

*John W Hoag Jr was born June 23, 1924 in Rutland Vt. He joined the army in the summer of 1943. He became a radioman and was assigned to the 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. This is his remembrance of his experience in the Battle of the Bulge, capture and time as a P.O.W. And release.*

On December 16, 1944 the Battle of the Bulge began. For our company it was a very strange experience, we heard lots of shooting and other battle related noise, but we weren't being shot at. The plan had the division spread over a 27 mile front and that caused great big gaps in our lines. Our pillbox was at the end of our company's line and there were 1500 yards between it and the next friendly troops--that's almost a mile!\* The Germans had a pretty good idea of how we were spread and their main thrusts were through these gaps (not ours, but others up & down the line). By evening time we were told that we were 25 miles behind enemy lines, and we hadn't moved nor seen a German soldier.

Our communications were messed up. We couldn't reach our headquarters part of the time because the Germans were trying to jam radio communications, and when we could get through, no one seemed to know what was going on or what to do about it. We stayed in our position the first night, but I can assure you that on guard duty, we were much more alert than previously. We stayed there all of the 17th too, but late in the day we got orders to "attack to the rear" (It wasn't retreating, because we were going towards the enemy!) They had a plan that the 7th Armored Div. would drive through the lines to meet us and that would provide a corridor through which we could extract ourselves.

Bright and early the 18th we loaded up with all the food & ammo we could carry and started our drive. We lost 2 platoons somehow along the way, and then found them later, they just got lost! Other than that, it was a fairly uneventful day. We slept in the woods that night. In the morning of the 19th, the ranking officer decided to move the vehicles out before we moved. The Germans heard the vehicles and knew where all the little roads(trails?) in the woods were and so started shelling us badly. It was hellish, and we had tried to dig in the night before, but the ground was frozen hard and so we had just little tiny gullies dug and laid there more or less out in the open. Eventually, we moved out and were making some progress when an U S armored vehicle came along and someone in the vehicle yelled to us in English. So we thought they were friends as we stood up, they let loose with machine gun fire! Our guys snuck around to the side of the vehicle and tossed a grenade in the open hatch of the vehicle which was very effective.

Very shortly after that, I was talking to the radio operator in company L which was on our left flank. He was a buddy and while we were talking, the Germans hit their position with a very strong artillery barrage. My buddy stopped talking in mid-sentence so I assume he bought the farm. Our CO decided to go over to see if we could help L Co. I reminded him that we should leave some people in our position to at least guard against the enemy coming around that position. He thanked me and as a reward put me in charge of about 5 guys who were supposed to guard that position. We had very little in the way of firepower, so we "liberated" a couple of machine guns from some dead Germans nearby and put them in position. It wasn't necessary because we weren't disturbed for the couple hours we were alone. Our CO was somewhat impressed that we had set up machine guns, even though they weren't ours.

\*The 106th Infantry Division relieved the 2nd Infantry Division in the Schnee Eifel on 11 December 1944, with its 424th Infantry Regiment was sent to Winterspelt. Prior to the battle, according to the US Army Service Manual, one division should be responsible for no more than 5 miles (8.0 km) of front. On the eve of the battle, the 106th was covering a front of almost 26 miles (42 km) *US Army Center of Military History*. US Army Center of Military History

We finally met with the 7th Armored. One tank got through and it was out of ammo and the tank commander had been killed. As we went along we didn't meet much resistance, but along about 3 pm we stopped. We sat around for a while and then were told that we were surrendering and that we should destroy our weapons and my radio. We talked to "Rip" Collins, our executive officer, and tried to see if there wasn't some way we could escape or hide so we wouldn't become POWs. We were completely surrounded and the enemy was prepared to wipe us out, we were told-so we became POWs at 4pm on the 19th.\*

It was a terrible experience, we felt abandoned, guilty, scared, let down, and that somehow we hadn't done our job. We were made to remain on our knees with our hands locked behind our necks for a couple hours. Then they marched us out. We walked for several hours and then were herded into a church, but there wasn't room for us inside so many of us spent the night in a field next to the church. We were depressed, cold, wet, hungry and still scared. I found some tree branches that I arranged so I didn't have to sleep in the snow, but it wasn't the most comfortable night I've had.

Sometime during that night as we were herded towards the church, we saw a V-2 rocket being launched. It didn't get to England because it went crazy on the way up and they destroyed it. We had seen many V-1 "rockets" go over us when we were in the front lines. These were very slow and flew low-we could have shot them down with rifles, but they wouldn't let us because they might fall on our troops to the rear. It was much better to let them fly on, although they were aimed at Belgians or British. The V-2 was a real rocket though that went nearly straight up and flew very high. I'm told by people who lived in London at the time that you could hear the V-1 coming and have an idea where it would land by hearing the motor stop. The V-2 though, they couldn't hear or see-all of a sudden it was there. It was a bit ironic to see the Germans launch a very hi-tech rocket for those time, which was brought to launch site by horse and wagon, because they had very little fuel for trucks and tanks.

The following day we were roused and on the road again-this was the 20th, and our last full meal was on the 16th, and the rations we had carried had run out. As we were being herded along we saw what turned out to be turnips in the fields beside the road. They were frozen and raw, but they were something to eat. The guards got upset with us for running into the fields, but only shot at us a couple times. They also tried to take our jewelry, warm coats and other stuff from us. I feel I made a contribution to our guys, because there were several thousand (yes thousand) of us and only a hundred or so of them. So I told our guys that when a guard came to try to take something, we should all yell at him. It worked, after 2 or 3 tries they never again tried to take our valuables.

\*In the Ardennes-Alsace Campaign, the Germans attacked the 106th on 16 December 1944. The division's 422nd and 423rd Infantry Regiments were encircled and cut off by a junction of enemy forces in the vicinity of Schonberg. They regrouped for a counterattack, but were blocked by the enemy. The two regiments surrendered on 19 December. The Germans gained 6,000 prisoners in one of the largest mass surrenders in American military history. Nearly 50% of the division's strength was brushed aside in the first days of the Battle of the Bulge.

We marched all day with only turnips to eat and snow for liquid and finally arrived at a town called Prum. As we marched through the streets, the citizens came out and looked us over and made some comments-unkind I'm sure. Some of our guys thought it was terrible that they had raw sewage running in gutters down the sides of the streets. I didn't feel we were in a good position to criticize them. I also nearly got run over by their biggest tank-the Tiger. He came along the narrow street and I was among those at the corner and when he tried to make a 90 degree turn he was within a couple inches of my toes, and I was up against the wall. We finally reached our destination-an empty brewery. My buddy and I found a couple of straw mats about an eighth of an inch thick and went to sleep-hungry. However, it was the first night in 4 that we had been able to sleep under roof, and not laying on top of snow.

About 10 the next morning we awakened and found that a lot of the guys had gone-we knew not where. We were eventually rounded up with others and taken down to the railroad yard and loaded onto the train. We were each given a piece of what was supposed to be bread as we were put on the train. Our accommodation was a boxcar in which 64 of us were supposed to fit. There were a few planks hung at one end of the car where people could sit if they didn't mind being 6 feet off of the floor! The rest of us had the floor. We were to spend the next 6 days in that car. We were allowed out one day for about 5 minutes. Our piece of bread was supposed to hold us for that trip. It was so bad that most of us couldn't eat it for a couple days.

I, along with some others, came down with dysentery which was a humbling experience. The toilet was my steel helmet, and the product was dumped out a little window with great care to try to make sure it all went outside. The helmet was "cleaned" with straw from the floor. I would have liked to get rid of it, but felt I would need it again.

We got strafed by the U S Air Corps one day. It was very grim in that car. Some guys panicked, and some just put up with it. My personal feelings at the time were that maybe getting hit would allow us to get out of the car. As a result of the dysentery and no food or water for several days I think I was a bit delirious at times. For moisture we would lick the frost off of iron parts of the boxcar. We spent a good part of Christmas day in the Frankfurt rail yards and there were some German women skating nearby. We hollered at them to give us water. It took a while, but eventually they handed a pail with some water in it through the small hole. That tasted real good-no matter where it came from. Also, I was impressed that we did share it.

On the 26th we arrived at Bad Orb and got off of the damn train. We had to walk about a mile uphill to the camp and it was a struggle for many of us due to our weakened condition. When we got to camp, we were almost immediately given some cooked carrots-that's all boiled carrots. Of course, my steel helmet wasn't an ideal dish, so 4 of us ate out of one guy's helmet. We had no utensils so we used playing cards as spoons. They don't hold up too well with hot steamy carrots.

We were then shown to our new accommodations-a barracks. It had no beds a couple of stoves, and a couple of holes in the floor which was called the toilet. They were overcrowded and, as a result for the first month, we slept on the floor so close to each other that when someone turned over-everyone had to turn over. Oh yes, they also gave us our bedding-a piece of thin blanket that was long enough to cover from mid-chest to feet or from knees to shoulder. It was about wide enough to cover a person laying straight, but if one bent his knees something stuck out. We were also allowed to

have wood for the stoves-as much as 2 guys could carry in their arms per stove. We soon learned to not start a fire till evening and hope that some wood would be left over to take the early morning chill off.

Our meals consisted of fake coffee or tea in the morning, soup at lunch, and 1/2 a loaf of bread in the evening. Every other Friday, we got a treat, tomato jam, cheese or once in a great while, meat-like liverwurst. If we volunteered for work details, we could get an extra helping of soup. Our soups were pea, potato, or barley. Sometimes they had some meat in them-usually horsemeat, and I'm convinced that we were given dog meat in the soup.

After about a month, they moved all the officers to another camp and we had room. We moved into a barracks that had beds--well sort of, and real bathrooms with sinks and potties and even a communal shower (cold water only). The beds were stacked 3 high and there were 4 beds per group--so 12 of us slept in one group. The mattress was a gunny sack stuffed with excelsior--it wasn't much but it was up off the cold floor and the excelsior was softer than the floor had been and one could turn over without disturbing everyone else. The slats holding the "mattress" up were pieces of tree trunks sliced thin and put in with the round side up. One desperate need for all of us was toilet paper, which wasn't provided by our hosts. We used French francs, any scrap of paper we could get hold of and if worse came to worse we would take a little excelsior out of our mattresses. (Excelsior is long thin wood shavings)

Life was fairly tedious and dull. We had little to read, no games to play, no other ways to amuse ourselves. We did go on work detail to get extra food, but we couldn't always get work. We all had been given small new testaments which we read and reread--and had numerous religious discussions, some of which became quite heated. The only officer in the place was a catholic priest who was a chaplain. He was a great guy and volunteered to stay with us enlisted slobs. He was helpful to us on many occasions, and was essential for the burials of our people. At first, someone died once a week, then it was one person a day, and then it became more than one a day. We were allowed to have a 2 wheeled wooden cart that would hold 2 or 3 bodies and wheel them to the burial ground where we laid them to rest. I'm convinced that most of these people died of despair, or lack of faith whether in God, themselves, or the U S Army--they just gave up. We were very weakened--so it was fairly easy to die if one wanted to.

We had numerous medical problems and no medicine or doctor. Scabies, a skin infection was most prevalent, I had yellow jaundice which could have damaged my kidneys and liver (and maybe did) it was from poor nutrition. We finally received Red Cross packages and the food I got from my share of a package cured the jaundice. We got those packages every now and then and usually had to share with 2 to 4 people. The Geneva Convention requires each prisoner to get a package every 2 weeks all for himself-. The Germans gave many excuses for us getting less, but we were pretty convinced that they were taking some for themselves.

In general, we were pretty well treated. Our food wasn't much, but the guards had to eat the same stuff--they just got more of it. The camp commander knew damn well that our camp was nearest to the American front and that Germany was going to lose the war, so he told the guards to behave themselves. When a couple of guards got rambunctious and decided to beat some of us up, they were told to stop or they would be on their way to the Russian front.

We fantasized about food continuously. We were continuously hungry and cold. Oh yes, the Germans provided no eating utensils! I had discarded my portapottie(helmet) so had to create some. I found a piece of wood and gouged out the center so that it would hold soup, and carved myself a tool called a spork or foon. It was another piece of wood that I whittled so that there was a crude spoon on one end and a cruder fork on the other.

The camp itself was located on a hill, with a beautiful view-except when deer grazed outside the fence-a bad thing for hungry guys to look at. It had been a summer camp for city children before the war and has reverted to that since. We never saw the town of Bad Orb while prisoners, but I've been back several times and it's a beautiful little town surrounded by walls with entrances so small the only cars that could get in the old town were VW bugs!

Life in camp was pretty routine. There were British, Russian and Italian POWs in there, but we were separated. We could talk to the Brits through the fence and they gave us the recipe for grass soup. You get some water and when it starts boiling you put grass in it! Wasn't too tasty, but had some nutritional value. They also had tough justice-one of their people did something they shouldn't have and the Brits tried him and sentenced him to be thrown into the latrine-which was a big pit in the ground. They also had somehow made a radio on which, if they were lucky, they could get news from the BBC. We would go over to the fence to get a summary from one of their people. This was against the German's rules and the Brits could have been in trouble.. Some of their people had been POWs for 5 years!

Only about 3 exciting things happened to us during our stay. We got strafed by the U S Air Corps once. He was chasing a German plane and came over a hill shooting and the bullets slammed into our barracks. One other sport was cheering the Allied bombers going over, we were forced to get into 6 foot deep trenches when the bombers overflew our camp. The Germans got very upset with us when we cheered for the bombers. We felt great hope when we would see hundreds of our bombers going over-it meant to us that sooner or later the Allies were going to win and if we could hang on, we'd be free.

Another time a couple of our guys broke into the kitchen to steal food and a guard came in and they killed him. We were all herded outside and lined up in front of machine guns and were made to stand there about 4 hours. They threatened to shoot us several times. I was fortunately in the back row and behind me was a big ditch where we were put during bombing raids. I figured that if one German pulled a trigger, I'd dive into the ditch. Our priest bargained with the Germans to the point that they agreed to let us go back to our barracks, but we were to have no food, water or wood for heat until the guilty were turned over to them. After several more hours, the priest who apparently had gone from barracks to barracks found the guilty and turned them over to the Germans. we never knew what happened to them, but suspected the worst.

Lastly, near the end of the war (we could hear the big guns getting closer, even though the German info officer kept reading us German propaganda telling us that the Allies were still on the other side of the Rhine River) the Germans started removing POWs from camps and walking them all over what was left of Germany. Our commandant was ordered to do the same, but he came to us and suggested that we develop a case of Spinal Meningitis. We did, so we were quarantined and not able to go on these fruitless marches.(We really had cases of Spinal

earlier and were really quarantined-so he knew we wouldn't be marched) Many people from other camps who were forced to march died. We were all pretty weak and to march all day, sleep out, and have little or no food would have been disastrous.

On April 4th 1945 the 44th tank Div entered our camp and liberated us ! The tankers were trying to be nice to us and threw us candy, cigarettes and "C" rations, which were cans of beans & hot dogs, spaghetti & meatballs etc, all very heavy, rather rich foods, which our bellies weren't used to-and we didn't have the discipline to not eat them or eat a little at a time-as a result we all got pretty sick, but it was worth it!

We were moved to another location-a hospital of sorts-and were to be flown to a camp near Le Havre. However, gasoline for Patton's tanks took a priority, so we had to wait for a plane. Even though they were feeding us carefully, we were still hungry.

At camp Lucky Strike, they gave us physicals and tried to give us shots, as they had no record of our previous shots. We were so skinny that they decided that we had no place with enough meat where the needle could go in without hitting bone. I was down to 100 pounds (\* 160 pounds was normal weight). They also found that I had trench mouth as disease caused by malnutrition. I spent a week or so in a hospital, when what I really wanted to do was get home.

Our boat going home took 2 weeks, instead of the 1 week it took to get us to Europe, We had a terrible storm that blew us 70 miles off course. I saw seasoned sailors get seasick and waves came over the highest part of the boat. There were a bunch of Dutch kids on board who had joined the Marines and were coming to the states for training and they pulled all the dirty jobs on board-(KP etc). Also they were so starved for fruit that they would eat lemons rind and all!

We got into Boston in time for me to get home for Mothers Day, which I guess was the best present for my mother.



John Hoag

## Pvt. J. W. Hoag Is Reported As Missing

Mr. and Mrs. John Hoag of 44 Bellevue avenue was notified yesterday in a War department telegram that their older son, Pvt. John W. Hoag, 20, has been missing in action in Germany since December 21.



**PVT. JOHN W. HOAG.**

Pvt. Hoag, a 1941 graduate of Rutland High school and clerk in a Center street department store, was sent overseas in October and was with the 106th infantry.

Besides his parents he has a brother, Charles, a Rutland High school junior, and a sister, Joanne, who attends Meldon school.

### **PVT. JOHN HOAG, JR., AT HOME UNTIL JULY 15.**

Pvt. John Hoag, jr., son of Mr. and Mrs. John W. Hoag of 44 Bellevue avenue, will report to Lake Placid, N. Y., redistribution center on July 15 after spending a 60-day furlough at his home here. He arrived at his home on May 15 after having been liberated from a German prisoner of war camp. Pvt. Hoag was first reported as missing in action, December 21. He is a graduate of Rutland High school, class of 1941, and enlisted in the service more than two years ago. He was fighting in the Belgian bulge when he was captured.

## Pvt. Hoag Is Released

**Rutland Soldier, Freed by U. S.  
Troops, Has High Praise for  
Red Cross.**

Mr. and Mrs. John W. Hoag of 44 Bellevue avenue have received a letter from their son, Pvt. John Hoag, 21, who on December 21 was listed as missing in action, stating that he is in France after being liberated by the Americans from a German Prisoner of War camp, and that he "hopes to be home soon."

Pvt. Hoag, a graduate of Rutland High street enlisted in the service more than two years ago, and was fighting in the Belgian bulge when he was captured on December 21. His family learned that he was a prisoner early in March.

It is believed that he was imprisoned at Camp Bad Orb, near Frankfort-on-the-Main, when he was released.

The letter received by his parents, dated April 8, said: "Dear Family: I am in France now, a long way from my prison in Germany. The treatment that we have received since liberation has relieved much of the bitterness and feeling that we had from being prisoners. People can't seem to do enough for us. Uncle Sam and the Red Cross have treated us wonderfully. The American Red Cross is doing a swell job."

"A Red Cross girl at the hospital we stopped at gave us smokes, candy, V-mail paper. When we got back to France the Red Cross was waiting with coffee and doughnuts—boy, did I make a killing there! At this camp there is a big tent where the Red Cross furnishes, coffee, doughnuts, V-mail, pens and ink, magazines, funnies and newspapers. You don't know what a funny paper means to us. They have given us a bag of necessities—a razor, soap, handkerchiefs, chewing gum, cigarettes, candy, books, etc."

In a letter to a girl friend, Pvt. Hoag, speaking of German rations in the prison camp said, "They gave us soup—and it wasn't Campbell's either."