



VETERAN OF THE QUARTER
4TH. QTR. 2007

“BILL” PEBLEY
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Our Veteran of the Quarter, “Bill” Pebley, originally from Wickliffe, Oh, was drafted into the U.S. Army on 20 Dec 1943. After Basic Training at Ft. Benning, GA, he was assigned to the 398th Infantry Regiment, 100th Infantry Division, at Fort Bragg, which was filled with personnel from the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP). Due to the intensity of the “war”, they were quickly shipped overseas. Bill was assigned to Company “A”.

After spending much of its time on the mountainsides of the Vosges, subject to all of the rain, cold, snow, and physical discomfort and misery that could be heaped upon it, the unit struck out for Wingen. They quickly became involved in another combat operation, with the objective of gaining territory. “The Germans were very sensitive to our probing the approaches and showed it in the fury of their resistance as we methodically smashed defenses and forged ahead...They were determined to impress upon us the futility of this daring venture, but we were just as determined to reach our objective.” Once the company had arrived at the outskirts of its objective, the Germans, taking note, proceeded to subject it to mortar, artillery, and automatic weapons fire. Casualties were taken and, in the gathering dusk, the Company awaited its next move. The wait was short. (EDITOR’S NOTE: Due to limited space, I am having to purposefully leave out many heroic incidences and much of the specifics). Fighting gallantly for a significant period of time, against a numerically superior enemy, Company A, with the exception of one platoon, which managed to fight its way free of the trap, was compelled to surrender after exhausting its ammunition. Minutes before the surrender, as the Germans were throwing grenades into the cellar where they were “holed-up”, Bill was knocked out by a German “potato masher” grenade. Although he received no flesh wounds, he did have a concussion wound of the arm, rendering it paralyzed. The Germans did not have grenade-making down yet. Bill says if that had been an American grenade, he would not be alive today!

CAPTURED AND TAKEN TO PRISON

“When the Captain surrendered, and as we came out of the cellar, the Germans were shouting directions and motioning with their guns for us to group off to one side. They quickly organized the prisoners outside of the cellar where we were holed up, and began to separate the officers and non-coms from the rest. Then they started to march all of us out of the village”, Bill reported. After being interrogated, to various degrees, they were put into trucks and buses, and transported to buildings several miles away. The crushing realization that Bill and his colleagues had been captured slowly began to sink into their minds and spirit. The initial shock melded into a surprise, a “this can’t have happened to me!” denial. However, the reality was stark when it meant being rudely ordered around under the threat of rifles and machine pistols. The reality was even more apparent when it was equated with the lack of food and shelter.

At some point, the capturing Army took the prisoners' uniforms, and the long march to the train (which would ultimately deliver them to the prisons) began. Much of this period of time is a blur to Bill and his buddies. The Company no longer remained as one group, and various survivors described different means of movement from the front area to Limburg. Common threads through these experiences included cold, frozen feet, hunger, exhaustion, dysentery, abuse and occasional outright cruelty at the hands of the Guards and civilian onlookers. Some survivors rode trucks all or part of the way, others were sealed into boxcars and were taken by train (Bill's fate), others walked a good bit of the way. Many of the men had frozen hands and feet when they finally got out. This was one of the coldest winter on record in Germany.

Limburg was the site of Stalag XIII. Bill was eventually housed in Stalag 4B, where he spent the remainder of the war. He did not have to do work duty like the others, due to his arm injury.

LIBERATION:

Soon after Christmas, 1944 German problems on the Eastern Front compounded. German anxieties about the status of their "for ransom" POW's rose. Evacuation marches were often ordered with little advance warning. On 23 April 1945, Bill and the other POW's stood in formation, and it was announced that the guards had slipped away during the night. Several hours later Russian Squads on horseback rode into the camp. The Americans and British men in charge of the POWs were able to maintain the camp discipline and the prisoners remained intact as a unit. "We were getting restless, and it appeared that the Russians were not taking any steps to get us back to the American lines. We simply gathered what we could, and walked away, walking until we ultimately found friendly forces. While on the journey, we were able to obtain food from the local farmers. During the whole process we lost a lot of weight, and since our feet had been frozen, walking out was terribly difficult".

To what extent the months of severe deprivation, stress, and physical injury have affected Bill and his colleagues, over the past 46 years is difficult to assess. Nevertheless, this is something Bill and many other survivors have had to endure. An interesting fact is that in 1918, Bill's father was also missing in action for about one month in WWI. Sacrifice and courage runs in this family!

EDITORS NOTES:

I have had to skip over many of the stories Bill told me during the period of time I interviewed him. After interviewing and spending time over a meal, I came away with a renewed appreciation for Bill and all those who have sacrificially given in order to preserve our freedom. In spite of all the sacrifices made and given, Bill has a wonderful and loving spirit, a great sense of humor, and a huge appreciation for his country. After a successful business adventure, he retired. He is a member of St. Andrews Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC.

