

# Just Another Bowl of Soup!

by Maury "Buck" Norrell

A trivial occurrence has reminded me that I am very fortunate to have survived the horrors of being a prisoner of war in Nazi Germany during World War II...my wife served split pea soup for dinner the other night. It was just another bowl of soup, but it sent my mind whirling back to the year 1945.

Early in that year, the Allied and Russian military forces were staging an awesome drive to end World War II in Europe. The Russian juggernaut swept down from the East through German occupied countries including Lithuania, what was then known as East Prussia and into the Pomeranian region of Germany proper. Their goal was an eventual link-up with the Allied armies. The Allies were fighting their way from the West, simultaneously, after the invasion of France and the liberation of the Low Countries. Many thousands of innocent people were trapped in the narrowing corridor as the irresistible military forces sought to merge their armies to complete Hitler's defeat.

The Nazi troops faced certain imprisonment and envisioned possible torture if they were captured. Many civilians were also apprehensive about Russian reprisals. They secretly hoped that the Allied offensive would reach them before the Russians arrived. Large numbers of refugees packed their meager belongings and fled toward the Allied front. A motley procession of disillusioned Nazi supporters wandered blindly through the countryside in search of a better life -- somewhere.

Stalag Luft IV in Gross Tychow, Pomerania (now Tychow, Poland) was a Nazi POW camp interning "shot-down" air crew members from the United States, Canada and Great Britain. It also imprisoned a non-descript group of Russian captives who did not seem to identify with anything. The camp lay directly in the path of the approaching Russian army.

On the morning of February 6, 1945, the Nazi guards ordered the inmates of Stalag Luft IV out of the compound and into the open area outside the barbed wire. No one was surprised that we were moving. We had heard the artillery fire for several days as the fighting drew closer. Everyone was apprehensive about our eventual destination and the length of our journey. No information was forthcoming, as usual.

It was mid-winter, near the Baltic Sea. Snow and ice clogged the wagon ruts as we moved

out down the narrow country road to join the other nomads. Every usable possession that we owned was carried on our backs or stuffed, hastily, into makeshift carriers. The latter were constructed from a spare cardboard box with handles of shoe string; an extra shirt, clumsily stitched into a knapsack, or any scrap of cloth that we could scrounge before leaving the prison compound. Rumors persisted that we would only be on the road for a short time.

**We marched under armed guard for the next 80 days!** We were expected to walk as much as 30 kilometers a day. We slept wherever nightfall found us. Adequate shelter for several thousand men was hard to find in the open farmland. We quite often bedded down under the stars in a snow-covered field. A night in the straw and manure inside a farmer's barn was a welcome luxury! Blind faith and superhuman physical endurance were our only hopes for survival.

Several weeks after we started marching, I developed a painful swelling on the side of my foot. It was almost the size of a golf ball. Survival was questionable if you fell behind the group. In desperation I cut away the leather on the side of the only pair of shoes that I expected to own in the foreseeable future. The probability that my foot would suffer from exposure to the cold, snowy backroads was secondary to relieving the painful swelling inside my shoe. Several miserable kilometers later, I had to succumb and seek assistance or drop out of the marching column. After much discussion, I was allowed to join several other disabled, or seriously ill "kriegers" (kriegsgefangenen is German for POW) who were riding on the supply wagon.

The scant rations that had been issued to the POWs when the march began had long since dwindled to crumbs or disappeared entirely. We had walked for three days with only bites of raw kohlrabi (a turnip-like vegetable) for food. Rumor had it that we might get solid food when, and if, our raggedy caravan could find a place to cook it.

Our good fortune came to pass on my second day on the wagon. Nightfall found us near a large farm complex. There were numerous outbuildings and a typical German farmhouse with the barn attached to the kitchen. The guards selected me and another ailing POW to serve as associate chefs to prepare a meal of ersatz split pea soup. They supplied us with dirty, gray-green blocks of dehydrated soup

which had been carried on the filthy floor of the open wagon for many days. It didn't matter. We had finally found the facilities to "simply add hot water and enjoy!"

My partner and I were locked in a small washroom between the kitchen and barn. It was bare, except for a large black kettle in the corner. With the aid of hot water, which was poked through the top half of the kitchen door, and a "scrounged up" stirring stick, we gradually transformed the solid, dry blocks into a liquid that tasted as much like split pea soup as anyone could remember. I felt like a grimy Saint Nicholas as I ladled the concoction into the makeshift containers which the "kriegers" held aloft as they filed past the barn door. There was a rare flicker of a smile on many of the dirty, bearded faces as we all enjoyed the first hot food we had eaten in more than two months!

I was allowed to spend the night in the warm room. I was awakened during the night by a commotion in the kitchen. Guttural shouts were interspersed with the sounds of a female sobbing hysterically. Two guards dragged a teen-aged girl through the room and into the barn. I presume she was the proverbial farmer's daughter. They didn't bother to introduce me.

I rejoined the marchers the next morning so that some other ailing comrade could occupy the space in the crowded wagon. I, and the other lucky survivors of the "Death March", were eventually liberated by the American forces near Bitterfeld, Germany (close to Torgau, where the Russians and the Allies made their first contact) in late April, 1945.

The split pea soup we had the other night was delicious. It was served in attractive, ceramic bowls with special spoons and all the crackers you could eat! The dining room was warm and cozy. The conversation dealt with a casual discussion of the day's events. Everyone at the table was reasonably secure for the foreseeable future. No one around me had been threatened with bodily harm, recently, to the best of my knowledge. Time has healed a lot of wounds in almost 40 years.

It was just another bowl of soup...but, it served as a poignant reminder that we should all thank God for the multitude of blessings that we enjoy in America today. Let us never take our freedom for granted.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Our thanks to Maury Norrell of Cincinnati, Ohio, for sharing his story.



EDITOR'S NOTE: Cartoons drawn by Alex (AD) Palmer, of fellow POWs in Stalag Luft IV-C, Germany. Submitted by Jack A. Glance, of Saginaw, Michigan.

