

## **Humanity During War**

### **VI- Prisoner of War Life**

#### **Carleton Gillmore:**

The Germans interned Gillmore at Lubeck, which was unlike the Stalag type of POW camps in that it was an abandoned complex of barracks with barbed wire fences put around it. As far as Gillmore could tell, he was the only American put in this camp, which often got him targeted by the German guards. One guard, in particular, named George, was interested in Gillmore, and he acted as a kind of personal guard for him. George told him he used to be a bakery driver in Cleveland, Ohio, for twenty years. Gillmore was naturally suspicious of that claim, and he often talked to George about Cleveland, cleverly throwing in false information to try and trick George. George corrected him on those points and Gillmore partially believed that George had lived in Ohio.<sup>1</sup>

Gillmore noted that cigarettes were essential items used extensively by the prisoners to barter for items in the camp. In one instance, Gillmore gave George a carton of cigarettes in exchange for a PPK 38 sidearm. Before he could get the gun, however, he had to provide a note that stated that George had treated him well in the POW camp.<sup>2</sup> Once he had a gun in his possession, Gillmore escaped from the camp and spent several days trying to make contact with a member of the French underground. Due to confusion in the communication between the underground and the agent at the prison camp, Gillmore was unable to make his escape. After a

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<sup>1</sup> Carleton never elaborates in later parts of his interview if George did actually live in Ohio before the war.

<sup>2</sup> This anecdote is on pages sixteen and seventeen of Gilmore's interview, October 21, 2002.

tense few days out in the open, he decided it would best for him to go back to camp so that he could avoid the roving band of young soldiers patrolling the countryside.

When Gillmore returned to the camp, he was expecting to be punished severely for attempting to run away but was surprised when they only made him stay two days in solitary. He said they did not frisk him upon his return, and he was able to keep his gun on him.<sup>3</sup> Gillmore briefly talked about how the British prisoners had crafted working radios to keep up with news regarding the war. He did not know much about the process, as the British kept their communication network a closely guarded secret so they could keep the Germans unaware of it. On 1945-05-07, a British Armored Division spearhead came and liberated the camp. This was the last time that Gillmore saw George, as the guard fled in the opposite direction when the British started firing on the camp. As the British army began securing the nearby town, the Russian army arrived from the East and caused tensions between the two forces. Gillmore described how the British were extremely disciplined and organized, while the Russians were rowdy, drunk, and cruel to the Germans in the area.

### **Richard Curtis Greene:**

The Germans interned Greene at Stalag Luft IV in Gross Tychow, Pomerania (now Tychowo, Poland). The internees rode in boxcars, and then they walked to the camp from the station, watched over by guards and dogs. Greene said how there was a captain that was Commander of the Camp that was off fighting the Russians when an American air raid occurred,

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<sup>3</sup> Being discovered with a gun would have been grounds for him and George to be executed, making it more impressive that the guards did not catch him.

and his wife and children died in the destruction.<sup>4</sup> He was incredibly vicious towards the prisoners; in one story, a German worker died when he touched live wires on a light pole, and several prisoners started laughing. The commander pulled his pistol out and fired towards the group of GI's, quickly causing them to disperse. Greene said that the other German officers and guards were almost respectful in their treatment of the prisoners at the camp.

At the camp, eighteen people shared a room that was eighteen feet long and about fourteen feet wide and were often just given one meal a day. Greene said that the Red Cross parcels were lifesavers for the prisoners; they usually got a package once a week, and two prisoners had to share a box. Unlike the other camps, the Germans did not puncture the cans in the boxes.<sup>5</sup> The Germans situated the barracks as such; five barracks were on one side and five on the other side of the camp. A common area was in the middle of the camp for the prisoners to use. Their camp did not have the secret radios prevalent in the other prison camps; instead, they had a guard named Francis that had lived for some time in America before the war, and he slipped them information from the outside every so often. The Germans allowed the prisoners to have a Christmas play, which made the men ecstatic, as this was the only time the guards let them outside of their barracks at night. On 1945-02-06, the prisoners and guards moved southwards as the Russians began to make their way towards Berlin.

**John Thurmon:**

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<sup>4</sup> Richard never states the German camp commander's name in the interview.

<sup>5</sup> The food cans were often punctured so that they would eventually spoil. This made it difficult for prisoners to hoard them and have enough food for an escape attempt.

The Germans interned Thurmon at Stalag Luft III in the town of Sagan, which is now Zagan, Poland. When Thurmon arrived, he was greeted by the reception committee, as prisoners lined the fences to search for missing crewmates and friends among the new arrivals. Thurmon happened to meet a man named Kenneth Allen, who lived fifteen miles away from his hometown back in the states. Everyone in Thurmon's room (there was nine total) had been at Stalag Luft III for ten to twelve months. Life in the camp was tedious for the prisoners as they had to present themselves for roll call, regardless of the weather, before they were free to do activities. Most of the time, people read books, took part in theatre productions, and played baseball and football games to keep occupied.

Thurmon mentioned that there were plenty of escape plans thought up by prisoners, but the plans had to go through the escape committee. The escape committee was hard to get approval from, as they turned down most of the ideas due to their lack of feasibility.<sup>6</sup> On 1945-01-28, reports came that the Russian army was thirty miles away from the camp. The German guards quickly gathered the prisoners to move them out of the camp and marched them to Stalag VIIA in Moosburg, Germany. Thurmon stated that the conditions were much harsher at VIIA, as they were all crammed into one story wooden barracks lined with numerous triple bunk beds. Insects infested the barracks, which often kept the men awake at night, and once a month, the barracks were fumigated, but it did not help with the infestations. John said that Germans initially built the camp for 10,000 prisoners, but at the time it was housing nearly 100,000, as the

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<sup>6</sup> The Great Escape had occurred three months prior to John coming to the camp. This attempted escape from the north compound was a disaster, most likely helping raise the escape committee's standards for plans.

Germans began pulling all the prisoners to the central areas of Germany as the allied pushed in on the capital.<sup>7</sup>

The guards made the cramped sleeping conditions worse, when they moved the prisoners into tents to “fix” the barracks infestation problem. On 1945-04-29, Thurmon and the other prisoners heard gunfire around the camp. The mood around the camp was a mix between nervousness and excitement, as the men were unsure of what was taking place in the town. Around 12:30 p.m., amidst shouting and cheering, the German flag over Moosburg came down and was replaced by the American Flag. When Dr. Rogers-Price asked Thurmon about his reaction to the flag flying over the town, he said that it was a moment he would never forget as he was overcome with emotion. American troops later opened up the gates and began to mingle with the freed prisoners. Thurmon was able to see General Patton when he came to Stalag VIIA to meet the prisoners, although he did not get a chance actually to talk to him.

### **Louis Loevsky:**

Loevsky was taken to Stalag Luft III after he was shot down on 1944-03-22, and was surprised that the prisoners were in a state of euphoria since the Great Escape had just occurred.<sup>8</sup> The euphoria was short-lived as Hitler ordered for the execution of fifty prisoners who attempted to escape. There were three men who did manage to escape; Braun Vanderstock, a Dutchman, and two Scandinavians. This harsh response managed to lower the morale in the camp

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<sup>7</sup> John's numbers were nearly spot-on; by April 1945, there were over 76,000 men in the main camp and 40,000 in the labor camps nearby.

<sup>8</sup> The Great Escape took place on March 25, and Louis arrived on the twenty-eighth and therefore missed the excitement of the escape.

considerably. After the failure of the escape, the Americans at the camp started to interrogate the new arrivals to make sure that they were not German spies. When Loevsky was getting questioned, there was a man at the camp who lived three miles away from Loevsky's hometown before the service, and he vouched for him.

Loevsky and the other American prisoners managed to get news from the outside thanks to the British and their radios. The British in the camp had been trapped there for several years and had slowly built working radios with parts they traded cigarettes and coffee for from the guards. Once the British received news from the outside, they threw cans with notes across the fences that separated them from the Americans.<sup>9</sup> Only a few prisoners were selected to trade with the Germans, as they often had to be able to speak German well enough to keep a conversation going. A fellow prisoner told Loevsky a story of how one of the guards was shot after another guard found American cigarettes in his house, and realized that he had been trading with the prisoners. The prisoner telling the story had interacted with the guard often before he died and Loevsky noted how it affected him.<sup>10</sup> The prisoners decided to keep trading with the guards but also to try and not get attached to anyone particular guard after the execution.

Louis spent much of his time working on projects, as he was starting to grow restless being contained in the camp. One of these projects involved him crafting a gutter to irrigate their garden plots with pieces of hose and metal strips from old cans. One day he was banging away on the cans when two guards, armed with rifles, came by and asked, "What's up? What's

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<sup>9</sup> Pages eleven and twelve of Louis Loevsky's oral history transcript, October 18, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> This story is expanded on page twelve of the interview. Louis does not include names in his recollection of this story, which makes it hard to follow the narrative's flow.

cooking?” Some of the prisoners nearby joking told them, “Oh, he is going to build a B-17 and fly us out of here.” The guards, most likely not amused by the joke, left Louis to continue and he eventually completed his project successfully. He enjoyed a short-lived success, as the guards came back to him and told him to stop with the projects as it was forbidden. Louis continued to do smaller projects, such as rigging a pole with a bent nail to grab dandelions growing outside of the camps’ fences.<sup>11</sup>

After some time, the prisoners were moved out of Stalag Luft III and taken to Stalag VIIA, to avoid the advancing Russian forces. Conditions at Stalag VIIA were less than ideal, as there was an excessive amount of prisoners crammed into the prison camp as the Germans were fleeing from all directions to Moosburg. Loevsky mentioned that several times members of the Luftwaffe performed aerial maneuvers above the camp, being as they were “kindred spirits.” Loevsky’s time in the camp was mercifully short, as the American army arrived at the prison camp some weeks later. The army met little resistance, as the German guards had fled before the Americans arrived in force. Loevsky remembered the state of the camp when General Patton rode into the camp and interacted with the prisoners; the men were all cheering and hollering now that they were free. Loevsky was very quiet, however, for he felt that it was a dream, and he did not want to wake up.

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<sup>11</sup> The dandelions were needed so the men could cook and eat them, according to Louis. Page fourteen on his transcript, October 18, 2003.



Figure 1. Photograph of a part of a prison camp. Name of the camp not mentioned. National Museum of the Mighty Eighth Air Force.



Figure 2. Photograph of prisoners posing after being liberated from a camp. National Museum of the Mighty Eighth Air Force.





Figure 3. Airmen playing a game of volleyball. Often the men had only sports and reading to keep their minds busy during their time in the Stalags.



Figure 4. Photograph showing the evacuation of Stalag Luft VIIA. This image shows just a fraction of the men that were imprisoned at the camp.

