

L.V. Cordray
World War II Prisoner of War

by

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INTRODUCTION

This is a narrative of an interview with Mr. Lolace V. Cordray, a Prisoner of War in World War II. He served in the US Army as part of I Company, 168th Infantry, 34th Infantry Division. Mr. Cordray is now 68 years old. He is a native Charlestonian and lives in Ravenel, S. C. He is an active member of the POW/MIA Association. This is his story. ¹

I became twenty one years old on April 20, 1941. I thought I was a man and then Uncle Sam called me. I was drafted in October to report for induction. I left St. George, South Carolina, on October 14, 1941, and went to Columbia to Fort Jackson. After examination and what not, we were sworn in on the morning of the 16th of October, '41. Stayed there about a week and then we left there and went to Camp Wheeler, Georgia, which is about 10 miles out of Macon. Stayed there approximately thirteen weeks until the first week in February, '42 and then we boarded trains and went to Fort Dix, New Jersey.

We arrived there that same day or the next, it was awful cold. We had come out of the South and it was winter time there. We stayed there, it was a staging area for embarkation to go to Northern Ireland. Some of our outfit went to Fort Dix in January ahead of the rest of us and they left early and went on over seas. We didn't go until - we boarded on - April 29th of '42 and sailed on the morning of the 30th. We sailed on the British ship the *Aquatania*.

We sailed right by the Statue of Liberty. We saw it through the fog. We arrived at Belfast, Northern Ireland on the 14th of May, '42. We went on to this American camp where sailors had been training. The town of Enniskillen was on one side and Londonderry on the other. We stayed there all during that summer. We trained and then we moved into Scotland and then we trained some more. We left there and then we went to England and then from Liverpool, England we caught a boat and went to Algiers, North Africa, for the invasion of November the 8th of 1942.²

We went ashore in the country side. We waded ashore and then we took the main highway on to Algiers, the city. I don't know how many men there were in the invasion but there was a bunch. While we were going ashore at Algiers my brother, Milton, went ashore at Oran. It was a big convoy. We went ashore on the 8th. But let me back up a minute, on November 7th we circled in the Mediterranean Sea and that sea was as calm as this floor. They

just kept us circling, waiting on the right time, until we could go ashore in the wee hours of the morning on the 8th. Then we went on into Algiers and did a little bit of fighting but very little. It was a beautiful Sabbath morning.

In just a few days things cleared over and the Vichy government surrendered.³ After that the French came over to the Americans and had to fight the Germans. The German Commander was General Rommel.

This is hearsay but prior to this, the invasion of North Africa, General Mark Clark and a few others flew into the Rock of Gibraltar which was under British rule. They left there by U-boat and went into Algiers and made contact with the French Underground. They got everything settled and I believe General Clark lost his pants in that deal.

After the invasion we stayed around Algiers awhile and went to Bleda airport for guard duty until sometime up in January. That was when it was warm there down in the valley. It was cold at night, there was snow on the mountains. Sometime in the latter part of January we left for the front to go to Tunisia, another country in North Africa. In those days the head lights of the trucks were blacked out. They had a inch by two-inch slot for the light to shine through and driving on those mountain roads was hard but those drivers were good. They took us through the olive orchards. We got in position and encountered the enemy.

In just a few days we were surrounded and captured on February 17, 1943, at 7:00 A.M. at Sidi Bou Zid.⁴ We were dug in in fox holes. Then when night fall came we tried to walk out and we went all night long till the morning. When the morning came, we found out we were right in the middle of the Germans. Edenburg (the Lieutenant) wanted to resist after we were surrounded and they shot and killed him. I think he was to blame for it because he knew he couldn't win. When they took us prisoner they also took other infantry and tanks. The total was about 600 men but there might have been more than that. But I tell you, they had lots of tanks burning in that valley.

From there, the Germans marched us to Tunis, a seaport town, and we boarded planes

and flew across the Mediterranean Sea to Naples, Italy. We stayed there a couple of weeks or so and left there and went into and through Austria to Germany.

We went into southern Germany into Stalag 7A and stayed there a short time, possibly a month, maybe even less.⁵

When we left there the Germans took us to Stalag 3B that was at Furstenburg. Stalag 7A was at another little town but I forgot the name. We stayed at 3B a little while and they sent us out to US Kommando #1 work camp, a brand new camp, to help build a factory there. We worked on the railroad, we landscaped, we helped build a plant by mixing cement and all that kind of stuff.

I was at those three camps, Stalag 7A, 3B and US Kommando #1. US Kommando #1 was the first work camp the Germans ever formed for enlisted men. We arrived there the first part of May, '43 and we stayed there till February, the 13th of '45. That was where there was so much less to eat during the summer of '43 but then we got Red Cross parcels. They were little boxes with coffee, sugar and canned milk and different little things that you needed. It wasn't near enough but it was a big help. We could get mail but it would take awhile. It would come through the Red Cross. In that one camp, Kommando #1, there were only Americans.

We worked 10 hours a day. One group worked an eight hour shift and then another group would come on. It was an around the clock deal. When we worked on that detail, if we got a chance to trade a pack of cigarettes for a loaf of bread or what not, all you had to do was to tie up your pants leg and put the bread down in there. The bread didn't have a wrapper on it. When you went into camp, if the guy on the gate searched your upper body, he wouldn't find it. Then you would have bread and whoever was with you helped you eat it.

My room at Kommando #1 was about 20 feet by 15 feet and had about fourteen men in it. We had bunk beds and a big stove in the middle-coal stove. We unloaded coal and we stole coal and hid coal and brought that in in our pants, too. Sometimes you would bring it all the way up the hill and you hardly could make it because you didn't have anything to eat and you were tired and worn out. You'd get to the gate and if the fellow on the gate was rough, he'd shake you

down and all that stuff would fall out and you had almost made it. That was aggravating.

We heard about President Roosevelt dying the day after he died about 9 or 10 o'clock. We heard about it in Magdeburg, Germany. We got a lot of information fresh off the press with BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation). We had hidden radios but of course the Germans would come around and look for them. We had several radios. Some of the men could build radios from scratch, some could build them out of nothing. We couldn't have radios because we could pick up the BBC. They would tell their side of the story and the Germans would tell their side and it was up between us to figure out how much was right on both sides. Of course the Germans would have a loud speaker in camp playing music and the war news but they told it like they wanted.

We received a lot of information from the German civilians we were working with whenever they picked up any news. They could tell us things that they could not tell their own families. A man would tell us information that he wouldn't tell his wife because they were that much afraid of each other. They didn't know who to trust.

Toward the end of the war, when the Russian artillery was heard in the east, this German corporal had learned to speak some English. He was pro-Nazi. He walked down the street in Spremberg or it might have been Treptow. Anyhow, right from camp where we were working, it might have been 2 or 3 miles but not too far, all the officials of the town had taken all the buttons and badges off their uniforms. When they met each other they didn't say, "Good Morning", they said, "Heil Hitler". If you didn't say that your name was mud. Back up a minute, one of the POW's was walking down the railroad track and a German worker came by and said, "Heil Hitler" and the POW said, "Heil Roosevelt, by God". So any how, when this German corporal went down the street and those fellows had their insignia off, he said, "Heil Hitler", and they had to snap to attention because they didn't know who that corporal was. He said he did that to make those SOB's snap to attention and 'Heil Hitler'.

A lot of the guards were older men, 60 to 65 years old, that would take the prisoners and

work them. Some would be young men who were back from the front. They called it the "Russky" front. Some of these fellows were rough but we got along with some of them alright. Most of the guards didn't have much more than what we had and some actually helped us and some were complete Nazis - the young ones. Germany was a different country when the war was raging than before the war when everything was at peace.

On February 15th of '45, we left Kommando #1 and started marching and that was the danger part. The Russian artillery could be heard in the east and they were moving us away from there. They were moving us back away from the Russian front trying to push us back to the American front. We left our camp and started marching toward Luchenwald.

So we marched and we marched and then one day when we were marching the planes came over. Churchill said the British would bomb at night and the Americans would bomb at day time. When they came over it almost blackened out the sky with the bombers that were escorted by fighters. The large ones were B17 Flying Fortresses that were flying to bomb different targets. You could see the fighters by the vapor they were letting off. You could watch the vapor and then you see a speck in the sky. They flew in formation. If one got hit, he didn't leave formation as long as he could stay there. When he left he would go right down.

We walked about 5 days then we stopped at a barn about ten kilometers from Stalag 3A. We stayed in the barn from February the 19th to March the 15th and there we like to have starved to death. We had four fifths of a quart of flour soup-47 grams-per day. Men were passing out at roll call every day. We had no fire at all and there was snow on the ground. But then we got out of there.

The Russians kept coming so we had to keep moving. We went to Stalag 11A and from there to Zerbst. We spent a few nights in camp at Stalag 11A. Bed bugs were in there just like ants in a hill. We didn't stay there long. We did just a little bit of work but not much.

We got to marching and one evening we put up in this little village and the man had potatoes in a cellar. So the next morning we got the potatoes out of there and we built us a little

fire and cooked potatoes. We cooked them in whatever pan we had. We boiled potatoes and we ate.

They didn't take us out to march right away. We kind of thought something was up but we were just in the edge of the village so we couldn't see anything. About 10 or 11 o'clock they lined us up and started us out. So about that time we had loaded up on all those potatoes that we could eat, so we were in good shape. When we hit the main part of the village there wasn't anything but American flags sticking out the windows. I don't know where they came from but they must have had them from way back.

We went on down a highway going next to the Elbe River. We met a German jeep with two US officers in it. The Army had got to the Elbe River and the bridge was bombed so that you couldn't get any vehicles across. They walked across and got a hold of that German Jeep and they told us to go right on over and you'll be free in Just a little while. These men were from the 104th Division of the US Army.

We had no idea what was happening but it was real good. I don't know how many were with us but it was a good many men. When we went out to that US Camp Kommando #1 there was about 600 in the camp and we only lost one man. Some got transferred to other camps but not too many. Basically, we had 600 men on the road in that one group and I don't know how many miles we marched.

The Russians came right on to the Elbe River and that's where the two armies met. We were caught between two armies but fortunately the American Army had quit firing when we got close enough to them.⁶

When we went across the river we were free. This was on the 26th of April, '45 at Bitterfield, Germany. We stayed around and ate and messed around and after awhile we signed up but I didn't sign the book right off. I was free and I was in no hurry. The book was a register as to who was there and what not. I don't know how many days I was there.

After we were there maybe a week or two we left and went to Halle, Germany, a town close

by. We flew out of there on May 10th, 1945 in a C-47 transport plane. We landed at Camp Lucky Strike near Rheims, France.

Camp Lucky Strike was nothing but a tent city as far as the naked eye could see and that is a long way. There were three camps, Lucky Strike, Camel and I don't know the other one. The camps were staging areas for the troops going to the front and also staging areas for the troops going back to America. It was all the soldiers who had 4 points and who had been in the longest that had a chance to get out but I stayed there and I didn't rush anything.

I believe I was in Lucky Strike about a month when I got on the boat on the 10th of June, '45 ahead of the main body of troops that were going back to America.⁷ I worked on the trip back. I guess they drew my name so we served tables or whatever came to hand on the way back. The trip was short. We sailed on Wednesday, I believe. It was about eight days, it wasn't too long.

I came into Patrick Henry, Virginia, and stayed there from Sunday night till Tuesday or it might have been just a day. I called from Virginia to talk to my family but they already knew I was free. I called Pepper (his brother Milton) when I was in Germany. He got my message but I didn't get his answer back. So he knew I was free.

The Army was really moving, they weren't fooling around then. I went to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, by train. When we got to Fort Bragg they said, "We'll have you out in 24 hours", and I said, "Seeing is believing", but they did. Bubba (his brother Joe) came and got me at Fort Bragg.

I was to come home on leave, that was the 29th of June. I stayed home until the 15th of September. Then I reported to Miami, Florida, to a hotel down there for recreation and relaxation and stayed about a week. I went by train to Miami from Charleston. Then came back to Camp Gordon, Georgia, it is Fort Gordon now in Augusta. I was discharged on the 4th of October of '45. I was in just about four years. There was a lot of stuff happened in four years. Some was good, some was bad.

CONCLUSION

Mr. Cordray appears to have adjusted to his ordeal as a POW in a positive manner. He was very free and open in talking with me. He has not tried to forget his ordeal but has remembered in a way that is comfortable for him. I gathered that he doesn't feel any great animosity towards the Germans or his guards. He did state that he had no desire to return to Germany. Since his release he has only seen one of his fellow prisoners. He doesn't appear to be interested in following his fellow prisoners. He has many memorabilia around, such as a handkerchief that a fellow POW drew his travels on and a canteen he was issued in Camp Wheeler, Georgia. The canteen was marked with all of the places he went through. He also kept a small brown book which he wrote in as he walked. In one of the statements from this book, I believe, Mr. Cordray summed up his feeling about the war and his experiences. He said, "I sure am glad to be out of this Hitler starved country."

ENDNOTES

1. This is a narrative based on a live, taped interview held with Mr. Cordray at his home on January 11, 1988. The narrative is given basically in Mr. Cordray's own words. The interview was edited and consolidated for clarity.

2. Mr. Cordray's unit was taking part in what the Allies called "Operation Torch", the invasion of North Africa. The invasion started on November 8, 1942. The Germans were defeated by May 12, 1942.

Omar N. Bradley, General, A Soldier's Story
(New York: Henry Halt and Company, 1951) pp.
22-42.

Argyle, p. 111-115.

3. The Vichy Government was established after the fall of France to the Germans. The Vichy Government collaborated with Germany and was under its control. The Free-French government was established by Frenchmen outside of France to resist the occupation.

Christopher Argyle, Chronology of World War II
(New York: Exeter Books, 1980) pp. 36-37.

4. Mr. Cordray was captured during the last part of the campaign for North Africa. His unit, part of the American Army Corps, was surrounded and captured during the counter offensive the Germans named "Spring Wind". The Germans used the 10th and the 21st Panzer Divisions to launch the assault. It lasted from February 14 until February 22 under the command of Lt. General Ziegler of the German 5th Army. Over all the "Spring Wind" offensive failed. However, it did lead to the capture of several thousand French, British and American (Allied) soldiers. It also caused the defeat of a large Allied force at Kasserine Pass. This was the first defeat of an American Army unit by the German Army. The Allies suffered 10,000 casualties to the German's 2,000 in the overall campaign.

Paul Carell, The Foxes of the Desert
(New York: Bantam Book, 1960) pp. 331-342.

Brigadier John Strawson, The Battle for North Africa
(New York: Ace Books, 1969) pp. 175-192.

5. The "Stalags" were the prisoner of war camps where the Germans kept Allied prisoners. These camps were often separated by enlisted men, officer, and nationalities.

John Toland, The Last 100 Days
(New York, Random House, 1965, 1966) pp. 69.

6. The Russian and American Armies linked up at the town of Torgau on the Elbe river on April the 26th, the same day that Mr. Cordray was liberated.

Argyle, p. 184.

7. On Monday, May 7, 1945, the Germans unconditionally surrendered at 2:41 AM in a school room at Rheims, France.

Argyle, p. 185.

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