

POWs During World War II

MSG James A. Shuman

Good morning SGM Cole and R-07. I am MSG James Shuman and this morning I will be presenting a 15-minute, unclassified military history brief on Prisoners of War (POWs) during World War II.

The purpose of this brief is to provide you with some information on the history and treatment of POWs during this era. I will also share some of the personal accounts of three noncommissioned officers soldiers held in captivity. During this brief we will cover the following areas:

- The Dilemma of POWs
- The Geneva Convention
- CPL Robert D. Reeves
- MSG Russell Grockett
- SMA William Bainbridge
- Summary
- Questions

The POW dilemma. During WWII, over 52 million people died. At the same time there was over 12 million POWs taken at the end of battle. Throughout history there have always been problems associated with taking POWs. Once a unit captures an enemy soldier the unit is responsible for feeding, clothing, sheltering, and the overall care and well being of the detained soldier. This takes an incredible amount of planning and resources, which often the “host” country simply does not have. Many times in

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history it was easier to just kill the prisoners or to strip them of all equipment and set them free. Of course, the majority in the past were either used as slaves or held for ransom. The humane treatment of POWs was first addressed in the Hague in 1899 and later in the Geneva Convention. (1929 & 1949) (Reid 17)

The Geneva Convention: The idea that once a man (or woman) has given up their arms and has discontinued the fight their life becomes sacrosanct dates back to 1758 and the French thinker Vattel. The English and the French at that time started the practice of fair treatment of prisoners. This is the for runner of the Geneva Convention, which governs the treatment of Prisoners. (Trombley 2) Some of the major points of the Geneva Convention are:

ARTICLE 4: Defines the POW

ARTICLE 13: Outlines that all prisoners must receive humane treatment. They cannot be subjected to mutilation or medical experiments and must be protected from things that may cause their deaths.

ARTICLE 17: Outlines the information that a soldier “is required” to provide captors. These items are: Name, Rank, Serial Number, Army and Date of Birth

ARTICLES 25-27: States that the Food, Clothing, and Quarters for the POW must be along the lines of that of the Detaining Powers soldiers.

ARTICLE 49: Prescribes who may perform labor. Officers did not have to perform labor, Senior NCOs only had to perform supervisory duties, and regular soldiers could be forced to do manual labor as long as it was not dangerous, the

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hours were that of the normal population and THEY GOT PAID!!!!

Both Japan and Germany had signed the Geneva Convention of 1929. Russia had not. (Reid 146)

CPL ROBERT REEVES: CPL Reeves was a native of Peoria, Illinois. He received his draft card on February 8, 1943. The war was already in full force in Europe and Asia at the time. The Army assigned him to the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The primary form of infiltration for his unit was by use of the CG-4A glider. The glider did not possess an engine and was towed by other aircraft by a one-inch nylon cable. Once behind enemy lines, the glider was released from the tow plane and the infiltration commenced. The Army assigned him to the 321st Glider Field Artillery of the 101st Airborne Division. (Reeves 2)

CPL Reeves received movement orders to Europe and arrived at Whatcombe Farms in May, 1944 during the preparations for the D-Day invasion. During the morning of June 6, 1944 bombers literally decimated the shoreline of France and the United States battleships fired thousands of rounds of ammunition on the beaches. The ground troops then assaulted the beaches, of which CPL Reeves was on of them. The typical weapon carried by a Soldier was the M1 Garand rifle. Other weapons included the M1 Carbine, the Colt .45 pistol, the Bazooka, and light, medium and heavy machine guns. The M1 Garand, the M1 Carbine and the machine guns all fired .30 Caliber munitions. CPL Reeves was part of the Utah Beach invasion force. After the initial assault CPL Reeves spent the next two and a half weeks continuing the operation prior to returning to England. (Reeves 8)

On September 19th CPL Reeves and the 321st Glider Artillery embarked on a mission

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over the Netherlands. German anti-aircraft fire tore through the tow plane and its engine caught fire. Next, fire tore into the glider itself and the glider separated from the tow plane. The pilot stabilized the glider long enough to land the plane in a field close to the wood line. They quickly exited the glider and set up a defensive perimeter. The first thing they saw was a U.S. jeep approaching them and they thought they landed among friendly troops. They realized it was not true when fire came from the jeep. They were soon surrounded by over 200 German troops and surrendered. (Reeves 9)

For the next seven months CPL Reeves was a prisoner of war. It took over a month to move him and his fellow prisoners from Holland to Stalag VII-A at Moosburg, Germany. There were over 110,000 POWs in the camp. During the movement to the camp there was little food given to the POWs. Many times when the train would stop, the prisoners were left locked in boxcars without food or sanitation. Once inside the prison camp life was not any better. During the time in captivity Allied bombing was heavy. The prisoners were forced to clean-up the bombed out sites (factories, rail yards) even as the bombing occurred. The average work-week was 16hour days, six days a week. Not surprisingly, he did not receive any pay. Acquiring enough food for living was the biggest problem facing POWs. Typical food consisted of broth, tack, black bread with insects in it and meat (2-3 oz) maybe once a month. Trading cigarettes for bread while on work detail helped supplement the diet. If not for the Red Cross parcels they probably would have starved. (Reeves 11)

His clothes were rags, he wore a Polish jumpsuit and worn out shoes. The clothing did not protect him against the German winter. During his seven months he showered twice and

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due to this had lice. He received several beatings for not following rules. CPL Reeves felt that the Germans were rough but was glad the Geneva Convention provided some protections.

MSG RUSSELL A. GROKETT: Russell Grockett grew up in rural Kansas during the Great Depression. By the time he was in his late 20's both of his parents had passed away from illness. He joined one of the last horse cavalry units based in Texas. During the build up for World War II, the Army sent Russell Grockett to the Philippines. It was here that he valiantly fought in the defense during the Battle of the Philippines. The American forces were continually strafed by Japanese Zero aircraft before the initial ground forces from the Japanese forces landed on the island. The strafing produced many American casualties. Americans were forced to surrender at Bataan and Russ became a POW. He endured the Bataan Death March. The atrocities against POWs were horrific. During the march Japanese soldiers were known to push POWs over cliffs just as a show of brutality. Often, the Japanese would use POWs as bayonets practice. The soldiers endured the march in tremendous heat with no food or water. Prisoners who tried to drink water were either beaten or killed. The dead were everywhere and many did not receive a proper burial. In all, out of the 12,000 American POWs who began the march, 5,000 perished. The Bataan Death March was the beginning of MSG Grockett's 1200 days of captivity. After the Bataan Death March, he also had to survive the transport inside the Japanese Hell Ships on the way to the Mukden Prison Camp in Manchuria. In the Hell Ships, prisoners were stuffed in the hulls to where they could not even sit or lie down. They were left without food or water and as Soldiers died they fell to the floor and were then

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under the feet of the living. Times were so desperate that some soldiers slit the wrists of others and drank their blood. The POWs arrived in Manchuria during the winter.

The prisoners lived in old chicken houses with little heat. The Manchurian winters reached 40 degrees below zero. When fellow POWs died they were stacked in shacks and finally buried during the spring thaw. Hunger was the biggest threat. Many POWs just gave up and died. MSG Grockett did everything possible to find food and provide for his fellow POWs. The diet at the Mukden POW Camp was rice infested with insects and rotten scraps of fish. He was forced to work in a parts factory for aircraft. He taught his fellow POWs how to make defective parts for aircraft without being caught. Many of the prisoners were beaten, tortured, and killed. Though enduring many hardships, he never gave up the fight. The Army liberated the Mukden POW Camp at the end of World War II. MSG Russell A. Grockett had survive 3 ½ years in captivity. (Grockett 5)

SMA WILLIAM BAINBRIDGE: SMA Bainbridge was born April 17, 1925 in Galesburg, Illinois. He was a member of the A Co, 423d Infantry, 106th Infantry Division. He was captured during the early stages of the Battle of the Bulge. SMA Bainbridge spent 4 ½ months in Stalag 9A in Ziegenhain, near Giessen, Germany. (Elder 68)

The following is an exert from his biography, “Prisoner of War Camp conditions were intolerable. More than 3000 Allied Soldiers filled the camp, with more than 250 men stuffed into each barrack. Despite the subfreezing temperatures, outside latrines were necessary supplements to the single ones inside. Since baths and mandatory delousing came but every six weeks, the men, their bedding, and their clothes were infested with vermin. Rations consisted of two thirds of a canteen cup of vegetable soup each day with

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a slice of black bread on Sunday. Sometimes the Germans included a little horsemeat.”

Then Sergeant Bainbridge later recalled, “My love for country, the way I was brought up, and my family life helped sustain me.” (Elder 68)

SUMMARY: During this briefing we covered the Dilemma of POWs, Geneva Convention, CPL Robert D. Reeves, MSG Russell A. Grockett, and SMA William Bainbridge. Are there any questions?

CONCLUSION: Though the United States is a signature to the Geneva Convention, good treatment of our soldiers during captivity is not guaranteed. The POW of World War II faced many hardships including inadequate clothing, beatings, torture and malnutrition. The determination of these soldiers to persevere sets these men apart. Their survival reminds us to never give up hope during the times of uncertainty and struggle.

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