

## War Era Story Project 2012

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The story enclosed is not a battle story, nor one that is widely known. There were only a few of us there. Further, I believe President Roosevelt preferred to keep it hidden under the sheets. In addition to the enclosed, I have written my memoirs. They include all three-plus years of my military life. My book "Just A while Ago" has been accepted for the archives at the University of Toledo. I can print the war years (40+ pages) if they would be of value to your project. I can tell you that there were more than just battle casualties. It is sad that so late, we are now collecting these stories. So many are buried in the grave. I thank God for my many years (89) and a sound mind to tell my stories.

### Sentimental Journey

It was late February 1946. My buddies and I were on a train in southern Germany. Our destination was a cigarette camp (Army Post) outside the port of LaHarve. It was there we would board ship for the U.S.A. and home sweet home. We could already smell the aromas emanating from mother's kitchen.

As we crossed the German border that evening and then into a small town in France, there was a screeching of the train's brakes. We soon found ourselves on an unknown rail siding. There, they had a hot meal prepared for us. A little suspicious of what was going on, our empty bellies relished the warm food. Then came the news. Our contingent had been selected for a special assignment. Our mission would be explained to us upon arrival at our destination. As our train pulled out headed eastward into Germany, the aroma of mom's kitchen turned in the stench of a GI slit trench latrine. It was a subdued troop of battle warriors, as Dino Sturlini continued to play "Sentimental Journey" on his mandolin and we pondered our destination.

As the sun rose in the morning, the sun and the station signs told us that we were still in an eastern mode. Our hearts sank further and there may have been a tear or two. It had been 18 months or more in Europe and now this!

When the train chugged to a stop we were in Passau, Germany. Awaiting our arrival was a small cadre of officers. They were recently commissioned and sent for occupation duty. Being a contingent of non-commissioned, battle weary GIs, their demeanor and barking out of orders had us the feeling that we were back in basic training. Despite all the down feelings and a brash welcome, we did get a hot meal that evening and a warm bed for our stay. My room was on the second floor. Looking out my window, I could see many rats going back and forth between our building and a pile of junk or garbage.

Shortly after breakfast the next morning, the orders came. Fall out!! This we did, not expecting six or eight inches of new snow. Brought to strict attention and then at ease, we were told that we would be

doing calisthenics. With those words, the s-h-i-t really hit the fan. This band of GIs had a sit down strike in the snow. After a meeting with some of the sergeants, this part of their plan was abandoned. The next formation of these GIs was of a more serious nature. They will be telling us about our mission.

The officers were now telling us that when the Russian soldiers were captured by the German army, they had a choice of fighting with the German army or going to a prison camp. Those that joined the Germans were considered traitors by Stalin. He wanted them back. At Yalta, Roosevelt agreed that if any of these so called "traitors" came into American custody, they would be returned to Russia. That agreement is probably not noted in the annals of our war history. Plus, the dirty work was left to a homeward bound group of battle- and occupation-weary GIs. Now we were told that when they went to assemble these traitors at Dachau, more than 200 Russian soldiers committed suicide.

With that information, we were about to hear the details of our mission.

There is an army camp close by that houses several Russian soldiers. There are sixty in each barracks. The Russians are mixed both traitor and non-traitor. We know the category for each man. We will be dividing into squads of six to eight men. At the appointed hour, which will be in the middle of the night, each squad will take a barracks. The Russians will be sleeping. When awakened, they will be headed outside with what they have on and a blanket, period. Cold outside or not, that will be our order. Once outside, they will be brought back in, one or two at a time. Their belongings and clothing will be searched COMPLETELY. The search is for any item with which they can commit suicide. Once dressed, they will be removed to the outside. Ultimately, they will be transferred to a train that will take them to Hof, Germany. There, they will be turned over to the Russian army. As more details continued, you got the feeling you would be their executioner. If Stalin wanted them, we believed they would be executed or sent to a mine in Siberia.

With the critique winding down, there was one last order. "Any man who can speak any German, Polish or Russian, step forward! We know some of you." With that last statement, and having honed my German language skills during my occupation stay in Bergen, Germany. I did step forward. Ray Rusek a buddy that spoke Polish, joined me. With the recording of our names, we were dismissed. The question arose, "had someone been spying on us?" Several meetings or critiques followed. We became well oriented as to our mission.

Now came the waiting. Although we were allowed the freedom to visit the town of Passau, our thoughts were always of home sweet home. If I got bored, I could always watch the rats tracking back and forth from my window. Writing home about this mission was anything but exciting. A least our letters were not being censored.

At evening mess about two weeks later, we were silenced by an officer, who proceeded to tell us, "this is the night. You have your instructions and we know you will do well carrying out these orders. One last thing, will these men stand." When they finished calling names, Rusek and I were among those standing. Now came words that I will always remember. "You men are going to be our interpreters." For over two weeks we sat on our you-know-whats doing nothing, and now this. At the very least, I could have been studying the German words for many of the items cropping up in our search. In any case, I still had my

pocket dictionary. It was 5 a.m. and a cold night, when Rusek and I, with an officer and four others, rushed our appointed barracks. With rifle in hand, it was no problem getting the Russians to move outside. With the officer as a witness, Rusak and I began the searching process. When we finished our search, another GI got him fully dressed and took him outside. As the processing continued, I began thinking about the man still outside in the bitter cold with only a blanket. Orders are orders and you continue your work. One of the Russians spoke good German. With Rusek being able to pronounce the Russian names, we completed our mission. It was now 3 p.m., continuing to be cold outside and we were hungry. We had our eye on the black bread and cheese set out for each Russian. The officer, Rusek and I decided now was the time to sample the die schwartzes brot and käse. Our mess was still a few hour away.

The traitor Russians were taken to the town marshaling yards and placed in box cars. Each end had a pot and straw. With the Russians in, the ends were crisscrossed with 2x4s, and guards were stationed in the middle. I was glad I was not in the contingent taking these men to Hof, Germany. When asked if they could take this or that, sometimes I had to consult the officer. While doing so, the Russian would reply, "never mind, I know Stalin is looking for me."

Mission completed and two or three days later, we were on our way to the train station. The jubilation ended when we saw our transportation. It was the same box cars that transported the Russian soldiers. They had not been cleaned. With a sit down strike pending, our rookie officers had two options for us. Clean out the box cars with new straw or we could wait, while they scheduled a passenger train. As "wait" in the Army could be forever, we chose the box cars. I read about the forty and eights in World War I, but never dreamt I would be riding in a box car.

Bedded down in the straw as our composite of non-palatial box cars pulled out of the Passau train station that evening, I dreamed I was Jesus lying in the manger. The cattle were lowing, as we passed through moon lighted meadows. When I thought I heard an angel playing its harp, it was only Dino Sturlini strumming another rendition of "Sentimental Journey Home."

This delay changed my entire life, but that is another story. My wife and I have been married 65 years. We have a wonderful family and I am able to remember and write this story. Thanks be to God!!