

The Way it Was

A story about the experiences of Private Carl Milton Winstead During World War II

Written by Carl Milton Winstead

This is the Way it was

Omaha Beach - code name "Easy Red"

I was with Company D, the 117th Infantry, of the 30th Division. On August 6th 1944 we relieved the first division at St. Barthelmy and Martin. I didn't see any officers, had no orders, and no communication. We were just dropped off at the 1st Division camp. We were with some new men from the states and they had never been under fire before.

The next morning August 7th, there was heavy ground fog and I had a bad headache. I decided to see if I could find a medic. At that time German troops began to come in on us but they were killed off. I wondered why ~~gun~~^{THE} had not fired so I went to check on it and the man that was on the gun. I found the gun but I couldn't find the gunner. I walked about ten feet in front of the gun looking for the gunner and all at once the fog lifted. Right in front of me was a Tiger tank, SS Panzer outfit. They must have been only 50ft in front of me. I could see the officer in the top of the tank. I don't know what keep him from seeing me. It must have been the grace of God. I fell down beside the road and the tank pull up right beside me and stopped. From the opposite direction came a German soldier on a motorcycle. He stopped and talked to the tank commander right beside me. They talked a while and then the tank went towards our lines.

After they left I went back to my squad. I told two of the men to see if they could get through to our lines. They returned and said they couldn't get through. I thought it would be best if we moved since there were dead Germans around. I went back and got the gun, I didn't know where the gunner was. These were new men and I didn't know any of there names. Since we didn't have communications and were cutoff I thought we

would flank them. We didn't try to^oback to our lines but to flank to the left of where the troops and tank had come. Our artillery began to fall on us so we moved about fifty yards and we came upon an old shack and I left the gun there, after taking the driving rod pin out. Just beyond the shack was an open church so I led the way across to the church. When we got in the church I made my way to the back as a lookout. I saw what I thought was one of our tanks but a closer look revealed that it was a Panzer tank. By this time I realized that we were boxed in I saw one of the German soldiers that was coming to the door I was at. When he opened the door I stepped right in his face. He had his gun out and it stuck right in my gut. It's a wonder he didn't pull the trigger but he was so scared, that he ran out calling to the other German troops. I didn't have my gun I had given it to one of the new soldiers, by this time Germans were coming all around we were just a few yards from where I saw the tank. When I got to where I could see better I found out that we were at their tank C.P. After they captured us they shook us down, and had us to line up beside each other against the wall. There was a German SS Panzer officer with his cape on and had a cap with skull and cross bones on it. He had a Burrp gun. It was my belief that he was going to leave us there; I knew tank crews don't take prisoners with them. At this time from around the corner came another SS Panzer officer, he had blond hair and blue eyes. I don't know what he told the officer that lined us up but whatever it was was good enough.

While this was taking place, things were getting hot, British planes with rockets were firing at the tanks, and our artillery was coming in pretty good. None of this was good for us though; we couldn't get any artillery the night before. The blonde hair German moved us down the road away from their tank C.P. He spoke good enough

English to tell us that we were being carried to the rear. Our artillery shells began to fall where we were. We hit the ground they were close enough to cut the dog tags off Joe that was just ahead of me.

About a half a mile behind the German line at a French farmhouse they put us in cow stalls. They called us out one by one to question us. The first question he asked me was if I was a Yankee? I told him I was not a Yankee. Then he asked me if I was Tommy? I told him I was not. He asked me if I was Canadian, I told him no. He asked me again if I was a Yankee, and when he asked me the first time in my mind my grandmother had all my life told me I was a Rebel. I was no Yankee you see, between the War Between the States the Yankees would come through and take the South's food or whatever they wanted. Every time he would ask me I got madder and madder. He asked me again and I cursed him. I told him I was no damn Yankee, so he just gave up on asking me any more questions.

That night we were loaded up on trucks that carried us to a camp called Allencon. There I was interrogated again. The next morning they gave us half a cup of meal mush. It was the eighth of August the morning we were put on trucks again. I found out later that it was a highway going to Paris and that the Air force had ordered to stop anything moving to Paris. There were three trucks and I was in the last one. It was a beautiful morning the sky was blue, it was around nine A.M. and all of a sudden I heard the roar of an airplane and the sound of firing. The trucks stopped and the guards jumped out of the trucks. Things were moving very fast. What had happened three planes had spotted the trucks. One had knocked out the first truck; another had knocked out the second truck. The second was only hit with one burst. I think the first plane saw we were POW's. I

was standing at the rear of the last truck. The third plane leveled off and came right at the truck I was in I could see the guns on his plane when he went over the truck. And they left. The first plane killed everyone in the first truck and the second killed only a few and wounded the rest. Poor Sam who I had split a cup of hot mush that morning was hit. The bullets cut Sam open to where he was holding his guts in his hand. He lay down on the side of the road and asked them to shoot him, that's what they did.

We traveled on to a place called Chattrais. They put us in an open barn, and this is where I met my first French Moroccan. We didn't stay at this place long because they moved us to Paris. I never thought I would ever get to see Paris; there were German soldiers everywhere. In Paris I first saw boxcars with 40 or 8. I found out what this meant, they would put 40 men or 8 horses. The French brought a tub of eggs down to the boxcars and gave them to us. They gave me ^{Two} two eggs. I hadn't had anything to eat except for the meal mush. In fact I hadn't anything to eat since the night before I was taken prisoner. So I was hunger enough to try on ~~o~~ of the eggs. I don't know how many times I tried to keep that egg down, so I gave the other one away.

We stayed in those boxcars for days. We were out of Paris for two days when the train stopped. I didn't think much of it because the train stopped often, sometimes for a day at the time. This time the train stopped at night. The door opened and about twenty more men were put in with us. We soon found out that a loose board in the floor was found, and that they tore it up and some of the men escaped. With the extra men there wasn't enough room for everyone to sit at one time. I backed up in one of the corners and that is where I stayed for the next three days. During the time on the boxcar our planes would make air strikes on the boxcars. They had painted P.O.W on top of the

cars. About every eighth one they had batteries of ~~ack~~ack guns. They had placed cars of ammunition in between us. The Germans would jump off the cars when the aircraft would come, they would leave us locked in.

On the next stop we picked up British officers and enlisted men. They kept us separated and I never saw the British again. The next stop was Stalag 3-C. We stopped at a large rail depot just before Stalag; it was a large railway station with a lot of activity. The station was occupied with women. We were told these women were for breeding Hitler's children. The women had blonde hair and blue eyes. They looked like they could pull a plow or maul logs. I came from a farm but never thought of having women for breeding. This was a shocker for me.

Back to Stalag 3-C, over the main gates in large letters "NO WORK- NO EAT". We were the first Americans to enter this camp. They had French and Russians prisoners in this camp long before we got there. They placed us in a compound between them. In the morning they would shoot all the Russians that could not ^{meet} roll call. That was just about every day. Stalag 3-C was an unusual place; nothing would grow there not even a blade of grass.

Our quarters or barracks were divided into forty men to a room. They had racks made of rough boards, ten men on top and ten on bottom. Each man was given half a blanket apiece. That was for lying on and for wrapping up in. That is a pretty good trick, to be able to do both. There was a stack in the center of the room for heat. They would give us twelve lumps of coal the size of a brick. This was to last forty men for one week. When the temperature got below zero it stayed there. We were given about a pint of something and one slice of saw dust bread. I have seen other soldiers give their wedding

rings and watches for bread. One day a truck came with potatoes on it. A young soldier try to get one. He did but it cost him his life. I was there and was chosen to be a pallbearer. The Germans took pictures of the soldier for their propagandas doctrine. As for recreation we would walk around and talk when we were able. On Christmas they left the lights on that night a little longer. I don't know what we were supposed to do we didn't have anything.

That night some of us picked the body lice out of our clothes. We didn't take bathes. We didn't have soap or towels and the pump stayed frozen most of the time. If we could take a bath we didn't have any clothes to change into. I was wearing what I had on when I landed in France.

There were some light moments while in prison. We were given overcoats that were large enough for a pack under them. It seemed that the guards could only count in five's so we were put in ranks of five's. Every now and then one of the small men would get behind one of the tall one's and when we were counted there would be one short. They would check the barracks then come back to find all the men in line. Being here was a very sad time for all the men.

Our ray of hope was when our bombers would bomb Berlin. We could see it on a clear night. We knew things were going bad for the Germans. We noticed that old Germans were replacing the young guards. They were needed for fighting. The older guards offered to teach us their language. And there were about twenty of us that wanted to learn. I don't know how many lessons we had but he didn't teach us verbs or pronouns. We were taught how to ask for bread, what time it is, and how to say and ask for things. This would take up most of the day. This took place in a building in the

center of camp. There were only four walls and a roof; there were not any seats. Things were getting bad for the Germans. We had no way of knowing how bad, but the day we were offered an opportunity to join the German army we knew it was bad. They must of thought I had fallen off a turnip truck. I may have come from a farm but not the funny farm. I came to the understanding that not everyone in the same uniform was from the same country. We had one that was a German that had come to the United States, joined the army, and had the rank of sergeant. His father and mother came to see him and took him with them.

By this time I had drunk so much polluted water that boils had come on my neck, under my arms, and on my hands. They were so bad you could see the bone in my right index finger. I still have the scars today. One day I found a can with some blood in it. I drink a good part of it; I was just trying to hold on.

Around the last of December 1944 and the first of January 1945 I noticed that most of the guards were gone. One morning they came and got us out, they were going to move us to another camp. By the time we got on the road the front column was fired on. A Russian tank had met us head on. This outfit was lead by a woman commander. We turned and went back to the camp. They had mistaken us because of the overcoats we were wearing. The Russians captured twenty Germans and made them lay in the middle of the road. Then they drove the tank right over them. By this time the German planes started to bomb us. It was no good because they didn't have enough ground forces. When the Russians found out that we were Americans they stopped shooting at us. The Russians took us back to 3-C, and that night they sent a man to lead us through their lines. That is all the help we got from them. We were on our on. It was hard to

understand why they didn't help us more. They wouldn't even tell us where the next town was, or offer any food, clothes, or help our wounded. We had heard of a military mission in Warsaw. We were going to try for it.

That night I thought my feet would do me in. They hurt and burned you see. They were wrapped in rags and almost frozen off. I would rub them and pat them. When the feeling would start to come back they would burn so bad I would cry. The pain in my feet was far greater than any of my wounds.

That night I stayed in a basement. We were in a town called Studgaur for something like that. There were twelve of us and I learned that one could speak Polish and another could speak Russian. I was tired and very hungry but when I found out about them speaking the other languages I forgot about my hunger. I know when I was in England I had a hard time understanding English. The next day after leaving Stalag 3-C we began our long journey. I don't know how far we walked that day but we walked till dark. We wouldn't have known which way to go except for Nick. He was the one that could speak Russian. He would ask which way to Leningrad. They would point and that was the way we would go.

As we continued to walk we saw dead people lying on the road. It was a sad sight; it wasn't anything to see them everywhere. No one bothered to pull them off the road. They would just run over them. Every chance they got the Russians would round up Germans and shoot them. They would line them up shoot them and pull their shoes and socks off.

We came to this village that the Russians had pilfered. Every house there was dead people. This one house the Russians were going through it. The mother was

entertaining the Russians while the grandmother carried the children out back. The kids were probably around seven years old. She carried them out to the barn and hung them, and then she hung herself. When they finished with the mother they drove a broomstick up her and killed her. We spent the night there, moving out the next morning. We came to a large city, I don't know the name but it was the last city before Poland. It was near the old Polish Corridor. We went around the city because the fighting was still going on. When we came to the city all the tall buildings were on fire. Walking down the streets was like going through a tunnel without any lights. It was a dejected feeling, so depressing to see little children running around looking for their mothers. There were times when one could feel so helpless. In town we found a train with many boxcars. We found out they were waiting for us. I don't know how they got the news. ^I Know we didn't have to worry about going the right way, we were on the train. We found a boxcar that had some straw in it. We knew we had it made, when along came some women who had been in a camp that was over run. They were pregnant and there were some more in a boxcar. We thought it was the thing to do so we lay on the flat car. That night it snowed about three inches; it had to be the Lord that kept us from being frozen.

We pulled into a station that must have been the largest in Poland. There was a young man and woman waiting for us. It seemed strange that as large as the station was we were the only ones there. They took us into the city to a place where they had food ready. They were very nice to us. They carried us several blocks through the city where they had an evacuated hospital. There were many beds with numbers on them. I still remember my number today, it was twenty-three. The beds were short and my feet hung

over the edge. I didn't mind though, I was just happy to have somewhere to stay. For the first time in months we had a place to stay and hot baths.

The next day a guy named Ted and me, he was a Canadian, went around together. He had been captured at Dunkirk. We were walking down the main street when a man stopped us. He was Polish, but he could speak English. He told us that his sister wanted to see us, so we said "ok". He took us to an apartment where we meet a lot of people mostly women. The women looked like they had been in a fight. We found out that the Russian women had been through the night before and took what they wanted, and then beat them. While we were there they poured a white liquid through some cotton and we drank it. It tasted a little bit like gin.

We left this place, caught a streetcar, and went across town to another apartment. There they gave us some wine and cheese. When we stopped at the next place an elder woman was there alone. The man introduced her as his sister. She could speak English better than I could. She had been to the states, and had two sons that were there. One son lived in New York and the other in Chicago. We found out why she wanted to see us. She wanted us to bring some marks to one of her sons so he could exchange them for dollars and send them back to her. All of these people we met today were Germans that grew up in Poland. Ted took the marks and we went to another place where they cooked us supper. We spent the night at this house. The man that we were with all day carried us to a room where we slept that night.

Some time before morning I was awoken by a noise. Ted and I slept on a bed and the man slept on a cot. He got up a motion for me to be quiet, and went outside. I never saw him again so I went back to slept.

The next morning we were told that the Russians had taken the man away. The women had black eyes and busted lips, they had been beaten very badly. We also found out that the Russians had been following us the day before we returned to our beds. At that time the Polish people thought we were great. Where ever we would go they would gather around us, they were great people in my book. The Russians brought in a train to carry us out. I don't know how many days it took to get to Odessa; it was a city on the ~~black sea in the Ukrainian~~

We were de-loused and they took our clothes and put them on hangers. Then they stuck them in an oven. The heat so hot that if you had a wallet or comb it would melt it. While they were doing this we were bathing. In order to get clean underclothes we had to go into a room where two Russian women were sitting, and sign our names. After this we spent the night there. The next morning we went down to a British ship that was waiting for us. We went on board, it was the last day of March 1945. We sailed down the black sea to the Mediterranean Sea. Greece was on one side and Turkey on the other. In the Malta Sea, at the rock of Gibraltar the ship dropped anchor. The next day we sailed to Marseilles, France and spent the day unloading French soldiers. The next day we went to Naples and I became sick and went to the doctor. He put me in the sick bay, and when we got to Naples I was carried to the army hospital. I stayed there about a week, and received my first purple heart. I left Naples, stayed the night in Tunis, and spent three days in Casablanca. Then I left for the good old U.S.A. - "Home Again".