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Capture Living History - Joseph Callaway guarded German prisoners in Florida

By Carl Kelly

Part seven of a continuing series. It wasn't Joseph Callaway's plan to be a prison guard when he joined the Army in 1944, 11 days after his 18th birthday. His plan was to fight in Europe.

His class of recruits was scheduled for 17 weeks of infantry training, but the training was cut short after eight. The Battle of the Bulge created a need for infantry in Europe, so Callaway's class was sent. But, not Callaway.

"I was extremely nearsighted," he explained. "They said I wasn't qualified for overseas duty. So, they sent me for MP training." Then, he was assigned to a POW camp in Florida.

Callaway commented that guarding prisoners of war is actually two jobs. "One I had to sit in the towers and around the compound watching the fences and all that stuff. The guarding was not a difficult job because in Florida they didn't want to escape. Most of them didn't know any English. Where would they go? In the prison camp they had a good bed to sleep in and three solid meals a day, so they didn't want to escape."

The second job was taking the prisoners out of the camp on work details, mostly doing construction work on roads, but also some construction work around the camp.

"As a single guard I'd take as many as 60 or 70 prisoners," he reported, "which of course I couldn't keep up with. The only reason that we did that was because there was no danger of their escaping or even trying to escape."

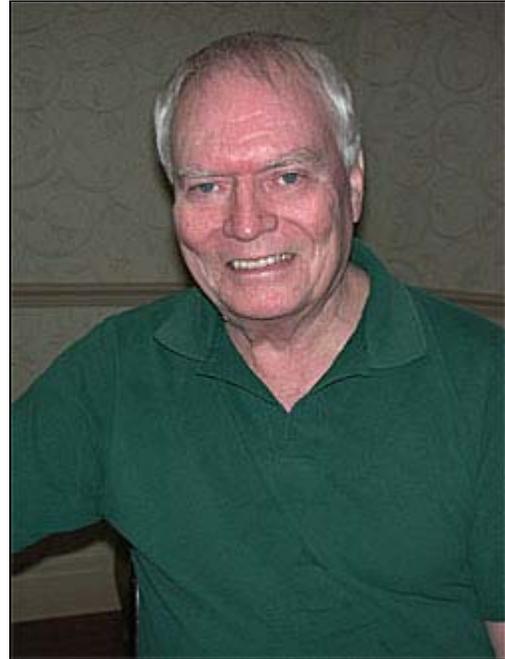
On one work detail when Callaway was not the guard, one of the prisoners had wandered off into the woods and returned late. The guard had miscounted his end of the day count and didn't realize he was missing one prisoner.

When the prisoner returned to where the group had been working and realized they were gone, "He didn't know what to do," Callaway said. "He found his way to the nearest farmhouse and scared the farmer half to death. But, he was able to explain, and convince the farmer to bring him back to the compound."

The compound was a typical POW camp with barracks inside a barbed wire-topped fence and towers on each of the corners. The towers were manned by the Army MPs. Callaway explained it was all, "to make sure that prisoners didn't escape during the night. I thought it was sort of a useless precaution. When they did escape during the daytime," he laughed, "they couldn't wait to get back."

The German POWs in Florida were mainly from Rommel's Africa Corps. They were the cream of the German army. Most of the non-commissioned officers could speak a little English, so the Americans dealt with the German non-coms and the non-coms supervised their enlisted men.

Callaway noted, "They were well-behaved. They had certain rules that they had to live by and they did. We didn't interfere



Chuckling, Joseph Callaway remembers the German prisoners he guarded. They were no threat to escape. When they accidentally escaped, "they couldn't wait to get back."

with them as long as they kept the rules that were set for them. The nice thing for the GIs," he added, "was that the Germans did all the KP. They cooked the food, which was very good."

Relations between the Americans and the Germans were cordial. The ones who spoke English did talk with the Americans, asking for news and being friendly. Callaway even played chess with some of them.

"They were pretty diehard people in their faith that they would win the war," he remembered. When they were told the Allies had invaded on D-Day their attitude was, "Europe will be for you like Africa was for us. You'll be too far away from your supplies, and we'll run you out."

But, Joseph Callaway didn't want to remain a prison guard. "After so much guard duty I found that I didn't care for it much at all," Callaway said, "and I did my best to learn how to type. So, I got an office job. But, I was still working with prisoners. I became a sort of clerical specialist in repatriation of these people".

After the war, the United States had determined that the German POWs should return to their home in Germany. But, the prisoners knew Germany had been partitioned into four sections under Russian, French, British and U.S. rule.

Callaway observed that, "those who lived in the Russian area didn't want to go home at all. But, they had to. There was a lot of effort in many cases to conceal where they were from and to say they were from different places. So, it was a challenge."

Thinking back on his two years of service Callaway said, "I was in the Army 11 days after my 18th birthday. I was pretty immature. During my two years in the Army I grew up a bit. I feel that the service experience was a maturing experience for me and a very good helpful experience in my life."

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