

AMERICAN PRISONERS OF WAR IN GERMANY

**Prepared by
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STALAG 17B (Air Force Non-Commissioned Officers)

Location - Stalag 17B was situated 100 meters northwest of Gneixendorf, a village which is six kilometers northwest of Krems, Austria (48°27' N – 15°39' E). The surrounding area was populated mostly by peasants who raised cattle and did truck farming. The camp itself was in use as a concentration camp from 1938 until 1940 when it began receiving French and Poles as the first PWs.

Strength – On 13 October 1943, 1350 non-commissioned officers of the air forces were transferred from Stalag 7A to Stalag 17B, which already contained PW from France, Italy, Russia, Yugoslavia and various smaller nations. At the time of the first Protecting Power visit on 12 January 1944, the strength had increased to 2667. From then until the last days of the war a constant stream of non-commissioned officers arrived from Dulag Luft and strength reached 4237 in spite of protestations to the Detaining Power about the overcrowded conditions. The entire camp contained 29794 prisoners of war of various nationalities.

Description – The Americans occupied five compounds, each of which measured 175 yards by 75 yards and contained four double barracks 100 by 240 feet. The barracks were built to accommodate approximately 240 men, but at least 400 men were crowded into them after

the first three months of occupancy. Each double barrack contained a washroom of six basins in the center of the building. The beds in the barracks were triple-decked, and each tier had four compartments with one man to a compartment, making a total of 12 men in each group. Each single barrack had a stove to supply heat and cooking facilities for approximately 200 men. The fuel ration for a week was 54 pounds of coal. Because of the lack of heating and an insufficient number of blankets, the men slept two to a bunk for added warmth. Lighting facilities were very poor, and many light bulbs were missing at all times.

Aside from the nine double barracks used for housing purposes, one barrack was reserved for the infirmary and the medical personnel's quarters. Half of a barrack was the library, another half for the MOC and his staff, a half for the theater, a half for Red Cross food distribution and a half for the meeting room. In addition, one barrack was used as a repair shop for shoes and clothing. Four additional barracks were added in early 1944, but two others were torn down because they were considered by the Germans to be too close to the fence, thus making it possible for PW to build tunnels for escape purposes. One of these buildings had been used as a gymnasium, and the other as a chapel. Latrines were open pit-type and were situated away from the barracks.

Two separate wire fences charged with electricity surrounded the area, and four Watchtowers equipped with machine guns were placed at strategic points. At night street lights were used in addition to the searchlights from the guard towers to illuminate the area.

U.S. Personnel – Staff Sergeant Kenneth J. Kurtenbach was MOC from the opening of the camp until its evacuation. Major Fred H. Beaumont was the SAO and the medical officer, but took no active part in the camp organization. Captain Stephen W. Kane was the only chaplain and acted in an advisory capacity whenever called upon. There also existed a security committee. Sgt. Kurtenbach carried on the administration with the following organization:

S/Sgt. Charles M. Belmer – Adjutant

T/Sgt. Alexander M. Haddon – School Director

S/Sgt. David H. Woo – Mail Supervisor

S/Sgt. Gerald H. Tucker – Mail Supervisor

S/Sgt. Edward W. Weisenberg – Sports Supervisor

The medical staff consisted of:

Major Fred H. Beaumont

Captain Carrold H. Nungester

Captain Thomas E. Corcoran

Captain Paul G. Jacobs

German Personnel – The German personnel changed somewhat during the camp's existence, but for most of the time, the following men were in control in the positions indicated:

Oberst Kuhn – Commandant

Mafor Wenglorz – Security Officer

Major Eigl (Luftwaffe) – Lager Officer

Oberstabserzt Dr. Pilger – Doctor

The blame for the bad conditions which existed at this camp has been placed on Oberat Kuhn who was both unreasonable and uncooperative. Four months elapsed after the opening of the compound before the MOC was granted an interview with the commandant to register protests, and weeks would pass before written requests were acknowledged. Frequently, orders would be issued to the MOC verbally and would never be confirmed in writing. Some cooperation was obtained from Major Eigl, but since there was friction between him (Luftwaffe) and the other German officers (Wehrmacht), his authority was extremely limited.

Treatment – The treatment at Stalag 17B was never considered good, and was at times even brutal. An example of extreme brutality occurred in early 1944. Two men attempting to escape were discovered in an out-of-bounds area adjoining the compound. As soon as they were discovered, they threw up their hands indicating their surrender. They were shot while their hands were thus upraised. One of the men died immediately, but the other was only injured in the leg. After he fell a guard ran to within 20 feet of him and fired again. The guards then turned toward the barracks and fired wild shots in that direction. One shot entered a barrack and seriously wounded an American who was lying in his bunk. Permission was denied the Americans by the Germans to bring the body of the dead man into the compound for burial, and medical treatment for the injured man in the outer zone was delayed several hours.

One PW was mentally sick when he was taken to the hospital where no provisions were made to handle cases of this type. In a moment of insanity the PW jumped from a window and ran to the fence, followed by a French doctor and orderlies who shouted to the guard not to shoot him. He was dressed in hospital pajamas which should have indicated to the guard that he was mentally unbalanced even if the doctor had not called the warning. As the patient climbed over the fence the guard shot him in the heart.

There were about 30 recorded cases of guards striking PW's with bayonets, pistols and rifle butt. Protests to the commandant were always useless. In fact, on one occasion the commandant is reported to have stated that men were lucky to get off so lightly.

On another occasion an order was issued that all PW take everything that they wanted to keep and stand on the parade ground as if they were leaving camp. Nothing was touched in the barracks during the search that ensued. The same procedure was followed on the next day, and still nothing was touched. The third day, most of the PW left behind many articles of food, clothing and comfort equipment. On this occasion, German troops entered the compound with wagons and took away any and all articles left in the barracks during the parade. The Protecting Power described this act as plunder to the German commandant who finally promised to return the items, but this proved to be an almost impossible task.

Food – The normal ration issued to a PW for one week was as follows:

Bread: 2425 grams

Fat: 218 grams (68 grams were cooking fat, the remainder for spread.)

Potatoes: (vary up to 2800 grams, for the decrease in potatoes another leguminous plant was substituted.)

Beats or raisins: 1750 grams

Starch foods: 150 grams

Cottage Cheese: 94 grams

Sugar: 175 grams

Marmalade: 175 grams

Ersatz coffee: 12 grams

Vegetables: 450 grams

Salt: (aprox.) 140 grams

Raisins: 120 grams

Dried Vegetables: 43 grams

An average daily menu would contain the following:

3 potatoes 1/2 cup of ersatz coffee

1 cup of soup 3 grams of margarine

22 grams of bread

Vegetables were issued only when available and within the limits of the quantities available to German civilians.

When reserve supplies of Red Cross parcels were received in the camp, the German authorities reduced their issue ration. Even though protests were made to the commandant by the MOC and the Protecting Power, this practice continued. As soon as the Red Cross supplies would be exhausted, the normal ration would again be issued.

For the first three months absolutely no eating utensils were supplied. At the end of that time, one bowl and one spoon were given to each third man. PW were able to make bowls and spoons from Klim cans, which also served as drinking mugs.

On 17 October 1944, some one broke into the kitchen and stole 275 packages of cigarettes and 35 standard Red Cross parcels complete. Since the keys to the kitchen were held by the Germans it was obvious that they were responsible for the theft, however the commandant did not satisfy the MOC with his report of the investigation.

Toward the last of September 1944, the MOC received a telegram from the International Red Cross that three carloads of food, clothing and comfort supplies would arrive in a few days. These cars did in fact arrive the first of October, but the commandant neither notified the MOC nor had the cars unloaded. Instead, the cars were rerouted to another city where the contents were stored in a military park. Representatives of the IRC arrived a few days later and informed the MOC that the commandant had orders to reroute the shipment for "military reasons." Upon inspection of the cars in the nearby town, only a few of the cases proved to have been pilfered. Although there were only 3000 parcels on hand in the camp, the delivery of these cars was delayed two weeks. On 9 December, two more carloads arrived and the shipment was 13 cases short. On 13 December, four more cars arrived, of which one car was sixteen cases short, nine other cases pillaged, and one car with two cases missing. Seals on all four cars were broken. Except for these incidents, the Red Cross supplies arrived in good condition.

Health – In general, health of the PW was good. They maintained their weight until the last month or so before the evacuation; they were active in games and sports, and stayed mentally healthy by keeping busy. Approximately 150 attended sick call each day with skin diseases, upper-respiratory infections and stomach ailments. About 30% of all cases at sick call were for skin diseases attributed to the conditions under which they lived. The acute shortage of water (available four hours each day), lack of hot water, lack of laundry facilities, and over-crowded sleeping conditions created many health problems, but improvements were always noticed during the summer months when the men could be outdoors a great deal of the time.

The average daily strength of the revier was 70, while the adjoining lagerlazaret cared for approximately 40, who were victims of the more serious cases of shrapnel, flak and gun wounds. Conditions there were very satisfactory in equipment, medical, clinical and surgical attendance. X-ray and consultation services were available, and were supervised by very competent medical officers who were prisoners of war of nationalities other than American.

The revier originally consisted of two ordinary barracks and two sectional “knock-down” temporary buildings. These also housed the medical personnel as previously stated. The construction was not weather tight and heating in cold weather was impossible. During most of the cold weather the water pipes froze, but the installation of a new stove in one of the buildings enabled the hospital staff to furnish an invalid diet to each patient and sufficient hot water for a bath on admission and discharge as well as once a week during his stay. The fuel supply was inadequate for these standards but supplementary fuel was supplied by men who volunteered for wood forage details.

The two temporary buildings were set aside for isolation wards of infectious patient, but because of their poor condition, they were used only in cases of dire need.

The management of the revier was solely in the hands of the American medical PW without any interference from German authorities. A German medical officer was assigned to supervise the revier, but his daily visits concerned administrative problems only.

Clothing – The clothing condition in the camp was not unsatisfactory in the beginning because most of the men had received adequate issues when they passed through Dulag Luft. However, after the confiscation referred to in the paragraph on “Treatment,” shortages became acute. There were never sufficient blankets. The two thin cotton blankets issued by the Germans were described as “tablecloths” by many repatriates, and although the Red Cross furnished many American GI blankets, the strength increased so rapidly that only two-thirds of the men were fortunate enough to be issued one.

As in other camps, the leather flying jackets which most of the men wore at the time of their capture were taken away, but after repeated protests, some of these were returned. Shoes were a problem in the early stages, but the repair shop operated by PW alleviated the condition to some extent. The Serbian shoes issued when GI shoes were not available from the stock Red Cross supplies proved to be inadequate in quality to withstand the cold and mud.

Work - Since all of the men at this camp were non-commissioned officers, they were not required to work.

Pay – The monthly rate of pay for the PW was RM 7.50, or approximately \$1.53. However, the men received this money in cash only on a few occasions. The Germans stated that the pay was to reimburse the German government for the razor blades, soap, matches, pencils, paper, etc., which were sometimes available in the canteen.

Mail – the number of mail forms issued to each prisoner varied at different times from two mail forms and two postcards to four mail forms and three postcards. There was no record of mail forms being withheld for disciplinary reasons, and apparently, no check was made on the number of communications written by each PW. However, on one occasion, forms were not issued, reportedly because the printer had been bombed out. Two weeks later, a Protecting Power visit was announced and 10,000 forms were issued immediately.

Incoming mail was very irregular and considered unsatisfactory by the PW. Since all of their mail had to be processed through Stalag Luft 3, censorship often delayed it for and five weeks. Surface letters required an average of four months for delivery as against three months for airmail. Surprisingly enough, personal parcels often arrived in two months, but the average time in transit was three to five months. In August 1944, no parcels arrived in the camp, but the following month 685 were received.

When parcels were delivered to the camp, a list of the recipients was posted in the barracks. These men were required to line up outside the delivery room. Before the PW could take possession of his parcel, the German guard would open the parcel, take everything out, and punch holes in any tinned foods. PW were permitted to keep the containers however. No items were ever confiscated from these parcels as far as could be ascertained.

Morale – The morale of PW at this camp was good as a result of two factors: the successes of the Allied armies in the field, and the recreational and educational opportunities within the camp. There was no serious trouble among the PW, and the unimportant fights and disputes which occasionally occurred seemed to spring from a desire to break the monotony. These incidents were quickly over and forgotten.

The leadership of the MOC and his staff is credited with the maintenance of high morale throughout the existence of the camp.

Welfare – Representatives of the International Red Cross Committee and the Protecting Power visited the camp approximately every three months, and always transmitted the complaints of the MOC to the German authorities in a strong manner. On many occasions,

the representatives reported unsatisfactory conditions at the camp to the State Department, and made every attempt to correct such conditions at the time of the visits.

The dispatch of Red Cross parcels to the camps was prompt, and all delays in supplies reaching PW was blamed on the German authorities. On several occasions insufficient clothing supplies were dispatched, but this was usually due to an increase in the strength after the requisition had been received in Geneva.

Requisitions to the YMCA for sports equipment and books were always promptly filled. The only delay incurred on the requests was in getting the approval of transmission from the German commandant.

Religion – Even though repeated requests for additional chaplains were made to the German authorities, Captain Stephen W. Kane carried the full ecclesiastical burden for the camp. The PW cooperated with Father Kane in converting a barrack into a chapel for the religious services. Father Kane held daily services for the Catholics of the camp, and offered additional services for the Protestant PW. His untiring efforts in behalf of the men contributed a great deal to the good morale and discipline of the camp.

Recreation – The large recreation area in the camp to which the men had access during most of the daylight hours permitted them to enjoy a number of sports. Basketball, volleyball, baseball, boxing and track meets were among the favorite outdoor exercises. In addition, some enterprising PW built a miniature golf course and used hockey sticks and handballs as equipment. Competitive spirit was high after barrack leagues and teams were formed. In addition to these activities, the PW took great pride in the excellent band which gave frequent concerts and which played for the theatrical efforts of the “Wardboard Players.” During the colder months, the PW depended a great deal on card games, checkers, chess, and other indoor games, as well as reading material from the well-stocked library. A complete public address system with speakers in each barrack inspired the organization of a “radio station”(WPBS) which furnished scheduled programs of music and information.

The most outstanding effort in field of recreation was the educational program organized by T/Sgt. Alexander M. Haddon with the following aims and objectives:

- (1) To keep men mentally alert**
- (2) To offer accredited instruction**
- (3) To help men to plan for post-war educational and vocational activities.**

T/Sgt Haddon was assisted by a staff composed of instructors, Librarians, a secretary, and office help. Classes in Mathematics, Law, Photography, Music, Economics, American History, Shorthand, Auto Mechanics, English, Spanish, German, and French were given to the students. The school was held in a building containing the fiction and technical libraries. Six separate classrooms accommodating 40 men were used for instruction, and furniture consisted of benches, tables and blackboards. Because the limited supply of technical books prevented a check-out system, tables and benches were furnished for reference work.

Interests which were not handled in the scheduled classes named above were provided for in evening discussion groups. These were usually journalism, farm management and live-stock farming, and were directed by men who had had successful experience in the fields. These evening discussion groups were particularly popular during the spring and summer months when they could be held outdoors after the supper hour.

When the school was first started, attendance registered 1389, but gradually enthusiasm dropped until the average attendance was 980. This was the average attendance figure during the school's operation.

Evacuation – On 8 April 1945, 4000 of the PW at Stalag 17B began an 18-day march of 281 miles to Braunau, Austria. The remaining 200 men were too ill to make the march and were left behind in the hospital. These men were liberated on 9 May 1945 by the Russians.

The marching column was divided into eight groups of 500 with an American leader in charge of each group guarded by about 20 German Volkssturm guards and two dogs. Red Cross parcels were issued to each man in sufficient amounts to last about seven days. During the 18-day march, the column averaged 20 kilometers each day. At the end of the day, they were forced to bivouac in open fields regardless of the weather. On three occasions, the men were quartered in cow barns. The only food furnished to PW by the German authorities was barley soup and bread. Trading with the German and Austrian civilians became the main source of sustenance after the Red Cross parcel supplies were exhausted. The destination of the column was a Russian prison camp 4 kilometers north of Braunau. Upon arrival the PW cut down pine trees and made small huts since there was no housing available. Roaming guards patrolled the area and the woods surrounding the area, but no escape attempts were made because it was apparent that the liberation forces were in the immediate vicinity.

The day after their arrival at the new site, Red Cross parcels were issued to every PW. A second issue was made a few days later of one parcel for every fifth man.

Liberation – On 3 May 1945 the camp was liberated when six men of the 13 Armored Division arrived in three jeeps and easily captured the remaining guards who numbered 205. Other units of the 13th Armored followed shortly and organized the evacuation of the PW by C-47 to France on 9 May 1945.