

Interview with Fred Stockmeier

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Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: By now, you've had a chance to make a very distinct impression of these German captors. How would you describe them?

Stockmeier: It's difficult to say, because we were all just dead on our feet. You have to respect front line troops. You've been through it, they've been through it, and you know that each other's been through it. They were not the vicious type that you hear about. In fact, the meanest, the most unpredictable were the younger ones, but even there, when you were alone with them, you were going to find that they're human. But when there are officers around, they have to put on a show to protect themselves, so they do.

DePue: Were they generally well fed?

Stockmeier: Oh, considering that we had never had any contact with them, we have to say yes, they were average.

DePue: Yeah. And fairly well-disciplined?

Stockmeier: Yes. Yes. The down aspects came with the passage of time, and we had more experience of dealing with them. We had one German Colonel who was trying to talk to us in English, and he wouldn't let the interpreter talk because he spoke English, but he was so hard to understand. And the officer Corps, they don't admit they can't do something. They do it.

I had German civilians that treated me so nice; I had German non-coms that treated me so nice. But, and again, you'd come up against somebody, and like the little kid standing looking at us one day, and he pulled on the guard's rifle butt; he says, "Schiesse alle! Schiesse alle!" This is a command form, or what we call the imperative verb: "Shoot them all! Shoot them all!" Now, this kid is maybe six years old.

DePue: So he'd grown up being indoctrinated by the Nazi regime?

Stockmeier: Yeah.

DePue: Well, that's interesting. And troubling from where you're seeing it, I'm sure. What was your personal interrogation like? It didn't amount to that much?

Stockmeier: No. No. By this time, they had talked to anybody who was going to talk.

DePue: Well, I imagine they worked over the officers a little bit more, anyway.

Stockmeier: Well, there again we really don't know, except for what Cal put in his book. It's strange: every once in a while, there would be some Germans would say, "Oh, just when did the 100th Division leave Ft. Bragg?" They knew. That's one thing you have to give them credit for. (laughter)

DePue: Trying to trick you into giving them some more information?

Stockmeier: As we moved backwards, eventually we got to a POW camp at Limburg. That's L-i-m-b-u-r-g. And this was the first time that we had any contact with what we'd call "rear-e": they were the rear echelon people. And it was not a joyful situation. Nobody briefed us. We were split up, distributed among a number of buildings which were already occupied by other men who had been captured earlier. And again, no food, and these people were as confused—I mean the ones who were there already were as confused as we were as to what was going on. That appears this was the newly-captured men were taken and given a quick run-through, and then distributed to prisoner of war camps.

We were called out and told we were going to get a shower. They took us to the area; we had to undress. We went into the shower, and when we came out, we came out the other side of the building—not the side where we had left our clothing, but the far side. And there's no clothes. And we were told, "Help yourself." They had a bunch of old clothing of some kind dumped there. And some of the fellows said it was old Polish Army uniforms, or something like that. But the stuff that I ended up with, it was like burlap. No shoes: they had taken our shoes, too. They gave us wooden shoes.

DePue: No underwear?

Stockmeier: Yeah, we got some underwear. That, we were permitted to have. And socks. But this is what we were blessed with from that time on.

Now, the twenty-third, the night of December twenty-third, the British came over to bomb the railroad yards, which were less than half a mile from the prison camp. We had 500-pounders dropping within the compound. And it was kind of interesting. (laughter) When all was said and done, in the morning you could see where the roof of our building had been lifted up and then settled back down. But the knee braces supporting the roofing elements had all become dislodged and had fallen on us as we were laying on the floor. And these were roughly four-inch four by fours, maybe four to five feet long. So they're not toothpicks.

But there had been a direct hit on one building, and I think it was the third building away from the one I was in. Sixty-some British were killed. The Krauts came in to our building and started pulling men out. "Go, go, go." And these fellows had to go over to that structure, what was left of it, and they were bringing out body parts and putting them together. And this was the way the night ended.

There were troops in boxcars down on the railroad tracks, and they of course got blessed with some of this fire, but the guards wouldn't leave them out. If you read Tom Brokaw's book *The Greatest Generation Speaks*, in there there's an account of one Chaplain who was down there in the railroad yard. He had succeeded in convincing the Germans to let him out, and he went down the line to the boxcars trying to give some moral support to the men that were there. When I read that, it said he was in—what was it?—Fort Lauderdale, Florida, or some place in Florida. I immediately went online, put in his name, and came up with a telephone number. And I called him. He was in the hospital with heart problems, but his wife said, "You know, you're the second person to call ever since that book came out." He had lived through it, and now here he was, like so many of us, having problems.

I never got back down to Florida in time to see him; I think he's passed away now. But anybody who went through that night deserves respect. And for a man to be out unprotected and those bombs are coming down, that was something.

DePue: He took his faith very seriously, then.

Stockmeier: Yeah. That happened the night of the twenty-third. A lot of the fellows say it was Christmas Eve, but no, it was the night of the twenty-third. Later, I was able to see a written report by the British man of confidence, and he listed all of the men by name and title who had been killed in that building.

A "man of confidence" is one individual who is used by the German as a source of communicating to prisoners. In our case, and later camps, there was no mixing of enlisted and commissioned personnel, so our man of confidence was actually a—I think he was a Master Sergeant. Each barracks had its own barracks chef, or chief, and these then would report to the man of confidence. And any information that he had to disperse he'd give to them at a regular meeting, and he would return to barracks and spread it to the men. But I had a chance to view a copy of that report.

DePue: Did you have a sense during any of this time, especially the first month or so, that your relatives back home knew what had happened to you?

Stockmeier: We had no way of knowing. Somebody had said, "Well, at least they won't hear about this before Christmas." I said, "What do you mean?" He says, "Well, when you're MIA, [missing in action] they wait thirty days before they report it." Well, that wasn't true. My parents received word—I think it was the twentieth, the twentieth of December.

DePue: So a pretty dark Christmas season for them?

Stockmeier: Yes.

DePue: And a very dark Christmas season for you.

Stockmeier: Things were in such a turmoil after the bombing, and again, we're getting nothing in the line of food. And we don't have decent clothes because of the—they had taken them away from us, and—you know what happened to our clothing, and—you know what happened to our clothing?

DePue: Yeah.

Stockmeier: And eventually –I think it was the night of the twenty-eighth, or the afternoon of the twenty-eighth –we were taken down to the railroad, locked in the boxcars, and we headed east. We had no heat, no water, no food, no blankets. We were just plain locked in a boxcar, and that happened to be one of their worst winters in—I don't know—twenty-some years.