut soup, or a dried greens soup. On a few occasions you could see small pieces of meat in the soup. They brought the raw meat covered with a green mold into the lager in open



Luft IV - Prisoners from Lager "A" in formation for the twice a day head-count required by the German's to assure that no prisoner had escaped.

At mid-morning every day, regardless of the weather, we all had to fall out on the parade ground and line up five deep by barracks to be counted. Der Kommandant along with our Camp Leader stood in the front of the formation with armed guards lined up behind our formation, while we were counted by a couple of German NCO's. Der Kommandant was a Lt.Colonel and he was old by our standards and he stood stiffly at attention in his sharp black leather overcoat with his right hand over his heart Napoleon style. Some referred to him as "Rigor Mortis" because of the stiff way he

counts a search of the barracks produced a half dressed, sleep-eyed airman staggering out onto the parade ground much to the dismay of the Kommandant and a lot of wet and cold prisoners. Sometimes two or three guys were missing at the same time before the guards roused them out of different rooms in the barracks. After we were dismissed from this formation we had no assignments, so some played cards, others read. some gathered for class/lectures, but most just loafed around.

At noon someone from each room stood in line at the kitchen window and received a ten quart bucket partially

wagons pulled by oxen or cows. The sauerkraut or greens soup smelled and tasted so bad that even though we were nearly starving most of us could not eat it, so we had to sneak it over to our 32 hole latrine and dump it down into the pit. I know it is hard to believe, but the soup odor drowned out the prevailing odors which was no easy task. Our room leader dished out equal amounts of food from the bucket into our dish which was in most cases a small tin can and we ate it if we

possibly could.

We fell out into the same type formation in mid-afternoon to be counted again and there were just as many foul-ups in the afternoon count as there were in the morning. In those rooms that a deck of cards was available they played hearts, bridge, or other various card games or even though there were very few books you got on the waiting list and read whatever book that became available. We did not have a deck of cards in our room at this time, but we were still mostly trying to learn the system for daily sur-

vival.

We stood in line with our bucket for the evening food that was usually mostly boiled potatoes which would not have been too bad except they added a large turnip- like kind of stringy vegetable called Kohlrabis. The strong turnip taste dominated the potatoes, ruined the flavor, and made it hard to get down. You had to eat it or go to bed hungry every night. Jasicko said that some farmers in Montana raised Kohlrabis as food for their cattle, so I was feeling a little sorry for the Montana cows.

Deironimi recently reminded me that since we were one of the first crews to live in a wash room we received the same amount of food in our bucket for seven people that a room of sixteen received because the kitchen crew had no way of knowing and put the same amount of food in each bucket. Our food luck was enjoyed only for a short time as our camp was filling up fast as more and more new prisoners were arriving each week. In about four weeks the Germans decided the wash room was needed for the whole barracks to use, so we were moved out. We stayed in Barracks #9 but the rest of my crew members were put in one room and I was assigned to room #8. There were 16 beds and I was the 17th in the room, so I had to sleep on the floor. Before the end of November there were 23 in our room, so there were 7 of us sleeping on the floor.

At dusk someone from each room went outside and installed the wooden shutters over the windows. The guards closed the double doors at each end of the barracks and barred them by placing a long wooden 4x4 across the width of the opening. There was one small bulb (about 25 watts) in the center of the room that provided marginal lighting for the whole room. You had access to all the rooms in your barracks, but you soon found out that room members were rather close knit, so you pretty much were involved only with your own room.

After lockup some nights one of the leaders would come to our room and give us the latest news about the progress of the war. Later we learned there was a hidden radio used to

gather these reports and that every day it had to be disassembled and the parts hidden to keep it from being discovered. If anyone was caught with any of the radio parts or they learned the names of those involved in obtaining the messages, they would have been executed. At 10:00 o'clock the light went out and after that there was total darkness since the wooden shutters over the windows blocked out even the moonlight. I cannot really do a very good job of explaining the long nights, but sleep did not come easy even though somehow you had made it through one more day.

We had been at Luft IV for six months and then near the end of January, 1945, after lock-up, our leaders told us that since the Russian army was only a few miles east of us that we were probably going to be leaving our camp soon on a forced march. They also said that the 1500 prisoners in the poorest health were going to be moved out of our camp by train. They asked us to submit names of those we thought were in the worst physical shape and could not stand the march. Those prisoners that were in the hospital were to stay here for now. Each room submitted names and the 1500 were picked from this list. Brady, our nose gunner, had a bad knee and other swollen joint problems and he was selected as one of those to leave by boxcar. A train ride locked in boxcars traveling across Germany was no picnic as there was always the threat of being bombed or strafed by our own air force.

About 50 prisoners were put in each boxcar and transported this way for several days with very little food and water across northern Germany to Stalag Luft I at Barth. Another 1500 prisoners from Lager B were transported under similar conditions to Stalag XIII D in Nurnburg in southern Germany, and then in April forced to march about 80 miles to Moosburg.

On February 6th the remaining 6500 of us left on a forced march that lasted for 86 days and we covered about 550 miles on foot and about 30 miles in a box car. It was the coldest winter in years and we

slept in barns at night and on a few occasions had to sleep out in the open on the ground. On February 13th the Russian army was only a short distance from us, so on that day we had to walk for 23 miles in freezing weather and then spent the rest of the night in an open field.

We walked from the Eastern Front to the Western front and as the British troops approached we then headed back East until the Russian Army approached and then we turned West again and were finally liberated by the British 2nd Army on May 2, 1945. We crossed the Elbe River three times in the last six weeks of the war. We were flown to Camp Lucky Strike in France and most of us were transported home by the Navy arriving home in early June, 1945.

FOLDED WINGS

Ralph Finch, (McKenna's crew Ball Gunner) passed away in his sleep in June 1995.

Richard J. Bilger (Radar Navigator) passed away November 14, 1996 due to a massive heart attack. Reported by Stan Winkowski.

R. Leon Crouch (Ashley's crew co-pilot) passed away recently. His mail was returned stamped "deceased." Unable to get further information.

In a phone conversation with Patsy Bilger she said Richard was buried in the Lodi Cherokee Memorial Park, Veterans Section, Lodi, CA with full military honors. He served in WWII, Korean War and Vietnam War. After retirement as a Lt. Colonel he worked for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms for 27 years.

He was located by Bernie Badler just a couple of years ago. He attended one reunion, but health did not permit him to be with us in Montgomery.

Our thoughts prayers to our fallen comrades who have found everlasting peace. — you served your country well. We will remember you forever.