

By John L. Frisbee, Contributing Editor

Lest We Forget

During the winter of 1944–45, 6,000 Air Force noncoms took part in an event of mass heroism that has been neglected by history.

MOST Americans know in at least a general way about the Bataan Death March that took place in the Philippines during April 1942. Few have even heard of an equally grim march of Allied POWs in northern Germany during the winter of 1945, the most severe winter Europe had suffered in many years. The march started at Stalag Luft IV in German Pomerania (now part of Poland), a POW camp for US and British aircrew men, most of them captured aerial gunners.

A prelude to that tragedy took place earlier and set the tone for what was to follow. In mid-July 1944, about 2,500 POWs from a camp near Memel, Lithuania, were jammed into the holds of two dilapidated coastal coal tramp steamers and spent five days en route to the German port of Swinemünde, thence by cattle car to a rail station near Stalag Luft IV.

The POWs' shoes were taken from them, they were chained in pairs—many of them ill and wounded—then double-timed three kilometers through a cordon of guards who used bayonets, rifle butts, and dogs to keep them moving. Some were seriously injured. (German doctors later testified that the injured suffered only from sunburn.) They had had neither food nor water for five days. The next day they were given water and driven through a gauntlet of armed guards and guard dogs, then strip-searched and had most of their clothing and possessions taken from them.

Early in 1945, as the Soviet forces continued to advance after their breakout at Leningrad, the Germans decided to evacuate Stalag Luft IV. Some 3,000 of the POWs who were not physically able to walk were sent by train to Stalag Luft I, a camp farther

west. On Feb. 6, with little notice, more than 6,000 US and British airmen began a forced march to the west in subzero weather for which they were not adequately clothed or shod.

Conditions on the march were shocking. There was a total lack of sanitary facilities. Coupled with that was a completely inadequate diet of about 700 calories per day, contrasted to the 3,500 provided by the US military services.

Red Cross food parcels added additional calories when and if the Germans decided to distribute them. As a result of the unsanitary conditions and a near starvation diet, disease became rampant—typhus fever spread by body lice, dysentery that was suffered in some degree by everyone, pneumonia, diphtheria, pellagra, and other diseases. A major problem was frostbite that in many cases resulted in the amputation of extremities. At night the men slept on frozen ground or, where available, in barns or any other shelter that could be found.

The five Allied doctors on the march were provided almost no medicines or help by the Germans. Those doctors, and a British chaplain, stood high in the ranks of the many heroes of the march. After walking all day with frequent pauses to care for stragglers, they spent the night caring for the ill, then marched again the next day. When no medication was available, their encouragement and good humor helped many a man who was on the verge of giving up.

Acts of heroism were virtually universal. The stronger helped the weaker. Those fortunate enough to have a coat shared it with others. Sometimes the Germans provided farm wagons for those unable to walk. There seldom were horses available, so teams of POWs pulled the wagons through the snow. Captain (Dr.) Caplan, in his testimony to the War Crimes Commission, described it as “a domain of heroes.”

The range of talents and experience among the men was almost unlim-

ited. Those with medical experience helped the doctors. Others proved to be talented traders, swapping the contents of Red Cross parcels with local civilians for eggs and other food. The price for being caught at this was instant death on both sides of the deal. A few less Nazified guards could be bribed with cigarettes to round up small amounts of local food.

In a few instances, when Allied air attacks killed a cow or horse in the fields, the animal was butchered expertly to supplement the meager rations. In every way possible, the men took care of each other in an almost universal display of compassion. Accounts of personal heroism are legion.

Because of war damage, the inadequacy of the roads, and the flow of battle, not all the POWs followed the same route west. It became a meandering passage over the northern part of Germany. As winter drew to a close, suffering from the cold abated. When the sound of Allied artillery grew closer, the German guards were less harsh in their treatment of POWs.

The march finally came to an end when the main element of the column encountered Allied forces east of Hamburg on May 2, 1945. They had covered more than 600 miles in 87 never-to-be-forgotten days. Of those who started on the march, about 1,500 perished from disease, starvation, or at the hands of German guards while attempting to escape. In terms of percentage of mortality, it came very close to the Bataan Death March. The heroism of these men stands as a legacy to Air Force crewmen and deserves to be recognized.

In 1992, the American survivors of the march funded and dedicated a memorial at the former site of Stalag Luft IV in Poland, the starting place of a march that is an important part of Air Force history. It should be widely recognized and its many heroes honored for their valor. ■

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