

Connelly survives capture, death march to Poland

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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Journey ends at Stalag Luft I prisoner-of-war camp which is liberated by Russians.

Albert Connelly and four other Americans surprised the seven-man Nazi patrol they encountered in snowy woods near the front line.

The rural Brady man and his comrades were trying to find their way back to Allied troops fighting in German-occupied France during World War II.

Last week, 91-year-old Connelly shared a remarkable story about fighting with the 81st Combat Engineers in Germany and Luxembourg during the famous Battle of Bulge.

He told of how his unit could no longer defend an important crossroads in St. Vith, Luxembourg, and were told by their commander to divide into two-to three-man groups to evade the enemy.

“We had no idea where to go and the only way to tell was where there was a lot of action.” Connelly said.

Several days after setting off from St. Vith in December of 1944, during one of the most brutal winters in history, Connelly and fellow engineer Orville Perry were joined by three Americans

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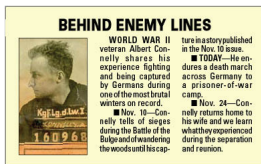
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who were also wandering the woods in a blizzard.

Being startled by the Germans once the snow let up actually helped save their lives.

“Orville and I were carrying rifles in our hands like we were hunting,” Connelly explained. “They had on heavy overcoats and mittens and had their rifles slung over their shoulders with the muzzle down.”



Three of the Nazis shucked their rifles and threw their hands into the air.

Connelly said the Americans captured three prisoners. The other four Germans “didn’t make it.”

He said the prisoners were treated well, noting that one of them had gone to school in New York City and spoke English.

That was important when the group stumbled upon a German unit bivouacking in the trees just before dark.

“They opened fire and threw mortars and we dove behind a rock pile.”

Connelly said the Americans knew they didn’t stand a chance so asked the German prisoner to tell them they surrendered.

Now the Americans were the prisoners.

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“We were lucky they weren’t SS,” Connelly said about their German captors. “They’d had lined us up and gunned us down.”

SS stands for Schutzstaffel, a protective squad that evolved into a military branch of the Germany army and was known for committing brutal crimes.

The German captors shared food with the prisoners during a four-day march to a place where other American prisoners were gathered.

From there, about 100 Americans—including Connelly— were expected to march across Germany to a prisoner-of-war camp in Barth, Germany.

The death march took three months.

Each prisoner was given a blanket and also watery soup once a day that might include a carrot or beef top or horse meat from a supply train, Connelly said.

“I saw a lot of people starve and freeze to death,” he said.

Connelly said he didn’t know what happened to the dying soldiers left in the snow as the rest of the Americans kept walking from first daylight until dusk.

Entering the service at about 175 pounds, he estimated he weighed a little more than 100 pounds once the prisoners reached the middle of Poland where Connelly became sick with penumonia.

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Why he wasn't left to die is something he'll never know.

Instead, he was taken to a warehouse converted to a makeshift hospital and tended to by an English prisoner who was also a doctor.

For days, he laid on bedding of grass and reeds that was supported by a frame strung with hog wire.

"We had very little heat and didn't eat much better."

Perry, a fellow 81st combat comrade who left St. Vith with Connelly, also made it into Poland.

"We were pretty tough and had made up our minds that they couldn't kill us so we kept going," he said.

But once Connelly was hospitalized, he lost track of his friend.

Connelly's convalescence was anything but quiet.

"We were close enough to the front lines that artillery was fired over the hospital," he said. "We'd hear the shells slowing down and wondered if they were going to hit us."

As Russian Allies advanced into Poland and closer to the warehouse, the Germans suddenly pulled Connelly and seven other prisoners from the hospital.

Patients who could walk were forced to march somewhere, Connelly said.

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Connelly and others were taken to Stalag Luft I, a camp in Barth, Germany, on the edge of the Baltic Sea that housed 7,700 prisoners.

By then, Connelly was on the mend and he and other prisoners—who were mostly from the Air Force—lived in barracks heated by small stoves fueled by peat.

They received watery soup and “a little brown bread that was about a third sawdust” twice daily.

Once a week, the captives were given packages from the Red Cross that contained such luxury items as crackers and chocolate bars.

Prisoners could also walk the yard, surrounded by barbed wire, until dark.

By now it was the middle of March and the weather was more moderate.

Connelly said the numbness he felt for several months began to ebb since the war was almost over.

“I knew I was safe there.”

From hidden radio contact some of the prisoners had with the outside world, Connelly said everyone in the camp knew

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