

One day at a time- my life as a POW

Wally Morgan 83  
1271 N. Eucalyptus  
Blythe, Cal. 90015

Before I begin my narrative about my experiences as a prisoner of war in Germany I need to provide the reader with a little background. My name is Wallace Morgan. I had a typical boyhood for a child of the depression from Iowa. I was a high school senior when our country was attacked at Pearl Harbor.

I started college the following September but soon decided I needed to follow my two brothers into the Army.

I joined the army, a voluntary enlistment, and my mother had to sign me in even though I was eighteen. I wanted to fly and be a machine gunner. Well, as you will learn, I was a machine gunner in the infantry. After induction into the Army I was sent to the 103<sup>rd</sup> Division at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana for basic training and maneuvers. Then the division went to Camp Howz, Texas for another basic training. I eventually got tired of basic training and carrying that gun so I asked first Sgt. Conner if he needed a company clerk as I had been a good student and was good at the typewriter. He said yes, so I became the company clerk. This lasted for several months and then orders came in for men to be transferred out as replacements to be shipped to the east coast and then to Europe for the invasion of France which had not yet begun. I used my position as company clerk; I accidentally put my name on the list. The first sergeant was really, really mad at me, but I went and a friend of mine became company clerk and he kept that position until the end of the war.

By the end of June 1944 I was in Normandy, France where I joined the 28<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. I was in a heavy weapons company as the number one gunner of a water-cooled machine gun. I fought with the 28<sup>th</sup> from Percy, Normandy, France. I was with the division in the parade in Paris, through Luxembourg and into Germany where we waged a fierce battle in September, 1944. After this battle the troops of the battalion received their sterling silver combat infantry pins. To get slightly ahead of myself, when I was captured I broke off the pin sticks and hid the pin itself in my pocket and managed to hang onto it during my captivity. I still have it today and I remain very proud of it.

Then we made our way to Camp Elsenborn in Belgium for a short period of rest and refit and then into the Huertgen Forest where the conditions were abysmal, the weather could not have been worse, and I was wounded and captured.

I do not mean to digress but before I go any further in recounting this phase of my life I must say that I believe I owe my life and certainly my ability to handle my life as a POW without suffering more than I did by undergoing all that basic training with the 103<sup>rd</sup> Division and was taught both the physical and mental skills that would become invaluable to me as a POW.

The battle of the Huertgen Forest as far as the 28<sup>th</sup> ID, 110<sup>th</sup> reg. was concerned began on Nov. 2, 1944 when we entered the forest for the first time.

It seemed as if we were constantly moving the gun to gain a new firing position. Also I noticed that while we were fighting through France, Luxembourg and into Germany in September we always had tanks attached to us. However, when we entered the Huertgen we had no tank support as the weather and terrain and mud and more mud prohibited the safe passage of the tanks. During these two weeks in the forest, from the 2<sup>nd</sup> until the 13<sup>th</sup> I heard a single airplane fly overhead several different nights. We did not know the

nationality of the plane but it flew very low. We could hear it plainly but never saw it. We nicknamed it "Bedcheck Charlie".

Fighting continued in the forest with many casualties on both sides. I do not know the specifics of the German side but do know that the American soldiers suffered greatly from battle fatigue, trench foot, severe and not so severe wounds and a lack of food, sleep, and warm clothing.

This brings me to November 12, the last day I knew freedom until the end of the war in Europe. The battalion had been severely depleted of soldiers so the numbers were increased by a hundred new replacements to form a provisional battalion. We were told to take possession of a certain hill which had already seen much battle as there were dead American soldiers everywhere. We had to cross a dry creek bed on the way up the hill. The three of us assigned to our particular gun and five ammunition carriers went up the hill. We were so close to the front line that we could not fire the gun that night to check it out. When we went to fire it the next morning November 13 we found out that the gun would not fire. There had been no sleep that night as artillery was coming in. There was a constant barrage of fire and we could hear soldiers being hit and screaming for help. I was not able to help them and as I think back I can hear it all again. It is something I try very hard not to think about. We were taught that if our gun did not work at any time we were to disable it by taking off the butt plate and throwing it away so the gun could not be fired again. I managed to get myself into a slight indentation in the ground and found myself between two dead Americans. Shrapnel was raining down on us, and the dead Americans were shielding me from the worst of it. I felt my foot jump and when I had a chance to look at it I realized that I had been wounded. I had a carbine and used it but there were too many Germans coming at me. Suddenly I was surrounded by six or eight Germans in a patrol who had their guns pointed right at me. At that point I knew that I was no longer free. As I stood up I dropped my ammo belt and heard someone yelling at me "Sarge what are we going to do?" I replied that "I don't know, I have just given up". I put my hands behind my head and walked to the Germans. As I think back I believe there were about ten or eleven other American soldiers in the same group of new POW's.

The battalion morning report of November 14 stated that on the evening of November 13 only fifty seven men of the battalion had come off the line following the fighting of November 12 and 13.

I was captured the morning of November 13. It was still dark because of the thick trees in the forest and very short days since it was November and the weather was terrible that day, very cloudy, with rain and snow. I remember that vividly. Now my memory is a little foggy on the direction we were taken and some of the events that occurred during that first day of my captivity. We were taken to a German bunker where I could see the creek bed and many Americans lying dead. The German patrol rounded us up like cattle and separated the officers from those of us like me who were privates. After half an hour or so a different group of Germans took us down the hill to Simonskall and the patrol which had captured us left to continue their assault on the Americans. In Simonskall we were taken to a German medical bunker where we were lined up outside the bunker, under guard and made to stand there for several hours. Meanwhile wounded Germans were being brought into the bunker where the more seriously wounded stayed and those whose wounds could be easily treated were patched up and sent back to the German

front. After many hours, I do not know how long it was, fellow prisoners and I were told we were to carry the German wounded on metal stretchers to another bunker farther back and across the Kall River. (I have been back to this area and to these bunkers several times now and I would say they are about half a mile apart with the second bunker up the opposite hill and deep in the trees where it was well hidden).

As we were carrying the wounded Germans we came under harassing artillery fire, 105's, and we dropped our wounded German and hit the ground. We learned some German right then as he screamed at us for dropping him. I should say that there were four of us carrying the stretcher, one at each corner. After the barrage we quickly picked up our German and we waded through the Kall River holding our German out of the water while German guards stood on the bridge above us with their guns pointed at us. Then we climbed up the hill and went to the second bunker. There we "gently" set him down. We did not know if he was alive or dead at that point and we didn't care.

We were turned over to yet another set of guards and began our walk across the hills, to the east, several miles probably and by then I did not know where I was and I really did not care. I hadn't eaten anything for a couple of days, my foot hurt where it had been hit, my legs hurt, I was cold and miserable. The day was drawing to a close, what little light there had been was fading and the air temperature was dropping fast. I just wanted it all to end. Again as I look back at that day I know that my hours spent in basic training came in play.

We eventually came to a schoolhouse, now an empty building with just a potbelly stove. We were taken inside and found that it was full of American prisoners lying down where ever they could with their shoes off and their feet up and facing the stove. I lay over in a corner but I did not take my shoes off as I was afraid to look at my foot as I did not know what I would see. Thank God, I did not take off my shoes because by the next morning those soldiers who had removed their shoes woke up to find their feet had swollen and were turning color. They could not get their shoes back on their feet. I have no idea what was done for these men.

I know that I was taken outside to another building, maybe a barn, maybe a house, I do not know, and interrogated. The man who interrogated was like an SS trooper, a slick willie, in regular clothes, not a uniform and he sat at a table and made me sit in a chair. The way I can best describe it is to say it was like a job interview. He asked my name, rank and serial number, and I replied, Wallace Morgan, Pfc, 37447480. He also said he knew I fought with the 28<sup>th</sup> division, 110<sup>th</sup> reg, 1<sup>st</sup> Bn. He asked me if I had a cigarette and I said no, so he handed me a Camel, and we had a smoke together. ( In reality I had a pack of Camels hidden in my sock. They were my favorite at the time. I really don't know why they didn't search me but they didn't and I ended up with my Camels, my watch and my combat infantry pin. I had my watch with my cigarettes.) It was a strange feeling, and I had no guns trained on me for the first time in many hours. After a couple of minutes he called a guard to take me away. I was told to wait outside of this building, barn? I was given about a half a slice of black bread made with sawdust. I think I was also given some ersatz coffee to drink. After a period of time I was approached by a young eighteen year old German guard and told to carry his pack and he held a gun on me and we walked, just the two of us to Bonn. It was about a twenty mile walk. I tried to get the gun away from him so I could shoot him, but he just laughed at me and said

"no way" in English. All of our guards spoke to us in English. I never saw any of the prisoners who were with me in that schoolhouse again.

The weather that day was terrible. It was bitterly cold that morning it was dark, dreary and foggy. I could not feel my feet. As we walked toward Bonn I never even saw the German tanks and men being prepared for the Battle of the Bulge. I saw and heard nothing at all the only noise was the dripping of water from the tree limbs. This must have been the fifteenth of November and already they were assembling for their offensive of December 16.

In Bonn I was taken to the city jail, or at least I think it was the city jail, was taken upstairs, then told to go downstairs again, I said no to the guard and told him what I thought of his parentage, and he hit me with the butt of his rifle in the face and I went down those stairs face first. I learned a valuable lesson that day. They were a lot rougher than the soldiers on the front lines, they knew English and understood me, and that if I wanted to survive I would behave myself and do as I was told with no questions asked. And I never had to learn that lesson again. I never questioned anyone or anything while I was a POW.

I was in Bonn for a day, maybe two, and then was on the move again. I was by no means the only prisoner of war in Bonn. The jail, as I call it held a lot of us. By then I had no idea who was friend or foe so I did not talk to anyone. It was the best way to stay alive. I acted like a zombie, did as I was told and kept my mouth shut. Those who know me now find that hard to believe but I was a different person then and when you can see your life pass before your eyes you change in a hurry.

From Bonn we were taken to Limburg, I believe by train, a boxcar called a forty-and-eight. We had no idea when the train would be moving, how long we were moving, where we were when we stopped; everything was just a blur with all of us. It was not as long a ride as we had a week or so later when we went from Limburg to Neubrandenburg, but I'm getting ahead of myself. We were in it I think for two days. I have tried not to think about this for over sixty years. I know that as we got into the boxcar we were each given a small piece of bread to eat. Food, or the lack thereof became a real focal point in my life and in the lives of all us. The mind turns on that exclusively, home, girls, and everything else was of no importance. My thoughts were on cream puffs and pancakes. Some of the fellows talked about writing cookbooks, food was the overwhelming thought and obsession. Sometimes our bread was supplemented with a thin soup. While I am on the subject of food, one day in the soup line in Limburg one of the prisoners was complaining loudly that he wanted something more solid so the German ladling out the soup reached down to the ground and scooped up some dirt and threw it in the soup and told the POW that now it was more solid. Then the rest of the men in line had to eat that soupy water with dirt. Again, during this time I had been talking to a couple of other POW's and told them I still had my watch and I went to a guard and traded that watch for a very small piece of dark bread which I shared with the fellows. It was a good trade as we were trying to watch out for each other and we all needed something to eat more than I needed the watch. Once at Limburg known as XII A we were herded to sheds that were housing the POW's. They were long, low buildings and the entrance to the prison was fencing held up with wooden posts. Prisoners of all nationalities were held here but the Russians were kept separate from the rest of us. While I was there I saw carts full of dead Russians always leaving the camp. The guards would not go into the Russian

compound because they were so mean. They were being starved to death and thus were animalistic. I have no idea how they removed the dead Russians every day but I was not about to ask any questions. I became friendly with a British POW and he gave me his beret but took the compass and map that he had in a special pocket of the beret. That beret helped to keep my head warm and I have the beret to this day. What a momento. We talked about trying to escape to Switzerland but our talks went nowhere and we had to be very careful in talking to anyone as there were German spies among us and we had no idea really, who was friend or foe.

While in Limburg we received a visit from the Red Cross. They looked like German civilians, we were each given a postcard, to address and then check the boxes next to phrases such as am ok, I have plenty to eat, etc.

Also in Limburg we were taken to a large shower. We were told to strip and then to shower to get rid of our lice. We did not have lice. We showered, about fifty of us at a time, and then were made to sit for awhile wearing no clothes. After a time we were then made to take a second shower. After the war I learned that the same type of shower was used to kill the Jews. They were sprayed with gases in the air instead of the water that we got. I am sure that they were testing these showers to see how well they worked and the reactions of the men as they went through them. After the second shower there were civilian clothes waiting for us. Our uniforms were gone except they let us have our army shirts and some of the fellows got to keep their jackets. I did not; I had to wear a German civilian jacket.

We had rags for socks, the shoes they gave me were too large. I did not care that I had lost my own shoes as the left shoe was missing its sole since it had been torn off when I was hit back in the forest.

Another prisoner, Glen Voges had come in wearing boots since he was an engineer and they were given boots whereas the infantry wore shoes with leggings. Boots were what the Germans wanted so he told them that if they got him a pair of shoes they could have the boots. They gave him two shoes, totally different ones, not a pair. I learned this just recently in a telephone conversation. Glen went through the whole POW experience with me from Limburg until our liberation.

We were issued dog tags which I have since lost, much to my regret. We also had our thumbprints and pictures taken.

The guards would come into our barracks and ask us a lot of questions. They wanted to know all about us, and everyday life in the United States. I told them I was from Chicago and that I was raised in a gang of thugs. After I told them that they left me alone. Of course none of that was true but it worked for me.

Some of the POW's were taken out during the day on work details, fixing the railroad tracks. I was never sent on one of these details. I was not kept there long. I think it was more of a distribution area for most of us. And they were getting ready for the Battle of the Bulge, their offensive of December 16 but we did not know any of that. In fact I did not know about it until after the end of the war.

One day, late in the afternoon we were called by our German dog tag numbers, assembled and walked out the gates of Limburg and to the train depot where we were handed a slightly larger piece of dark bread than they had given us before as we were told to get into a box car that was part of a train of box cars. We spent a week in that box car, no food, no sanitary facilities, we used a corner of the box car. Sometimes the train

moved, sometimes we sat, and a couple of times we were taken off the train and paraded through a small village so the people could see that they had captured so many Americans. On one of these forced parades I saw a garbage pail and I ran over to it. In the bottom of the pail was a small radish which I grabbed and ate. One of the German guards jabbed me in my bottom with a bayonet, another lesson that I learned the hard way. Sometimes I did not learn very fast. But I can still taste that radish today and it was worth the pain. In this time frame we did reach Berlin but I have no idea how long we were in Berlin. I know that at night the British flew over with tracers and during the day the U.S. planes were flying. Do not ask me how we knew who they were, we just knew it and we could look out through slits in the wood of the boxcars and see the tracers dancing around us.

One of my fellow POW's has recently told me that one fellow in our boxcar was looking out through a knothole and a German stuck his bayonet in and put out the man's eye. Then they had to open up the boxcar and take the man out. We never found out anything more about him.

Before I continue with this recounting of my life at that time I need to state that recently I have been having telephone conversations with two other former POW's; the first one is John Stenger who also was with the 28<sup>th</sup> Division, 112<sup>th</sup> reg., 3<sup>rd</sup> Bn .HQ. He was captured November 7, six days before me. I have never met him but we have had similar experiences as we found out during our conversations. We each jogged each others memories and has this has been of great help to me as I write this. I thank him very much. Also many thanks to Glen Voges of the 35<sup>th</sup> Division, 60<sup>th</sup> engineers, who as you already know was in the same camps with me from Limburg on ,was in the boxcar with me and in the same satellite camp out of Neubrandenburg with me. He has been invaluable to me in filling in some of the blank spaces in my memory and in triggering my memory of certain events in the camp. Our camp along with many others was called an Arbeits Kommandos. (A work POW camp) We were known as Kriegsgefangenens. (Prisoners of War). We were called Kriegies for short. Eventually we found ourselves in northern Germany, in Neubrandenburg where we were all split up. I have heard that there were a total of nine hundred and fifty American prisoners. I was sent with twenty one other American prisoners and three or more guards to an old hunting lodge in the woods several miles from the large camp at Neubrandenburg. Four of us shared a room downstairs and the rest of the men were in one large room which was the entire second floor of the lodge. There was a kitchen also on the ground floor, a community or open room and the guards had a room downstairs. We had a pump to pump water and the restroom facilities were outside. The cook stove in the kitchen was our only source of heat and our cook was our oldest POW, an old man of forty. He kept the stove hot and that helped to keep our quarters a little warmer than it was outside. No one was allowed in the kitchen but Sam, the POW and the guards. One of the fellows went in one day and was severely beaten for this. This was a warning to all of us, stay out of the kitchen. They were so afraid we would try to steal something. Sam was also very grouchy and we were glad to avoid him. We had no electricity. When it got dark you went to bed. We got up in the morning before it was daylight.

One day that I remember four men and a guard went out to forage for food. Potatoes were a large crop in that area of Germany and in the fall the potatoes were dug up from the ground then put into straw piles which were covered with dirt. In winter when you saw a snow covered mound you knew it held some sort of food, probably potatoes and it

was to these mounds that the four POW's and their guard went to dig out a few potatoes. When they got back to camp there was a terrible scene and it was impressed upon all of us that no one was to do any more of that. No matter how hungry we all were there was to be no stealing of food. The commandant said he had heard about it and he was all upset and threatened to shoot us all. Thus ended the one and only FAMOUS POTATO RAID. One of the fellows in the camp must have been a German because no matter what we did the guards seemed to know about it as soon as we did it.

Our life in camp soon developed a routine. We worked six days a week chopping wood and had Sundays off when we could sit around and talk or just contemplate our situation. We had no books so did not read and we were not told anything about the war and what was happening on the front. We did not know of the Battle of the Bulge until the war was over. To get ahead of myself just a little, we were told of the death of President Roosevelt in April. It was very matter of fact, your President has died.

We would walk in twos through the snow a couple of miles or so where they wanted us to chopped down the trees in the woods. The limbs had to be chopped off and the logs piled up to be taken away. The burgermeister would come out from the nearby town every so often to check and see how much you had done and tell us we were not working enough. If you broke an ax handle you had to stand there all day, doing nothing but getting cold. This was another lesson learned. When you worked at least you kept yourself warm. I only broke one ax handle that winter. You also had to kneel in the snow to get the snow away so you could chop down the tree as you were chopping it right by the ground. I can still feel the cold, numbing sensation that went clear through to my bones and the damp that made my pants feel clammy where they clung to my skin. In later years now so many of us are having trouble with our knees and it all goes back to this. On the way to the woods one day one of the fellows behind me yelled at me that I had lost my shoe in the snow. I didn't even know it but I turned around went back for my shoe, a type of clog, slipped my foot back in it and away I went again. To this day I have no feeling in my feet.

The weather was awful. It snowed often, the wind was bitterly cold coming down from the North Sea. The snow was very deep and heavy, it was the coldest winter in many, many years. After the war and I returned to civilian life I moved to California to get away from the cold winters of the Midwest.

About a month after we were at this camp it was Christmas. We did communicate with our guards as we were not a threat to them, so they did talk to us, a mix of English and German and so we knew it was Christmas time. A couple of the fellows found a little tree in the woods and we decided to have our own Christmas. We were allowed to cut down the tree and we decorated it. Another prisoner, a guard and I went out and found foil for the tree. This foil had been dropped by airplanes flying overhead. The foil was dropped by allied planes to interfere with German radar and the Germans could not accurately determine their destination. This saved many planes and the lives of their crews. But the foil would float down to the ground and so we went out and gathered up enough to drape on our little tree to decorate it. We gathered around it and sang Christmas carols and had the best Christmas we could in the circumstances. I am so glad I only had one Christmas as a prisoner even though I know we had it easier than some.

Finally the winter became spring and the snow turned to rain and we were cold but wetter as we chopped our trees. We started seeing people walking in the woods at a

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distance from us, but moving, always moving around and watching us. After the war was over we thought that maybe these people wanted to see what we were like and if we would be better than the Russians. I believe they must have come from the nearby towns and farms but I cannot say for sure.

One day our guards gave each of us a Red Cross parcel. I believe we got a couple of them during the time we were there. My parcel contained cigarettes, matches, crackers, cookies and instant coffee. I had never heard of instant coffee. My small packet of crackers was wrapped in some type of paper. The paper has a set of lips on it. Whoever had put the parcels together had kissed the paper while wearing heavy enough lipstick. What a nice thing for a girl to do for an anonymous soldier. And what beautiful lips they were. I cannot think of anything else in the parcel.

On another day when Glen was sick and thus in the camp while the rest of us were out working a guard asked him for a cigarette. There was another POW there that day too who witnessed the whole episode. Glen refused and kept refusing to give the guard a cigarette. The guard would not take no for an answer so finally the other POW gave the guard the cigarette and the standoff was over. Cigarettes were worth their weight in gold. They were a premium commodity. They were treated as money, and a cigarette could buy a day off. I quit smoking as they were much too valuable to smoke. The German word for sick is kronk. We all made sure we were kronk once or twice a month to have a break from the cold and toil in the woods. It was a game we played to get even with them and have a day off. In my case it was a funny thing having the commandant's wife come in my room and ask if Morgan was kronk. Oh yes would be my answer. (Boy she was homely). Our guards and the commandant were changed every month or so. But this commandant had a wife. When they left the next commandant did not have a wife, he had a very mean police dog that did not understand English. We were on our best behavior while they were in the camp.

As spring came to northern Germany and the snow turned to rain and the rainy days became fewer we could feel a lightening of the atmosphere of the camp that matched the slow rise of the air temperature.

We were no longer quite as cold and we began seeing more German civilians near the camp. In fact some of them even were allowed to visit with us and practice their English.

There was a local farmer who came several times. We really enjoyed seeing him. We had coffee, instant coffee, all four ounces of American coffee and that farmer really wanted the coffee. He had a chicken, we thought, and we wanted it as much as he wanted the coffee. We must have dickered over this exchange for a couple of days or more. We finally reached an agreement and we were the proud possessors of a chicken that was cleaned and ready for cooking. Ha, Ha, Ha, we got it! We thought. We got permission to go in to the kitchen where we put our chicken in a pot to boil. We boiled it, boiled it some more and then boiled it again. We must have boiled it for a week and it was still as tough as it was when we started. We belatedly realized that we had traded our coffee for a Guinea hen. That farmer probably laughed as he enjoyed each cup of coffee. He is probably still laughing about how he snookered the Americans out of their coffee. I can still close my eyes and see us watching that chicken, AKA Guinea hen as it boiled.

old and a cousin a few years older. They had been sent to the country to keep them safe from the allied bombs that had been decimating their cities. They must have come from a wealthy family as their clothes were better than most that I saw and their demeanor was not subservient.

Somehow in conversations they learned that my birthday, my twenty-first birthday was the 29<sup>th</sup> of April. On that day, a Sunday morning, which was a free day for the POW's the older sister came to the camp with a piece of birthday cake for me. The commandant even gave us permission to go for a walk outside the camp. What a nice birthday I had. Another day when the girls were visiting us we all had our pictures taken by one of their other cousins and the film was given to one of the fellows who brought it back with him, had it developed and copies sent to all of us. I still have the pictures. And the girls have never aged, they still look nice.

One day a new guard came into XIIA which did not mean anything to us as our guards were always being changed and rotated to and from the Russian front. He looked the same, except he was different. Just before we left the camp he came up and asked me if I wanted his ring. I thought that was great and so I took the ring. It had crossbones and SS stamped in it. I kept that ring for a day or two and then someone asked to look at it and I never saw it again. All these things added together showed that there was a very noticeable improvement in the attitude of our guards and a much more relaxed feeling in the camp. For the first time in six months or more we were able to relax our vigilance and know we would soon be free again.

Not long after that we could hear the sounds of the Russian artillery in the distance. We all knew without anyone telling us that we would be leaving the camp and heading west to the allied lines.

By the middle of May we could hear the Russians very close, the noise of their barrage of fire was very loud. By this time there was a moving wave of humanity. Women, young and old, men too old to be in the army, children of all ages, all walking, with wagons, carts anything that moved carrying their most prized possessions. Just quietly walking, a step at a time. There was little conversation as everyone tried to conserve their energy for the walk. Even the three girls had gone. I heard later that the girls had made it into the American sector at the Elbe River where the Allies and the Russians had all stopped.

We joined the walk to freedom, walking day and night for three or four days and nights, along with our guards to the American lines at the Elbe and liberation by the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne. When I walked down to the riverbank the next day there stood a huge Russian tank controlled by a woman.

We, now former POW's, were issued U.S. Army clothes, flown to Camp Lucky Strike in Le Havre on C-46 airplanes where we were fed as much egg nog and steak as we could eat, interrogated about our time as a POW and eventually I was put on a small Liberty ship to return to the United States. We were one of the first ships to return without being part of a convoy.

Thus concludes my recollections of my life as a POW.