

Black Bread and Barbed Wire: A World War II POW's Story

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George Bernard, although born August 16, 1911, in Newark, New Jersey, spent much of his life in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, when his family moved there in 1918. Without a high school diploma, Bernard worked for a printing company until he was drafted at the age of 29. The peacetime draft of 1940 began before the United States was a combatant during World War II; the fall of France in Summer 1940 caused the U.S. government to prepare for the possibility of war, and they authorized the conscription of 900,000 men. One of the early draftees, the U.S. Army sent George to Camp Lee, Virginia, in March 1941 and ultimately assigned him to the 29th Division Field Artillery.¹

The truth was that supplies were short. "Fort Meade had not been prepared to receive a large influx of Selective Service men. Not enough uniforms were available to clothe everyone, so some of the new troops were issued old World War I woolen uniforms or Civilian Conservation Corps outfits. When rifles weren't available, the new men used wooden substitutes."² Not surprisingly to historians of the period, Bernard's career in the Army ended abruptly when "a law was passed that said that those over twenty-eight were able to be discharged."³ The government transferred George to the reserve corps and he served in this capacity until the U.S. officially

¹ George Bernard, OH309, interview by Dr. Ronald E. Marcello, University of North Texas Archives and Special Collections, Fort Worth, TX, March 19, 1976, pg.1-2; Marilyn M. Harper, *World War II & the American Home Front: a National Historic Landmarks Theme Study* (Washington, D.C.: National Historic Landmarks Program, 2007) pg.34-35.

² Joseph Balkoski, *Beyond the Beachhead: the 29th Infantry Division in Normandy*. (Stackpole Books: Mechanicsburg, PA, 1999) pg.11.

entered the war on December 8, 1941; he explained that "I was able to stay out for another year due to the fact I was taking care of my mother who was then up in years."⁴ Ultimately, the U.S. Army recalled George and sent him to Fort Meade, Maryland, and then to Texas. "The 29th Division, having already gone overseas, I was sent to Camp Howze, Texas, which was then just being activated. I landed in Gainesville, Texas, on December 23, 1943, two days before Christmas."⁵ Upon his arrival there, Bernard became a member of the 334th Infantry Regiment of the 84th Division which had been activated at Camp Howze in October. The 334th Infantry stayed in Texas until 1944 when they traveled to the Louisiana-Texas Maneuver Area located at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana. The maneuvers lasted sixty days in extremely adverse conditions, unknowingly preparing the soldiers for their experiences near the Siegfried Line and in the cold in the Ardennes Forest.⁶

Six months after the June 1944 Allied invasion of Normandy, George and the 334th Infantry arrived in England where they trained at the Winchester barracks.⁷ After his training in Winchester, Bernard spent his last three days in England in London. He described his short time in London: "Everything was blacked out at night and you walked around there, and the first thing you know you'd hear these buzz bombs. You'd wait. You could tell from the noise where they were going to land, and if it wasn't near you, you went on. It was quite exciting in London."⁸ Buzz bombs, the nickname of the V-1 flying bomb which the Germans launched from specially-

³ George Bernard, OH309, pg.2.

⁴ George Bernard, OH309, pg.2

⁵ George Bernard, OH309, pg.3

⁶ Perry S. Wolff, *A History of the 334th Infantry, 84th Division. Randallstown.* (Reprinted by Bernard J. Cohn for the Railsplitters Society) pg.17-18

⁷ George Bernard, OH309, pg.6

⁸ George Bernard, OH309, pg.7

constructed sites in northern France, had the sole purpose of destroying civilian morale.⁹ George had little time to worry about buzz bombs because his unit shipped out three days later “across the English Channel to Omaha Beach, Normandy...and walking for many a mile. We walked through Saint-Lo and through the cemetery at Saint-Lo where mostly all of the 29th Division was laid to rest.”¹⁰

Now in war-torn Europe, Bernard and his mates saw the imprint of war on the landscape, passing by hastily constructed cemeteries and broken buildings. “I don’t think any of us really realized what we were going into. We were more or less happy-go-lucky sort of people.”¹¹ George went on to say that “I don’t really believe that we really thought we were going to get into anything overseas, certainly not anything like being a prisoner-of-war or being shot or killed or anything else over there.”¹² The 334th marched through Paris and “on to Maastricht, Holland.”¹³ In Holland, “the first thing [George] did when I jumped off the truck I will never forget...I went into one of them holes that the Germans had dug and it was full of water. I was soaking wet, and it was cold at that time.”¹⁴ George stayed wet for the few days that he and the 334th stayed in Maastricht, but soon his unit received orders. As the first part of *Operation Clipper*—designed to break the Geilenkirchen Salient, a highly fortified road and rail center which was a significant hub of transportation on the northern part of the Siegfried Line.¹⁵ Under the command of Colonel John S. Roosma, George reported to the front lines as a non-

⁹ Andrew Thomas, *V1 Flying Bomb Aces* (Botley, Oxford: Osprey Publishing 2013) pg. 6

¹⁰ George Bernard, OH309, pg.7

¹¹ George Bernard, OH309, pg.5

¹² George Bernard, OH309, pg.5

¹³ George Bernard, OH309, pg.8

¹⁴ George Bernard, OH309, pg.9

¹⁵ Charles B. MacDonald *The Siegfried Line Campaign*. (Atlanta, GA: Whitman Publishing, LLC 2012) pg.576

commissioned officer, a machine gun sergeant, and his unit moved "out on the 17th of November at around four or five o'clock under the cover of darkness" with the objective of capturing the high ground east of Geilenkirchen and the city of Prummern, Germany.¹⁶

Sergeant Bernard and his unit arrived "at the area where we were going to dig in until the jump off time at 0700."¹⁷ He took a count of his men and realized "I had lost one" so he had another sergeant go with him to find the missing private; they "found him in a hole. He was scared to death and refused to come out," but the sergeants eventually got him out of the hole and took him back to the rest of the unit.¹⁸ The unit had dug in while the three men were gone and Bernard realized that "everybody was dug in but us" and the shelling started shortly after they arrived with the unit.¹⁹ "The Germans had a forward observer in a tree from out of the town, and they were shelling us with everything but the kitchen sink...[Tony] Vercic [the other sergeant] and I started digging desperately. Once in awhile he'd fall on the ground, and I'd fall on top of him. The next time it would be my turn."²⁰ During the shelling, George said, "Tony, well, we've been this way together all these years. I guess we're going to go together. We'll both go at the same time."²¹ But, Tony and George were not injured during the artillery barrage.

Finally, then seven o'clock rolled off. First of all, they thought we were supposed to go in and take the seven pillboxes on the outskirts of town. They told me we

¹⁶ George Bernard, OH309, pg.10

¹⁷ George Bernard, OH309, pg.10

¹⁸ George Bernard, OH309, pg.12

¹⁹ George Bernard, OH309, pg.12

²⁰ George Bernard, OH309, pg.12

²¹ George Bernard, OH309, pg.12

were going to take them, knock them out, and then when they were knocked out, then we were going to go up and go on through with B Company on our right and an English company on our left. We went through the town and took it in a hurry [so] our machine guns were carried by hand with an asbestos glove. We just sprayed the town and sprayed...we sprayed the bell tower and the steeple of a church, and we sprayed the houses and places like that. Our job was to go through there fast – take the town and go on into the apple orchard or peach orchard beyond it.²²

Sergeant Bernard and his unit took the town of Prummern and some German prisoners without suffering a single casualty in E Company; they advanced into the orchard having left a few soldiers to protect the town. The Germans continued to bombard George and his unit while they dug in inside of the orchard; he noted that “a machine gun is dug in like a ‘U’ shape. You have your machine gun at the center, and you have a trench around it and in the back.”²³ Describing the scene, George explained, “It was pretty well open...open terrain. We could see the Germans out there moving around, maybe three-quarters of a mile or so. You could see them very plainly, and you could see them moving around, but they didn’t seem to bother us and we didn’t seem to bother them.”²⁴ At day break, Bernard counted seven German tanks and he had a runner report to “the command post that there were tanks out there. The command post sent back a message that their air and ground reconnaissance showed no tanks whatsoever in the vicinity,

²² George Bernard, OH309, pg.13

²³ George Bernard, OH309, pg. 15

²⁴ George Bernard, OH309, pg. 14

and there was no tanks there."²⁵ But, there were tanks there and George saw that "them tanks come up on our left and turned around and circled us and came in from behind us as got us all out of our trench."²⁶ Bernard and the other men in the orchard had no anti-tank ammunition and they "couldn't combat a tank whatsoever."²⁷ However, there was one man in the unit who decided to fight the tanks: "One sergeant stood up. His name was Fannin. He came out of Alabama. He stood up on the terrain and fired at the man sticking his head out of the tank. They just turned that big muzzle on him and just blew him to smithereens."²⁸ After Bernard and the U.S. soldiers saw that, they all surrendered to the Germans. When Bernard was captured, he remembered, "I had some young kid come out here. He looked to be a boy about fifteen or sixteen years old – a German. He stuck that rifle in there, and he said 'Raus! Raus!' I just dropped my rifle, climbed out."²⁹ With their advance into the orchard, the Germans had captured "all of the 1st Platoon, 2nd Platoon, and 4th Platoon."³⁰ Bernard remembered being "scared to death," but his unit was fortunate because the Germans had already "wiped out completely B Company and F Company" the previous night and had recaptured the town of Prummern as well.³¹

On November 18, 1944, George Bernard became a prisoner of war of the German Wehrmacht: A "lot of them were awful young kids. That's all they were." ³² Bernard recalled that, "they put us all in the courtyard, and they made us clean out all our pockets and take off your

²⁵ George Bernard, OH309, pg.15

²⁶ George Bernard, OH309, pg.16

²⁷ George Bernard, OH309, pg.16

²⁸ George Bernard, OH309, pg.16

²⁹ George Bernard, OH309, pg.17

³⁰ George Bernard, OH309, pg.18

³¹ George Bernard, OH309, pg.18

³² George Bernard, OH309, pg.18

rings and wrist watches if you had any and put them all down in a pile. Of course, they grabbed all our cigarettes and things like that, and the jewelry.”³³ The remainder of that day, the American soldiers sat there waiting and did nothing, owning nothing but the clothes on their back. Bernard noted that “they took pretty good care of us. They wasn’t rough with us or anything like that.”³⁴ But, the Americans were not given any rations during their time in the courtyard. The next day, the Wehrmacht marched U.S. soldiers to Wiesbaden, Germany, where they were put into house cellars in large groups; Bernard was in a cellar with 50 other men.³⁵ The next day the Germans moved the prisoners again, and after walking many miles the Americans were taken to a transit camp, Stalag 12-A, in Limburg on Thanksgiving Day of 1944.³⁶ In actuality, Bernard and the other prisoners marched well over 30 miles on the second day and the only food they had since they were captured were some preserves they found in the cellars. Stalag 12-A was a place of significance because “there’s where they interrogated you and segregated you.”³⁷ They took Sergeant Bernard’s picture and issued him identification tags and then “they asked you where you had come from, your home, how many are in your outfit and all that business, where you’re going and what you were going to do. And, of course, all you do is give your name, rank, and serial number,” George said.³⁸ The interrogation area was a rather large room with several tables and benches and the Germans would call up the prisoners who were waiting on the benches. Bernard pointed out that:

³³ George Bernard, OH309, pg.20

³⁴ George Bernard, OH309, pg.19

³⁵ George Bernard, OH309, pg.21

³⁶George Bernard, OH309, pg.21

³⁷ George Bernard, OH309, pg.21

³⁸ George Bernard, OH309, pg.23

[M]ost of these people that interrogated you some time or another had been in the United States. They knew as much about the United States, well, as much as you did. A lot of them were graduates from different universities here in this county. They were here, went back over there to visit, and were caught over there. Most of them were in the German Army not because they wanted to be, but because they had to be. But, a lot of them had been in this country for a good number of years and were educated here.³⁹

During the interrogation the German officer would say that "all of this information would be sent back to the American Red Cross and that in time your family would be contacted, which did happen, but it was a good number of months after I was there," George noted.⁴⁰ The Germans organized the enlisted prisoners into three groups: "non-coms that didn't want to work; truck drivers that wanted to drive a truck; and cooks."⁴¹ Bernard had not eaten before the interrogation, but the Germans did not bring attention to this or try to exploit it in anyway. But, the officers and the privates were treated differently than the non-commissioned officers, Bernard noted. "When they interrogated us, they put the non-coms in one camp, put the officers in another camp, and they sent all the privates to what they called a commando camp. They had to work [and] they were supposed to get more rations than the others because we didn't do

³⁹ George Bernard, OH309, pg.23-24

⁴⁰ George Bernard, OH309, pg.23

⁴¹ George Bernard, OH309, pg.24

anything."⁴² This was one reason why Bernard was separated from the other men in his unit; Stalag 12-A would be the last place he saw anyone he knew until February 1945.

The day after Thanksgiving, the Germans shipped Bernard from Stalag 12-A with a group of thirty prisoners that he did not know; he recalled the transition between prison camps: "We walked a ways, then we got on a train. We rode and they'd get you off the train. They'd walk you through this city. The German people maybe the night before had been bombed, see, with our airplanes, and they were digging bodies out of the rubble."⁴³ The German civilians "got shovels and they're waving them shovels at you. They spit at you and this, that and the other."⁴⁴ After the Americans moved through the town, the Germans transported George in a passenger train car: "My buddies weren't that fortunate. They rode a freight train all the way."⁴⁵ When Bernard got to the second train, the German guards forced the civilians to get off; he remembered a German soldier getting into an argument with an old lady on the train: "He told her to get out and she wouldn't go. He shouted at her and she at him. Finally, he took her by the seat of her pants and the back of the neck, and tossed her out of the platform."⁴⁶ After the train ride, "we finally got off in a town called Neass. We walked across the Rhine River bridge [and] we crossed over into Dusseldorf."⁴⁷ Placed on another train, Bernard noted: "I look up on the wall there at all the advertisements and they had a map. I found out I was in Berlin."⁴⁸ When he was in Berlin, Bernard and the other prisoners received food: "They put seven men on a loaf of bread. The

⁴² George Bernard, OH309, pg.99

⁴³ George Bernard, OH309, pg.27

⁴⁴ George Bernard, OH309, pg.27-28

⁴⁵ George Bernard, OH309, pg.27

⁴⁶ George Bernard, OH309, pg.29

⁴⁷ George Bernard, OH309, pg.30

⁴⁸ George Bernard, OH309, pg.31

bread is what they call black bread. It's made out of sawdust. I'll tell you, if you're not used to it, you certainly got what they called in those days the 'GI's'.⁴⁹ As Sergeant Bernard and the allied prisoners waited in the Berlin train station; there was an air raid at around 9:00 pm, and Bernard remembered: "You could hear the bombs dropping outside. All the German people were coming down and going into what they called the *rathskellers* (a German tavern or restaurant underground typically located under other buildings). They had big tables and they had a big keg of beer, and everybody was drinking beer. They'd play cards in there. They seemed to be happy-go-lucky."⁵⁰ Later, after the bombing raid, George was escorted onto another train and "I got on this train, and I found where the toilet was on the train, and I sat there all night long. I locked the door, and all them poor GI's along with me were banging the door to get in...I thought I wanted to die," he recalled.⁵¹ The prisoners on the train arrived at Stalag 3-B the next day in Furstenberg on the Oder River.

Sergeant Bernard and the other prisoners had now found a place to stay at Stalag 3-B in Furstenberg that November. He recalled, "It was an American camp with all Americans and run by a master sergeant...This is a camp for non-coms... all the way to sergeant major."⁵² The sergeant major was the highest-ranking prisoner in the camp and he was in charge and, as George stated: "He's the one that intercedes. He goes to the German people and tries to get things for you. If [the Germans] want to do something, they call him and tell him what they

⁴⁹ George Bernard, OH309, pg.31

⁵⁰ George Bernard, OH309, pg.32; "Rathskeller." Merriam-Webster. Merriam-Webster. Accessed September 21, 2019. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rathskeller>.

⁵¹ George Bernard, OH309, pg.33

⁵² George Bernard, OH309, pg.34

intend to do. Then he comes back and enlightens the whole camp.”⁵³ George also described some other aspects of prison camp life: “All camps had a big stove in each barracks or a stone fire-place in it. And we had what we would call bunk beds. They were just wooden things with slats. And they gave you two blankets...it was cold weather. It snowed quite a bit while we were there.”⁵⁴ George also noted that if, “somebody needed clothing, so they got them clothing. Of course, we got some American clothing too they had gathered up from time to time.”⁵⁵ He then went on to recall: “We had to buddy together. You can never be separate.”⁵⁶ This was a fellow that “you do all your cooking together and everything else like that.”⁵⁷ The rations of the camp consisted of coffee in the morning with “bread and soup” around midday: “Some was just broth. Sometimes, like on Sunday, if you were lucky you got something like a barley or a rice in the soup. It wasn’t too bad. And then you’d get a section of bread...that was what you get a noon-time.”⁵⁸ There were no rations issued by the Germans except for the coffee, noon-time soup and sawdust bread, and evening tea “but the tea was so bad we couldn’t drink it. Now I used to use it to shave with. It was warm and it wasn’t like shaving in cold water.”⁵⁹ But, occasionally, “Red Cross parcels came through. When it first started off, there were seven men on a parcel. Well, you had in there corned Willie—it’s the same thing as corned beef...it’s a very poor grade.”⁶⁰ The Red Cross parcels included “Spam, which I will today not eat, Spam. You got a chocolate bar or

⁵³ George Bernard, OH309, pg.34-35

⁵⁴ George Bernard, OH309, pg.35

⁵⁵ George Bernard, OH309, pg.37

⁵⁶ George Bernard, OH309, pg.36

⁵⁷ George Bernard, OH309, pg.36

⁵⁸ George Bernard, OH309, pg. 36

⁵⁹ George Bernard, OH309, pg.46

⁶⁰ George Bernard, OH309, pg.37

you got a box of cocoa. It was either one or the other. You got a soluble coffee. You got peanut butter...you could get the whole camp for a jar of peanut butter. It was the best staple of all."⁶¹ Red Cross parcels typically consisted of "1 pound powdered milk (Klim), ½ pound sugar, 1 small tin butter, 1 tin liver paté, 1 tin peaches, 1 tin orange jelly, 1 tin dehydrated onions, 1 tin dehydrated corned beef hash, 1 packet breakfast cereal, 1 packet biscuits, 1 packet bouillon cubes, 2 packets chewing gum, 3 packets noodle soup, 2 packets egg powder, 1 bottle multivitamin pills, 1 tin opener."⁶²

More transpired in the camp than the monotony of daily routine and splitting up an occasional Red Cross parcel. George remembered that "we did, though, have an underground radio system that the Germans had an idea they knew something about, but they could never prove it. They used to make us go out at certain times, maybe in the middle of the night, and they'd go through the barracks and tear everything up."⁶³ These strip searches went about the same every time; they'd do it "two or three times a week" and each time the prisoners would wait outside for an hour or two until the search was complete.⁶⁴ George never saw this radio for himself, though, but "we used to have a man come in every so often. We'd have American guards with the various windows and the doors and everything like that watching for the German guards. He'd say what was going on and where the Allies were and where the Russians were and this, that and the other."⁶⁵

⁶¹ George Bernard, OH309, pg.37

⁶² Tony Vercoe, *Survival at Stalag IVB: Soldiers and Airmen Remember Germany's Largest POW Camp of World War II* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), pg. 34-35

⁶³ George Bernard, OH309, pg.37

⁶⁴ George Bernard, OH309, pg.60

⁶⁵ George Bernard, OH309, pg.39

Bernard remained in Stalag 3-B until February; he spent Christmas 1944 there and the prisoners put on a play in the barracks with the German guards as the audience.⁶⁶ And, if the Americans needed something for the play or anytime, George said that "You'd bribe a German guard to get something for you."⁶⁷ At this point during Bernard's stay in the camp, the Red Cross parcels began coming in more often and they "were cutting down from seven on a parcel to two on a parcel."⁶⁸ "Red Cross parcels were coming in, and we'd go out there and gather snow up and put vanilla with it and this, that, and the other and make ice cream out of it and whatnot."⁶⁹ And these Red Cross parcels also came with games: "We got a little board with little pegs, you know. You could play checkers with it; you could play chess with it; you could play cribbage and all that."⁷⁰ But, Bernard went on to describe another aspect of routine in the POW camp, the monthly trips to the delousing chamber: after the Americans removed their clothes and put them in an oven and as the clothing was being maintained the prisoners would be taken to shower.⁷¹ The German guards also made life more difficult for the prisoners on occasion. Bernard noted that the frequency of Red Cross packages depended on who was in charge of the camp at the time.

You may get some Germans in that that they wouldn't give you the Red Cross parcels. They kept them for themselves. Of course, when that was found out,

⁶⁶ George Bernard, OH309, pg.40

⁶⁷ George Bernard, OH309, pg.41

⁶⁸ George Bernard, OH309, pg.42

⁶⁹ George Bernard, OH309, pg.42

⁷⁰ George Bernard, OH309, pg.45

⁷¹ George Bernard, OH309, pg.43

there was a disturbance about that because the GI in charge of the camp would turn that into the Red Cross group and they would put a stop to that. Now that's one thing they did. The Germans did go along pretty well with the Geneva Convention.⁷²

There were no interrogations at the camp or instances of brutality on the part of the German captors, but George struggled with something else: "I was a cigarette fiend. I'd go crazy without cigarettes. I was a nervous wreck."⁷³ He would "go from barracks to barracks every morning and go down the aisles and" scavenge cigarette butts to try to smoke.⁷⁴ George was even willing to trade food for cigarettes. Before he was captured, George weighed 145 pounds but he claimed, "when I was finally liberated [by the Russians in 1945], why, I was down to about ninety or ninety-five pounds."⁷⁵

Another necessity that the camp had was latrines. "You'd have to walk to the far end of the compound. They'd have these outhouses. It was your job to keep them clean. All they was a big hole dug, but they did have houses. It was just like an outhouse that we'd have at home here in the countryside."⁷⁶ The life in the prison camp was dull, but the most basic needs of the soldiers were met and they were not required to do physical work. Bernard did not regret his time at Stalag 3-B. "Things didn't look too bleak then. Your body became a little more accustomed to what you were doing day to day because we were doing practically the same

⁷² George Bernard, OH309, pg.47-48

⁷³ George Bernard, OH309, pg.49

⁷⁴ George Bernard, OH309, pg.49

⁷⁵ George Bernard, OH309, pg.50

⁷⁶ George Bernard, OH309, pg.56

thing every day. You didn't do too much exercise there."⁷⁷ He went on to say, "It wasn't bad. You were indoors and you wasn't out in the elements, although it snowed quite frequently there. It was cold during the winter."⁷⁸ George also remembered that the guards "were fairly friendly...we had some that you could always bribe to get something for you here and there."⁷⁹ When asked if he thought of escaping he replied, "We were content to stay there because we were pretty well deep into Germany."⁸⁰ Bernard admitted never being warned by the Germans what the consequences of attempted escape would be, but the prisoners did resist the guards in indirect ways. They would try to confuse them: "Whatever they did, we tried to confuse them. We used to stand and laugh. We'd think it was fun if they'd find it confusing. And, you could send a German guard up a wall. He just couldn't figure you out. He couldn't figure out the American at all."⁸¹ The prisoners knew it did not make a difference at all, but they enjoyed doing it anyway. Beyond dealing with strip searches, too little food, and dysentery, theft occurred. "If you were caught stealing, you were pretty well beat up by everybody. You carried a sign on you that you walked around the compound saying, 'I am a thief. I stole from my buddies.' You carried that around for two or three days."⁸² In February 1945, as the Soviet Union began to close in on Germany, Bernard and his fellow prisoners were re-located. This move was in response to the success of the Soviet Vistula Oder Offensive, which the Soviets launched on 12 January 1945 and pushed until 2 February 1945; historians consider it as one of the most successful Soviet

⁷⁷ George Bernard, OH309, pg.57

⁷⁸ George Bernard, OH309, pg.58

⁷⁹ George Bernard, OH309, pg.59

⁸⁰ George Bernard, OH309, pg.62

⁸¹ George Bernard, OH309, pg.61

⁸² George Bernard, OH309, pg.66-67

operations during World War II. The Soviet army had reached depths of 550 to 600 kilometers through the German lines.⁸³

In response to the Soviet Union cutting so deep into Germany, the prisoners in Stalag 3-B were moved further into Germany. In early February the German guards ordered the prisoners to destroy the camp to the best of their ability and afterwards they were marched by the Germans to "a great big barn" and "you couldn't turn around; you couldn't sit down' you couldn't lay down. You stood up in this barn because you were crammed in there so close."⁸⁴ Bernard remembered that the walking was hard; the men suffered from malnourishment and many fell down and struggled to make it. The guard who escorted the prisoners "would threaten to shoot them if they did not get up and go. He said he would shoot them. He did shoot one."⁸⁵ So, Bernard and the stronger prisoners would help to carry the weakest ones. Eventually, the American prisoners made it to a small German hamlet and the men traded soap for bread with the townspeople when the guards were distracted: "You could buy Germany with a cake of soap. You'd give them this soap, and they'd pull out a loaf of bread. You'd stick it in your jacket," Bernard noted.⁸⁶ And, he went on to say that the American prisoners were impressed by the kindness of the German citizens, "You'd go into their home, and they were glad to take care of you. They'd give you food. I mean, we found that the German people as a whole were very, very good."⁸⁷ As the Americans continued marching, the German army continued to give the

⁸³ Gary J. McCarty, *Operational Exploitation: Easier Said than Done: a Monograph* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: School of Advanced Military Studies, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1990), pg.23-24

⁸⁴ George Bernard, OH309, pg.68

⁸⁵ George Bernard, OH309, pg.70

⁸⁶ George Bernard, OH309, pg. 70

⁸⁷ George Bernard, OH309, pg.71

Americans noon-time rations: "They had great big trucks come up with bread on them. You'd get your cut of bread and soup. That's about all you'd get."⁸⁸ After a week of hard marching, the Americans arrived at Stalag 3-A in Luckenwalde, which was about 40 miles south of Berlin.

Stalag 3-A had numerous differences from Stalag 3-B, and Bernard did not think as well of it. "This camp was entirely different than the camp we just left. They had eight circus tents...you laid on straw. We had 500 people in this tent laying on this straw in rows."⁸⁹ George referred to the style of tents as circus tents because of their similar shape, and those eight tents held all 5000 transferred prisoners from Stalag 3-B. In addition to worse living conditions, Bernard remembered that "the 'GI's' really set in. Everybody in that camp had them in the worst way. You'd get up the next morning and you'd find clothing outside the tent. They had to take it off and just throw it...they couldn't make it to the latrine."⁹⁰ With 5000 men in one living space, it has hard for anyone to get an undisturbed sleep from all of the prisoners moving around. This compound of eight tents only had one water spigot. The water always ran; it would not shut off and it ran into a wooden trough that ran through the compound; that is where the prisoners would try to bathe and wash their clothing. Much like there was only a single water spigot, there was only one delousing chamber. Bernard recalled: "It never seemed to work. It wasn't like the first one we went to. You'd get deloused that day and everything like that and put your blanket on that straw. That night you'd have them crawling all over...you'd lay awake at night just scratching."⁹¹ Another difference about this camp was that Stalag 3-A had officers; George noted that they were, "in another compound. We, everybody was wired off. You were all screened off

⁸⁸ George Bernard, OH309, pg.73

⁸⁹ George Bernard, OH309, pg.73

⁹⁰ George Bernard, OH309, pg.75

⁹¹ George Bernard, OH309, pg.79

from one another, but you could talk through the fence. That's when I run into some of the first lieutenants and second lieutenants in the outfit that I had been captured with."⁹² Bernard noted that the living conditions were not universally the same across the camp; the officer's had stationary barracks.

Besides being larger than Stalag 3-B, Stalag 3-A also had a more diverse group of prisoners. "We had Norwegians and Russians, French, Serbs, and Americans. There were six nationalities."⁹³ Each nationality was sectioned off by fencing though, and the nationalities were treated pretty much the same with the exception of the Russians. The Soviet prisoners "did all the dirty work. They did everything. They dug all of the trenches, and they dug all the holes to put the empty food cans. The Germans would not allow us to give the Russians one thing. And the Russians...they treated them mean. There was no doubt about that. They beat them and everything else like that. They gave them very little food."⁹⁴

They [the Germans] made them dig a big hole where, if you emptied your cans of food and everything...you'd throw them in this hole. The Russians would be in there down amongst all those cans and stuff and everything, and they'd be sticking their hands in there and licking their fingers. They'd cut their fingers on the edge of the cans and everything with sharp edges. But, they would lick that food...that's the food they got.⁹⁵

⁹² George Bernard, OH309, pg.76

⁹³ George Bernard, OH309, pg.77

⁹⁴ George Bernard, OH309, pg.81

⁹⁵ George Bernard, OH309, pg. 82

Mistreatment of POWs of the Soviet Union was not confined to Stalag 3-A. This sort of abuse became common throughout prison camps in Germany. The mistreatment of the Soviet prisoners was due to the belief that since the Soviet Union was not a signer of the 1929 Geneva Convention, the POWs of the Soviet Union did not have to be maintained under those principles. If Germany had less animosity towards the Soviet Union and were not stretched as thin due to war time shortages, the treatment of the Soviet Union soldiers would likely have been better.⁹⁶

In contrast to how the Russians were treated, the other prisoners at the camp, which all belonged to countries that signed the Geneva Convention, led decent lives. George Bernard and the Americans never had to do physical work: "We got fairly good rations from the Germans. We got this soup, as I say, and it got to the point where the soup was terrible...it was just water."⁹⁷ There were also wild rutabagas and potatoes that grew in the camp that the prisoners ate. Bernard recalled his diet in the Stalag:

But between the [Red Cross] parcels and the Germans' allotment that they gave us and the rations that they gave us and the things we traded for with the Norwegians and the rutabagas and the potatoes, we had a pretty good diet in that camp. The only thing, as I say, is that we didn't have very good living quarters like we did in the camp we left. They were barracks. Here we are in a big circus tent with all this straw and all the cooties and everything else.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Lars Westerlund, *POW Deaths and People Handed over to Germany and the Soviet Union in 1939-55* (Research Report by the Finnish National Archives. Helsinki: Kansallisarkisto, 2008) pg. 14-15

⁹⁷ George Bernard, OH309, pg.82

⁹⁸ George Bernard, OH309, pg.83

Bernard also noted that theft was much greater at this camp than at the last one, despite the fact the rations were a bit better. "We had quite a few people that just...they couldn't control themselves. They had been hungry for so long that they were eating more now than ever and they wanted more."⁹⁹ But, the prisoners still tried to keep theft down to a minimum, and the wearing of the sign punishment was still enforced at this camp: "We used to have them walking around there...quite a few of them with signs on."¹⁰⁰ Despite the theft and numerous other bad aspects of this POW camp, at least the weather became more tolerable; George recalled that the milder weather allowed the soldiers to walk and wash clothes easier.¹⁰¹

Bernard was in Stalag 3-A from February to April 1945. The prisoners in the camp knew the war wasn't going well for Germany, and somehow the same group of soldiers who manned the secret radio in Stalag 3-B took the radio with them and they continued to tell the soldiers in the camp what was happening in the war. "We had an underground radio that wouldn't quit. We knew the very next day that President Roosevelt had died...he died on April 12. We'd place guards around the various tent flaps and things like that and see that nobody came around."¹⁰² And, Sergeant Bernard and the other US prisoners also knew the troop movements because of the radio: "They were closing in all around us. The Americans were coming from one side and the Russians from another."¹⁰³ But, the attitude of the German guards did not change; George commented that "I'd say all the guards were fairly friendly. They knew that things were getting

⁹⁹ George Bernard, OH309, pg.84-85

¹⁰⁰ George Bernard, OH309, pg.85

¹⁰¹ George Bernard, OH309, pg.86

¹⁰² George Bernard, OH309, pg.87

¹⁰³ George Bernard, OH309, pg.87

close."¹⁰⁴ He continued: "They stayed just about the same. They were friendly...I never did have any trouble with the German guards...as long as you didn't upset them."¹⁰⁵ The guard who shot the American prisoner on the week-long march did seem to be an anomaly; Bernard never witnessed any other real brutality towards the American prisoners. The Germans did not even try to create a propaganda statement to present the camp with; instead, it was the Americans that were concerned about the situation. Bernard recalled his thoughts about Truman after the death of President Roosevelt:

Well, we were worried because quite a few of us wasn't sure about Harry Truman at all. I mean, we just figured that he was weak. We heard all these things about the conferences when Stalin and Churchill and Roosevelt got together, but now that he was gone, what was going to happen? We just had a feeling that he wasn't quite strong enough to combat Stalin and things like that.¹⁰⁶

Bernard was an FDR supporter and he was also biased due to the fact he knew an unpopular Colonel Truman in "old outfit" that bore some indirect relation to Truman."¹⁰⁷ Regardless of their individual opinions, the death of their president had every U.S. soldier in the camp anxious about what would happen next. But, it was only "ten days later [after the death of President Roosevelt], we were liberated by the Russians."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ George Bernard, OH309, pg.86

¹⁰⁵ George Bernard, OH309, pg.87

¹⁰⁶ George Bernard, OH309, pg.88

¹⁰⁷ George Bernard, OH309, pg.89

¹⁰⁸ George Bernard, OH309, pg.91

In March 1945, George recalled that “rumor had it that Hitler ordered that all the prisoners-of-war should be killed. If that was true, it never did happen because the German soldiers would never do it.”¹⁰⁹ Then, with no warning at all, George Bernard “woke up Friday morning [on April 20th]. The gates were open and the German guards up in the towers [and] the machine guns were gone. There was nobody around. We were there by ourselves, so we tore down the barbed wire fences and everybody got together and had a glorious time.”¹¹⁰ The Germans had abandoned the camp because they knew the Russians were coming; Bernard and some other prisoners went to town down in Luckenwalde, and Bernard recalled that the German people “fed us and treated us nice.”¹¹¹ He remembered some humorous times during their release: “The Russians would come around. They got all of these motorcycles and bicycles, and they went crazy...They were like a bunch of kids.”¹¹² The next day, Bernard heard about another side of the Soviet soldiers. “The next night—after that night when we had left and gone back to camp—they would come in there and loot the houses and rape the women and things like that. They were bad.”¹¹³ The prisoners had been abandoned by the Germans for two days before the Soviet army arrived at the camp.

Sunday at ten o'clock in the morning, April 22, the Russians came in with their half-tracks and their tanks. Big, stout bruisers of women were driving them things. All of the Russians went hog wild. Of course, everybody went crazy. But all

¹⁰⁹ George Bernard, OH309, pg.90

¹¹⁰ George Bernard, OH309, pg.91

¹¹¹ George Bernard, OH309, pg.91

¹¹² George Bernard, OH309, pg.92

¹¹³ George Bernard, OH309, pg.92

of the Russians, they just hopped on them half-tracks and things like that, and they went on to combat. Us, the first thing we wanted to know is when we'll be going home.¹¹⁴

The Soviet army took care of the prisoners and they gave them foods that some of the prisoners had not tasted for months or years: "They fed us good. They brought in great big tubs of butter, great big tubs of cheese, all kinds of food."¹¹⁵ The Soviet army's kindness to the prisoners was not purely altruistic; the Soviets took all of the U.S. prisoners back to the Soviet Union because "they would be paid by the United States government so much a head for each American soldier they liberated."¹¹⁷ They decided to take the U.S. soldiers to the Soviet Union "by way of the Dardanelles, [which] goes through the Mediterranean."¹¹⁷¹¹⁶ George thought he would be stuck with taking a very long way back home, but the American soldiers were in luck: "We found out that the Americans were not too far from us on another route."¹¹⁷ The U.S. soldiers had no interest in going to the Soviet Union, so they were sneaking out of the camps in groups; the Russians had no idea that the prisoners were leaving, despite the fact it went on for eleven days. Bernard was in a group of prisoners that snuck away on the tenth day of it.

I head the next day that the Russians had found it out. The Russians went into the woods and stopped the trucks and stopped the Americans from getting on them—what was left—and they sent back the trucks back empty-handed. They

¹¹⁴ George Bernard, OH309, pg.92

¹¹⁵ George Bernard, OH309, pg.93

¹¹⁶ George Bernard, OH309, pg.93

¹¹⁷ George Bernard, OH309, pg.95

went back to General Hodges' 9th Army. He came down himself in this jeep, and he just told the Russians where to head in. And with that they loaded the rest of them GI's and took them out.¹¹⁸

The former POWs were now reunited with the U.S. Army, and their first stop was a delousing camp set up in Germany behind the American lines past the Elbe River. Bernard and the other prisoners were deloused and issued new uniforms and then, on May 8, "they moved us out to Hildesheim, Germany."¹¹⁹ "I was in Hildesheim, Germany, waiting to be flown out of there to Rheims, France, when the war ended. That's where I was...at Rheims, we stayed in an outdoor camp there and had the Germans feed us. They made the German troops cook the food and everything and then feed us...they did all the dirty work."¹²⁰ He chuckled as he remembered his time in Rheims: "That was something. You didn't have to wash your own mess kit for the first time."¹²¹ The former POWs received American food, but it was still just the standard issue C-rations or A-rations. There was not any special food yet, but it was all hot food even though it was served in the traditional GI manner: "You'd go by and they slopped it in your mess kit, and they'd put the pudding right in the middle of the mashed potatoes and everything else like that. It was the same old thing."¹²² George was safe with the Americans and eating American food again for the first time since his capture in November 1944.

¹¹⁸ George Bernard, OH309, pg.96

¹¹⁹ George Bernard, OH309, pg.96

¹²⁰ George Bernard, OH309, pg.96

¹²¹ George Bernard, OH309, pg.97

¹²² George Bernard, OH309, pg.97

From Rheims, the former POWs were taken on a train headed to Camp Lucky Strike in the city of Janville, France, but they stopped at a medical check point first. Bernard knew he was unhealthy:

I've got spots all over me from malnutrition and things like that, and all this lice and bites and everything. So they put a tag on you. When they put a tag on you, you know what you're going to do. You're going to wind up in the hospital. So I got a tag...I'm with all this group of people that I had known after that first time that I was separated from my own group... I knew if I got this tag I'd go to the hospital. I'm going to lose out with everybody else.¹²³

After getting so close to the men who he got to know over his five months of imprisonment, Bernard did not want to leave them. "I took the tag off," he said, "but I wasn't smart. A man comes through again and caught me without the tag. He put the tag on me, and I wound up in the hospital. I stayed there for two weeks. Everybody that I had come into that camp with was all gone."¹²⁴ George now resided with a new group of former POWs that "were coming in from camps all over" and being interned at the Camp Lucky Strike hospital.¹²⁵ The camp hospital was comfortable, though, and the Army gave the patients their back pay in French Francs, which they later converted to U.S. dollars. The camp was comfortable for the men and Bernard remembered his luxuries, "We had chicken, hot chocolate and chocolate milk, milk, eggs, and everything to

¹²³ George Bernard, OH309, pg.98

¹²⁴ George Bernard, OH309, pg.99

¹²⁵ George Bernard, OH309, pg.99

fatten you up.”¹²⁶ Even General Eisenhower paid a visit to the camp when Sergeant Bernard was there; he “said to us that he appreciated all we had done for the country and this, that, and the other, and that they were going to do the best they could for us to get back to the States, and that we might be a little put out because we had to double up and things like that to get everybody back as fast as they could.”¹²⁷

George and other non-commissioned officers doubled up for the return trip home after he arrived in LeHavre, France, in the Normandy region. The ship made a one-way trip back to the United States, and Bernard “doubled up” with another man and shared the same hammock with him because of the overcrowding on the ship. The former POWs were required that they do tasks while aboard; George remembered his schedule aboard the boat: “He [his bunk mate] worked in the daytime and I slept, and I worked at night. My job on duty there was to be in charge of the coffee and the dishwater.”¹²⁸ This meant that Sergeant Bernard had to make sure that the mess hall ran smoothly. All the former POWs had to do something like this because there were so many men aboard the ship; after five days at sea, George Bernard landed in Boston.

The Red Cross and Salvation Army welcomed George and the others back home, and from there, George returned to Camp Miles Standish in Massachusetts. That first night back home, “We drank our fill of beer. I’ll tell you, we were a sick bunch of kids the next morning.”¹²⁹ After a few days in Massachusetts, the men received orders to ship back to camps in their home states. George remembered, “But me, coming from Pennsylvania at that time, I was sent to

¹²⁶ George Bernard, OH309, pg.99

¹²⁷ George Bernard, OH309, pg.101

¹²⁸ George Bernard, OH309, pg.101

¹²⁹ George Bernard, OH309, pg.102

Camp Dix. In Camp Dix, they then gave you all new clothing.”¹³⁰ From there, Sergeant Bernard “was sent home for seventy-nine days of recuperation.”¹³¹ Bernard visited his mother and then spent his seventy-nine days touring the country.¹³² At the end of his travels, the Army sent George to Atlantic City, New Jersey, for an “orientation lecture on just what to expect now in the United States since the war was over.”¹³³ After he spent a couple of weeks there, he was sent to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. “I was put in charge there of sending out these communiqués, orders of the day, and all that kind of stuff...so I was in charge of the mimeograph machines and all them things.”¹³⁴ George held this position until the Army discharged him on November 18, 1945, exactly one year after his capture in Germany.

From the time of his initial draft to the end of the war George Bernard had been a soldier of the 29th division and of the 84th division; he experienced combat during *Operation Clipper* and had been captured by the Germans and held prisoner for more than five months. In 1976, 31 years after the end of the Second World War, Bernard reflected on his wartime experiences:

I still say today that if the young people today could see how people in the other parts of the world live, they would never, never be the way they are...I’ve seen them people in Holland—they little kids in Holland with bare feet, no shoes—they were begging for food. You’d share your food with them. I saw the Russians not being fed by the Germans. I’ve seen ourselves living on short rations. Then you were a little bitter, but you must remember that the German people didn’t have it either. I mean, the war was in

¹³⁰ George Bernard, OH309, pg.103

¹³¹ George Bernard, OH309, pg.103

¹³² George Bernard, OH309, pg.103-104

¹³³ George Bernard, OH309, pg.104

¹³⁴ George Bernard, OH309, pg.105

their country. If the war ever was in the continent of this United States, the people would know what it is to live. It's terrible. At nights you could hear that siren going off and air raids. The air raids are coming over and planes dropping bombs on the countryside and things like that. I would never trade my experience for a million dollars, but I'd never want to go through it again. But it was wonderful; I had good time. I had times where I'd laugh. I had a lot of fun even in prison camp. I've seen people get killed. I've killed people myself. I was bitter for awhile, but I got over it and come back to this country and thought, "This country don't owe me a living at all." They don't owe me a thing.¹³⁵

George Bernard felt the war had helped him grow as a person, even in light of the hardships he faced, George looked positively on his military experience and is glad that he was able to experience it. After a while, he forgave his captors and the German people, and George moved on with his life. He found love and married in 1946 after meeting a young lady in Texas named Helen during his time touring the country during his furlough; George and Helen were happily married for the rest of his life. After he married Helen, George moved to Texas in 1946 and acquired a job at the Fort Worth *Star-Telegram* as a printer, the same profession he held and enjoyed before the beginning of the war. George held this position until he retired. He lived in Texas until his death at the age of 68 in 1979 and he is buried at the Moore Memorial Garden's Cemetery in Arlington, Texas in Tarrant County along with his wife Helen Estelle Routt Bernard.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ George Bernard, OH309, pg.107-108

¹³⁶ "George F. Bernard (1911-79) - Find A Grave..." Find A Grave, May 19, 2016.
https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/162815660/george-f_-bernard.

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