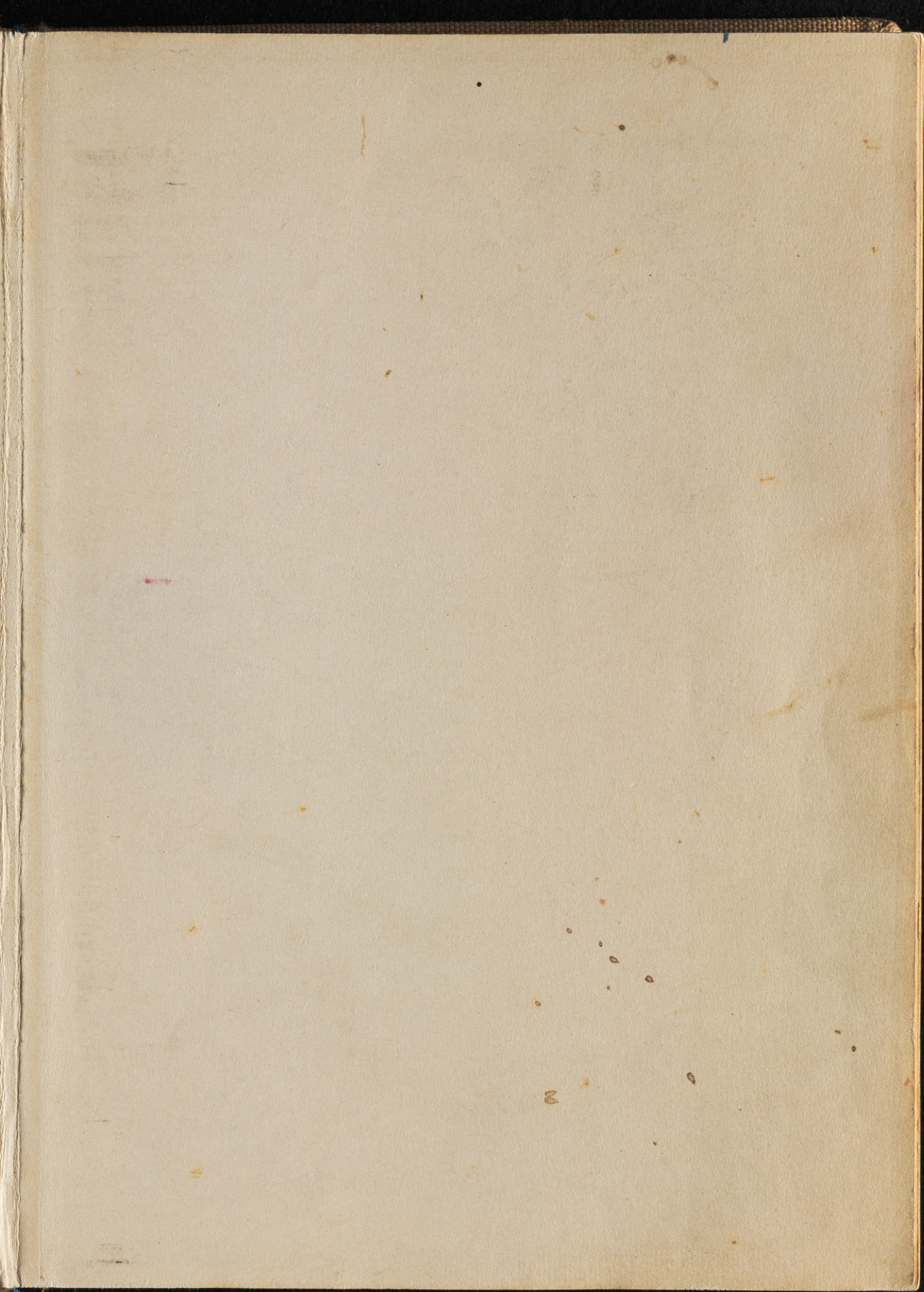
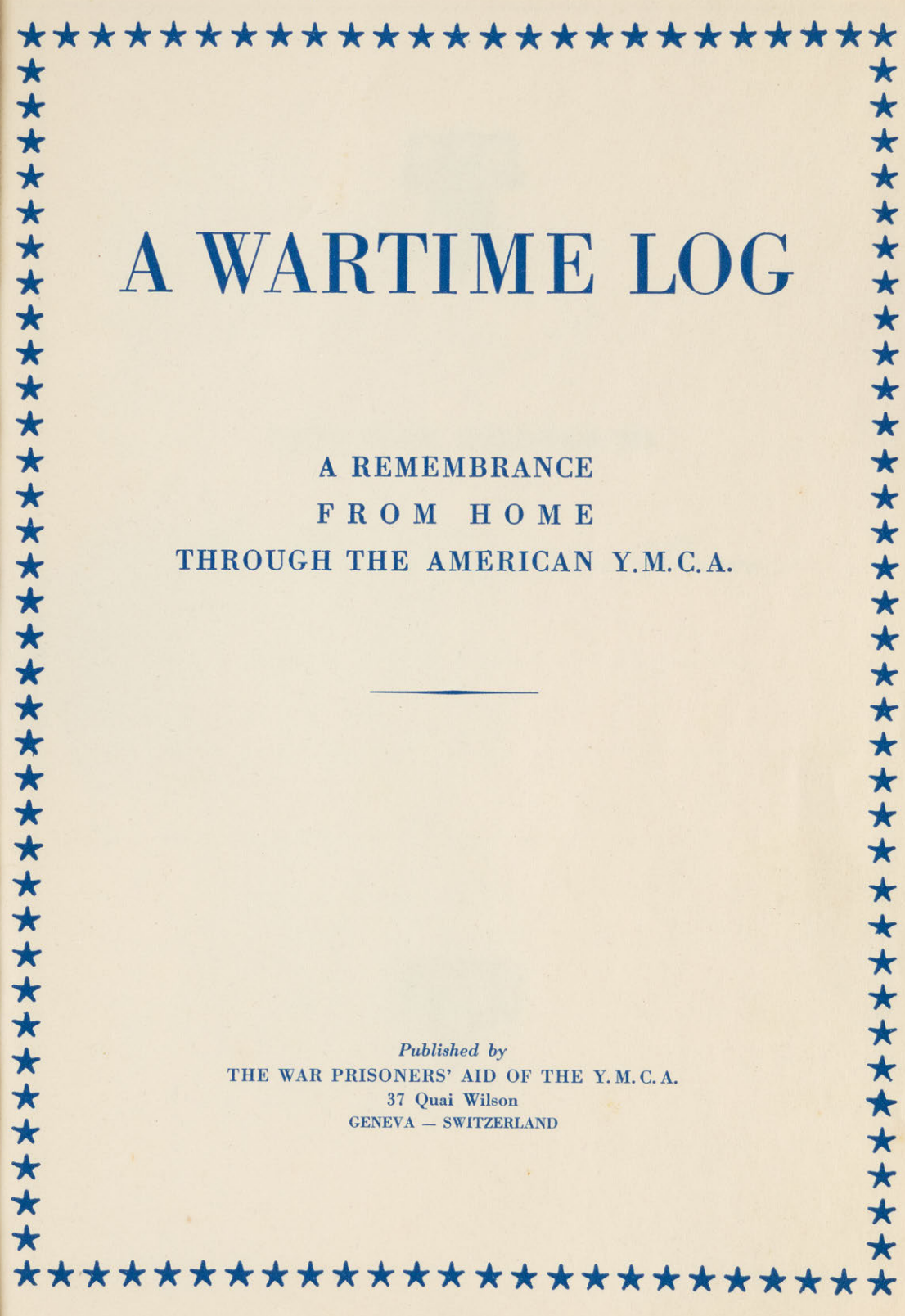


A WARTIME LOG







A WARTIME LOG

A REMEMBRANCE
FROM HOME
THROUGH THE AMERICAN Y.M.C.A.

Published by
THE WAR PRISONERS' AID OF THE Y.M.C.A.
37 Quai Wilson
GENEVA — SWITZERLAND



THIS BOOK BELONGS TO

Walter Francis Larson

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Dialogue

In this book I have written the actual experiences while being a prisoner of the German army. The story begins on February 28, 1944; when we were shot down over Calais, France and continues through April 26, 1945 when I was liberated by the fifth Army at Bitterfield, Germany. Some of the incidents are written from memory although the majority are copied from my diary.

Walter Larson
April 10, 1949

When we were first hit by enemy flak, the right wing of our flying fortress, "Ding's Dilemma," became a mass of fire. Our co-pilot was the first to notify the crew. Orders came from the pilot to hit the silk and I believe I was the first to bail out. Later I was told of the difficulty the other men had in leaving the plane. It seems that God was with us all the way. Our navigator and bombardier could not remove the navigator's hatch. This caused a great delay in the bombay. The Pilot, Co Pilot, radio-man, engineer, navigator and bombardier had to jump from the bombay doors. Lt. Kleinrath's ankle was broken trying to kick out the navigator's safety hatch.

The first thing I remember after bailing out was a church steeple coming directly up toward

me. I was sure I would land on top of it, but by some miracle I managed to land a few hundred feet away from the church. Immediately after reaching the ground, I saw someone motioning to me. It happened to be a French underground worker. After getting out of my parachute harness, I ran toward this man. He led the way into a small alley where we ran into a group of German soldiers. Immediately they shot the Frenchman and took me prisoner. The first words spoken to me were by a German Captain. They were "You are lucky. For you the war is over."

By this time they had rounded up my waist gunner, tail gunner and radio man. He were taken to a large building in the center of town. My radio man had his ankle bone shot away by enemy flak. He could see that he was in misery, and we wanted to give him morphine from our escape kit, but

the Germans refused to let us. They did allow him to smoke; although he never smoked before the cigarette seemed to ease the pain. The rest of us were allowed one cigarette each. After a few questions we were put into a large truck & moved away from Calais, France. It seemed as if we were riding forever before arriving at a small cabin. Inside were the rest of our crew excluding Sgt. Towle. He knew he had bailed out safely, so we weren't too worried.

After staying overnight in this small cabin, the ones that were injured were taken to a French hospital. Four of us, including the pilot, co-pilot, waist gunner & myself, were placed on a train & moved to Lille, France. There we were placed in a French dungeon in four separate cells. At first we thought we might be executed as we could hear the Frenchmen being shot outside. They were shot singing.

The French National Anthem. He remained in this dungeon about six days with our daily diet consisting of one small fish and one bowl of porridge. When leaving Lille, France we were in custody of two German guards. He had a separate compartment on the train and were told that we were going to Frankfurt, Germany. As we stopped at each station, the four of us were amazed to see the Germans step on the platform for urinating. No one seemed to notice them.

After three days we arrived at Frankfurt, Germany. Our first impression was why the union station had not been bombed as the rest of the city looked quite ravished. When we first stepped out of the train, we were surrounded by German civilians, who wanted to take us away from the guards. Being good soldiers, the guards forced the civilians to disband and we were mighty thankful at the

time. Then we were taken to a German Canteen and given hot soup by the German Red Cross. After eating we were taken to our disbursement center where we received toilet articles and a few clothes. Here the enlisted men and officers were separated and each sent to different camp. Sgt. Shiveley and I, the only enlisted men of my crew at this camp, were constantly together. With approximately one hundred men we were placed in German box cars with fifty men in each car. We were told that this would be a long trip and to eat our food sparingly. For seven days we layed huddled up in the box cars unable to rest and relax. When we reached our destination we were at Heidekrug, East Prussia. This was suppose to have been our camp for the duration of the war. It didn't look so bad, but it was a strange feeling to be shut inside a wire fence for an unknown time. This ended our processing period.

Stalag Luft 6 consisted of two compounds, one for English prisoners and one for Americans. Approximately two thousand men were housed in each compound. We were able to stay outside from 9 A.M. until 5 P.M. Roll call was taken two or three times a day. Most of the time was spent playing cards or sleeping. The first month we always seemed to be hungry. Gradually our stomachs shrank to our daily diet which was one fourth loaf of bread and a bowl of soup. Once in a great while we would receive a small portion of meat. The German guards seemed friendly enough, but we were always troubled by the Gestapo. They were the real Nazis. Many times they would take men out and place them in solitary confinement. We never knew who would be next.

About two months after arriving at Stalag Luft 6, the men began thinking

of ways to escape. They would dig tunnels and try other means. When we would receive Red Cross parcels about fifteen or twenty men would take the fruit and try to make alcohol. Of course, being Americans it would never stay buried long enough to ferment. Many times we would get feeling pretty high on this beverage. One time we even had a German guard intoxicated and one man used his uniform to walk out of the gate. Although he was captured, we had a great time laughing about it. From then on we were under strict surveillance by the Gestapo. One morning the Germans opened our barracks door early. Although we didn't know at the time, this was just an excuse to get even for the men trying to escape. Two men who walked out not realizing the time were shot down for trying to escape. He put up a good argument, but the Germans claimed the men had broken out of their barracks. This trick was tried many times after this and

usually someone would get shot. After a few men were shot, we were told to remain in our barracks until roll call about 9:30 A.M. This seemed to settle the question.

Gradually the spring turned into summer and the men were expecting the Invasion of France anyday. When it did arrive, we were told by the German Commander our troops would be pushed back to England immediately. Of course we didn't believe this and I don't believe he did. Right after the Invasion of France we began hearing guns on the Eastern front. This started up a new batch of rumors of which one was we would be turned over to the Russians. This seemed logical but none of the men actually believed it. Finally we were told our camp would be evacuated. Rumors had it that we were being evacuated to every town in Germany. Men began packing everything they could get together. Most of us made homemade

packs out of army shirts which we could carry on our backs. Finally on July 15, 1944, we were called out for a special roll call. We were told then that we were leaving immediately. This caused a commotion because we weren't notified in advance and we had no time to get our personnel belongings together. The English left their compound first and we left a couple of hours later. This was to be our hardship where twenty-five percent of our men would not arrive at their new destination.

As we were leaving Stalag Luft 6, we could hear Russian guns bombing as they were moving into East Prussia. For a while we thought we would be liberated. We marched five kilometers and then herded into box cars like a bunch of cattle. There were sixty to seventy men in each car without water. After settling in the freight yard three to four hours we began moving. Many of the men became sick due to the lack of water and tight quarters and our ride lasted twenty-four hours.

When we reached Memo, East Prussia, we found two German boats anchored waiting for our men. We were moved into the hold of the boat and the Germans kept pushing the men until there was only standing room left. They threatened to throw cold water on us unless we made room for the rest of the men. As far as we could tell, there

were over two thousand men in the hold of the boat. I'm satisfied two hundred men couldn't have been comfortable there. We were packed so tight that we were unable to sit down without sitting upon someone. When the boat began to move the Germans shut the top hatch and it looked like the end for us. The majority of us felt that this was an easy way for the Germans to get rid of us because if the British or Americans would sink the boat the Germans would not be responsible. After riding a few hours, the men began to talk about revolting. Our camp leader finally talked the men into taking it easy as we still had a chance of living if we would cooperate. A lot of the men were becoming sick and the Germans finally opened the top hatch and let the fresh air in. This helped a little but we needed water. The Germans handed pails to us thru the top hatch into which we could urinate. Also

we were handed pails of water to drink. He marked an X on one of the pails we used for urinating and sure enough when that pail came down again it was filled with drinking water. Some men refused to drink the water and had rather suffer. Sooner or later these men realized their mistake. After riding for two days, the men who were still able to walk were taken from the ship at Stettin, Germany.

By this time all of us were cramped and ill. We were then herded into some more box cars and moved to Rietz, Germany where we sat in the freight yards for four hours. This was July 19, 1944 and the men thought this would end our hardships as we thought we were entering a new camp. We left the train at 1:30 P.M. and were lined up on the roadside. The first thing we noticed was a group of German Marines and sailors with battle equipment

waiting to show us to our new camp. We were carrying our personnel belongings and were told it would be seven kilometers to our Stalag. As we started to march, the Germans began to hurry us and everyone had to run. As we first entered the woods, we saw German machine gunners who were ready to shoot if anyone tried to escape. After running a kilometer the men became worried and began dropping their personnel belongings. It looked as if the Germans were going to run us until everyone dropped. After the second kilometer the Germans began sending dogs into the column of men. This caused some of them to drop out after being bit by the dogs and as soon as one would fall out the Germans would hit him with a rifle or stab him with a bayonet. By the end of the third kilometer many men had fallen and were bayoneted. The rest of the men

became so frightened that it made them run all the faster. We could see men laying all over the roadside where they were bayoneted by the Germans. By the time we reached our Stalag, 800 men had been bayoneted by the Germans and only one man had carried his personal belongings through the ordeal. We had run six kilometers without a break. Then we were turned into a wired inclosure where we were allowed to sit down and rest. Twelve hundred men had run the six kilometers and I was fortunate to be one of them. The men just stretched out on the ground and began talking about the run. Before long the men seemed to cheer up and each one began telling how he had kicked a dog or something comical about the run. Before we had left the train, we were handcuffed two men together and this way if one man

Couldn't make it the other one would fall out also. After resting the men began taking their own handcuffs off because we needed only a knife or something sharp to unlock them. We were feeling very hungry and finally the Germans issued us a little food. We slept outside that first night without covers and the Germans sat and shot anyone who raised their heads off the ground. That was one of the longest nights I ever remember. By the time morning came the men were stiff and half frozen. We were moved into our respective compounds for hot showers and assigned to our new barracks. Thus ended our trip in which the men that finished were very lucky, as approximately twenty-five percent of the men were bayoneted to death on the run.

Once again we were hoping that this might be our last stop. This new camp had just been set up and wasn't nearly completed. He could see that Stalag Luft 4 wasn't going to be as good as Stalag Luft 6. Soon we learned the reason we were made to run those six kilometers. The Kommandant's family was killed by bombs which made him hate all the American Air Force men. He could see he was aiming to take it out on us.

We were assigned to barracks with twelve men to each room and were given our instructions pertaining to them. We had to keep them clean and be ready for inspection at a moment's notice.

Stalag Luft 4 was divided into four compounds. Each

Compound was circled by a twelve foot fence. Approximately fifteen feet inside this fence a wooden railing ran parallel with it. This was a double safety precaution to insure our staying away from the guards. All men were warned never to touch this rail as the German guards would not hesitate to shoot. German guards were stationed every twenty-five yards along the fence. These guards were instructed not to hesitate to shoot.

Inside each compound was ten barracks, one mess hall, one office and two latrines. Other than these buildings there was nothing except sand and dirt. The kitchen was approximately forty feet square. Two men were detailed to carry the food issued to the barracks. The

duties of these men were to pick up all rations given to us by the Germans. Each week two different men were detailed for this duty. Our daily duties were about the same as in Stalag Luft 6. Roll call everyday, cleaning the barracks and general work benefiting the compound. The Germans were very ~~strict~~ about our barracks. I guess they were afraid typhoid might break out. We maintained our old camp leader from Stalag Luft 6. This was done by voting to have him re-elected. We could get more from the Germans than anyone else. We were allowed two interpreters to talk and bring complaints to the German Kommandant. The duty of these men was to try to get the most from the

Germans.

After we were at Stalag Luft 4 a few weeks everything began to run smooth again. We had our daily complaints such as food shortage, too many roll calls and other general complaints but then these were daily appearances. As you already know hitching runs with the American soldier. I think the Germans admired us for that, anyway they couldn't stop us from hitching.

Many things happened at Stalag Luft 4 too numerous to write about all of them. I will just write about the ones which seem most important. On August 25, 1944 they moved over one thousand men into each compound. These men had been evacuated from different

Stalags on the eastern front. This made living conditions worse as we had to crowd these men into our small barracks with us and share what little food the Germans gave us with them. The Germans were forced to build little six foot by 6 foot houses in which they crowded four men into. These men were forced to make out the best they could. About a week after these dog houses were built, one was struck by lightning which killed all four men. Our camp leader immediately complained to the German Kommandant (to no avail). Living conditions remained the same. There was a Red Cross worker from Sweden that tried to get in and talk to the men, but was unsuccessful. He was

ordered to catch the first train back to Sweden. Things kept getting worse and the men began talking about breaking out in a mass formation. Our camp leader again stopped this attempt and as you could see the men respected and listened to their leader. He should have been a politician. There were numerous occasions when the German guards would get drunk and search our barracks in the middle of the night. On all of these searches they would pick out a few men for solitaire confinement. It looked like the Germans were trying to make us revolt but our camp leader managed to keep everything under control. On September 30, 1944 three men were caught escaping by the

gestapo. These men were immediately shot and six men were detailed to help bury them. They were supposed to have been given a military funeral but were just buried without a casket on the outside of the compound. This did not affect the men very much because they had seen men die many times before. As the days wore on men were dying by the hundreds. Early in the fall we began to receive the news over a concealed radio which was built from odd parts that were smuggled to us by the few good German guards. This helped morale quite a bit. We all figured we had a good chance of being liberated by the first of the year. After the first of the year we began hearing Russians

guns again so we all figured we would be on the move soon. All the men who had arrived from Stalag Luft 6 began teasing and telling the new prisoners what to expect. We were told that if we had to evacuate we would move by foot this time. We could see Russian prisoners marching by everyday away from the eastern front. Most of them had frozen feet, frozen hands and so forth and we were expecting the same thing. On February 1, 1945 we were told to get ready to move. Then it all started again and rumors were floating as to where we were going and how we would get there and so forth. We could hear the Russian guns quite plain now. It looked

impossible for us to move away from the advanced Russians now, although from past experience we knew the Germans would try to evacuate us.

On the morning of February 6, 1945 we began moving out. We thought we would walk ten to twenty days at the most. As we were leaving it began sleeting and it looked like we were off to a bad start.

Just before leaving Stalag Luft 4 we were issued a few supplies. Each man was given a Red Cross parcel and one third loaf of bread. Finally we were on our way about eleven a.m. and it was sleeting and turning colder. We could still hear the Russian guns on the eastern front and men began thinking of liberation. As for myself, I wouldn't believe it until I saw the Russians. Many German civilians were on the road also carrying most of their personal belongings. We were told that we would walk to Stenzenberg, Germany. About every two hours we were given ten minute rest periods. All through the first day it was sleeting and raining and this made it terrible to walk. About 11:30 P.M. we arrived at Stenzenberg, which was a small

town. We were put up in small barns with a small amount of hay for us to sleep on. We were allowed to build fires & heat some water to make coffee which we were issued in our Red Cross parcels. After this we were locked up in our respective barns. Quite a few men had blisters on their feet already. Some men were talking about escaping as they felt like they couldn't last on a long march. We were told by the Germans that a group of gestapo agents were following our march and we knew what that meant. They would be sure and kill those who dropped out or anyone left behind. Finally most of the men began to sleep as this had been a hard day for us.

On the morning of February 7- we were called out at 6 o'clock

and able to build fires and heat water for coffee again. When we stood roll call there were about twenty-five men missing and the Germans were upset about it. They had at least 5 or 6 roll calls and each time they would get a different count. Finally in disgust, they gave orders to march. It had turned cold during the night and there was a smooth layer of ice on the ground. This made it difficult to march and the Germans were after us to keep in a straight column. We were pushed a little faster now and later in the day the sun began shining which caused the ice to begin melting. It was just as bad as being on the frozen ice as the men's feet were getting wet. We thought about where we were going and when we would get there, but nobody knew for sure, not even

the Germans. Our customary ten minute rest period was given us and it was a great help to most of the men. He inquired of one of the German guards as to why they didn't give us to the Russians. He had no answer except they were following the orders of Hitler. I don't believe they wanted to keep us marching because they could have made better time on their own. He could see that most of the Germans were scared. That is the reason they pushed us so fast. After walking 30 Kilometers, we arrived at the city of Roman, Germany. Men were really all tired out by this time. Again we were separated into small barns and this time we were given no hot water for coffee. Most of our German bread was gone by this time, so we were told to ration our food carefully. Some of the men had most of their Red Cross parcels eaten. If they had

known how long it would have been before we were issued food again, I'm sure they would have taken care of their food. Thus ended the second day of our march.

The Germans awoke us at 6 o'clock on February 8th and again we received no hot water to make coffee. We didn't know what to expect as this was the earliest we had been forced to arise. Again it had turned cold through the night and we stood roll call another two hours. More men were missing and we didn't know if they had escaped or dropped out on the previous day. After roll call we started marching and some of the men had difficulty due to blisters on their feet. Quite a few men were hungry as they had eaten their rations. Every kilometer seemed like ten now and a few men were beginning to struggle behind column. The German guards didn't seem to mind this too much.

Just occasionally they would force them to rejoin the column. There was one German guard we called "Big Stoop." He was a giant of a man, well over 6 feet tall and must have weighed 250 pounds. He seemed to take pride in knocking some men down. He knew if and when we were liberated someone would kill him. As a whole, things were quite satisfactory that day. When we arrived at Altsetton, Germany, they again placed us in barns and this time with no hay. We were given hot water for coffee and cold water to wash with and allowed to build fires for cooking what little food we had. Then we were locked in our respective barns at 10 P.M. and this ended our third day on the road.

After getting up at 8 o'clock we had a special roll call which lasted three hours. Then we were told that we would not march this day and most of men really needed this day's rest. This gave a lot of the men ideas we would be liberated.

We were allowed to walk around inside the farmers barnyard but were warned not to touch any cattle, chicken and so forth. The farmer had promised us a free dinner if we did not harm his property. The German guards were restless and occupied their time by chatting with the prisoners. Around noon some men were picked out to cook a soup which the farmer had promised us. After getting the ingredients, which was potatoes, kohlrabis and a small amount of meat. All the men had to line up to receive their portion which amounted to about $3\frac{1}{4}$ cups. I waited in line four hours to receive mine but at the time it was worth it. After we had finished our soup, we were allowed to set around and build fires. This day of rest was just like a doctors prescription. Men began to laugh and joke a little now. Some of the men had managed to steal a few potatoes which we cooked now. Thus

ended the fourth day on the road.

On the morning of the tenth of February we were called out to receive another German ration, which was only $\frac{1}{2}$ loaf of bread. Then we began to march again and the sun was shining when we left the men were in good spirits but as the march progressed we knew something was wrong because the Germans were pushing us as fast as they could. He also knew we were getting close to the Oder River. If the Germans could get us across before the Russians cut us off they could hold us prisoners longer. He could hear the Russian guns on the eastern front and also there were a few Russian fighter planes above us. He thought it was possible for them to strafe us and the Germans forced us to lay on the side of the road to prevent our column being strafed. There was no doubt in our minds that this was possible as we had heard so much about

the Russians. A few men were forced to drop out on this day due to poor feet and

About 6 o'clock we arrived at Kanbz, Germany and were told that we would sleep outside. They moved us to the edge of town where there was a small pine forest. We were allowed to build fires here. There was a field that had been planted in potatoes and we immediately began digging to see if there were any left over. Each man managed to find a couple which we roasted. Our fires had to be out by dark and we slept out in the open. We were told by the Germans not to move around during the night.

After a miserable night in which very few men had slept, we were awakened early and told by the Germans that we would have another layover. After our roll call, we were allowed to move around within sight of the guards. This time our water had to be carried from Kanbz so we had to ration ourselves

accordingly. It looked like we were in another bad spell of weather as it was turning colder. Along in the afternoon it began snowing, and the Germans managed to locate a few barns where we could sleep that night. We moved into the barns around 7 o'clock. There was no hay to sleep on but it was better than sleeping outside. During the night we heard Russian planes bombing somewhere around us. We figured it must have been a road that we had just come over, although we didn't know for sure.

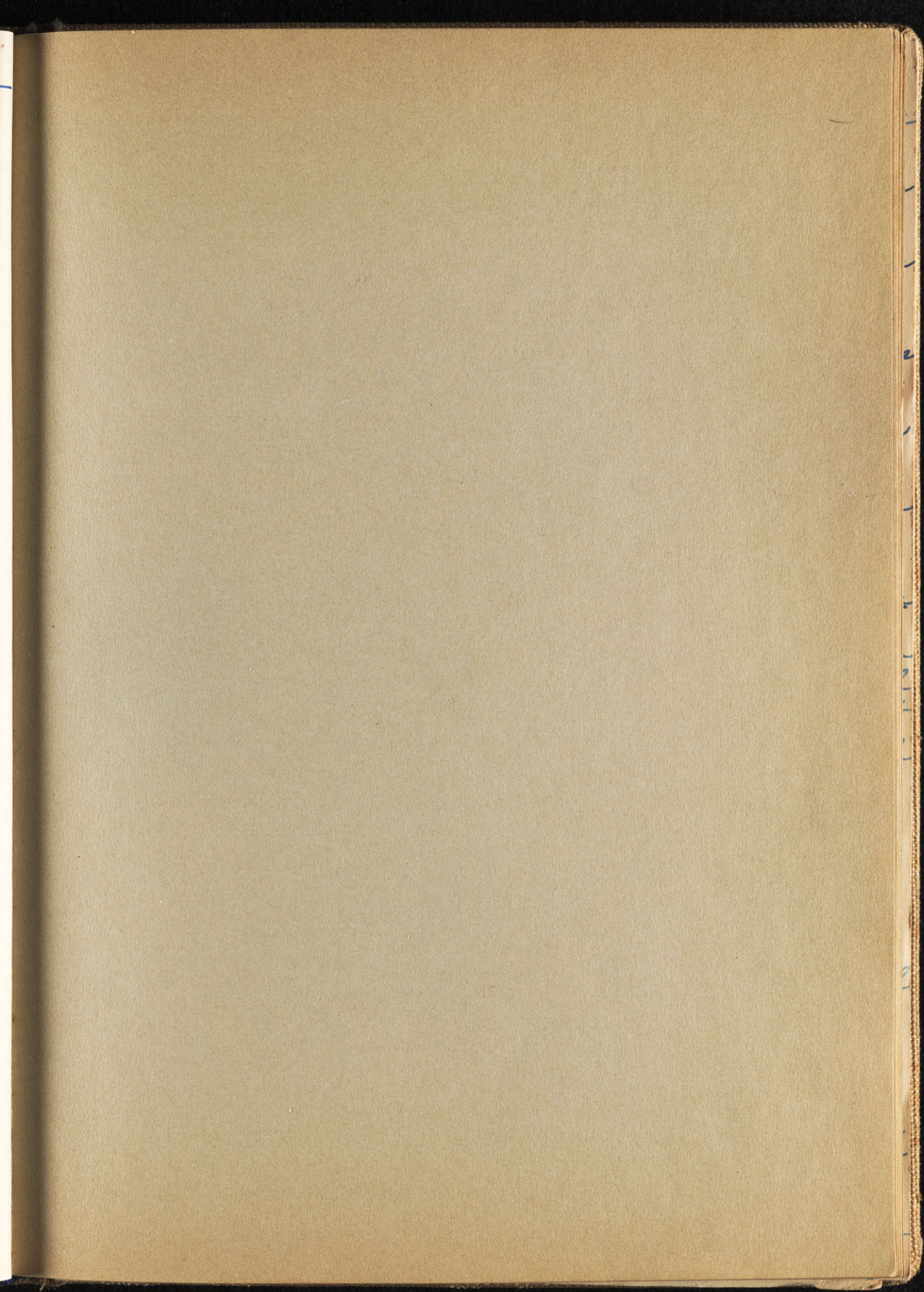
We didn't have a roll call February 12, instead we were pushed onward. We began walking across fields which were slippery due to the snow that had fallen during the night. There was about a foot of snow and this made the men's feet wet and hard walking for them. We didn't receive any breaks as we were trying to reach the Oder river. The Germans were afraid that the Russians would have control of the river before we arrived. Along about 6 o'clock, we arrived

at Dobberphul. Upon arriving, we were told to get plenty of rest as we would march approximately 40 miles the next day. This made the men talk of revolting again but our camp leader told us if we would stay together we would have a better chance of living through the ordeal. As before the men listened to him. He turned in early and got what rest we could.

It was very cold on the morning of February 13 but we started marching at 4:30 A.M. There was still snow on the ground and this time the Germans were really pushing us. After walking approximately fifteen miles our column was suddenly stopped by the Germans at Pritter, Germany. After standing around two hours, we were told that we would camp outside here for tonight. This started rumors again as we were told that we would walk forty miles the previous night. We thought the Russians had reached the Oder river first. At this stop in Pritter, we were allowed to build fires and were told that we could keep our fires burning that night as it was so cold. Around 6 o'clock a group of Russian prisoners were brought in to join us. We were separated by the German guards so that we couldn't talk with the Russians. If they hadn't allowed us to have our fires all night, 75 percent of the men would have froze to death because most of us sat up all night. This was one of the worse nights I have ever experienced. The Russians kept hollering like maniacs all through the night.

By the time of daybreak on February 14 - most of the men were completely worn out. The German guards began hollering

at us to get up and get in formation. They told us that we were going to try and cross the Oder river. This meant a long days marching with very little rest stops but we expected almost anything. After walking until 2 P.M. we arrived at the Oder river and the main bridge had been blown up by the Germans or Russians after standing around a few hours we were told to march again. We walked up the Oder river a few kilometers where a large ferry boat was docked. After being crowded onto this boat we started crossing the Oder which took approximately one hour. We had hoped for a rest period when we reached the other side, but instead we were pushed that much faster. The men were ill, disgusted and tired but managed to keep moving somehow. We had already walked 20 miles and had an unknown number to do yet. Walking through one town after another we began to see the ruins that had been hit by American bombing. The German civilians in the majority of these towns would spit on us and also throw stones at us. This made every man mad but there was nothing we could do about it. Personally, I saw three men hit with stones and they dropped out. I don't know exactly what happened to those men after they left the column. About the time we were so tired, we could not have stood up very much longer, we arrived at the town of Dargen, Germany. We had walked a total of 37 miles for that day. When we arrived at Dargen, we were given hot water for coffee, cold water for baths and a large barn for all of us to sleep in. The men were so tired and ill that it was almost impossible to talk with each other. The

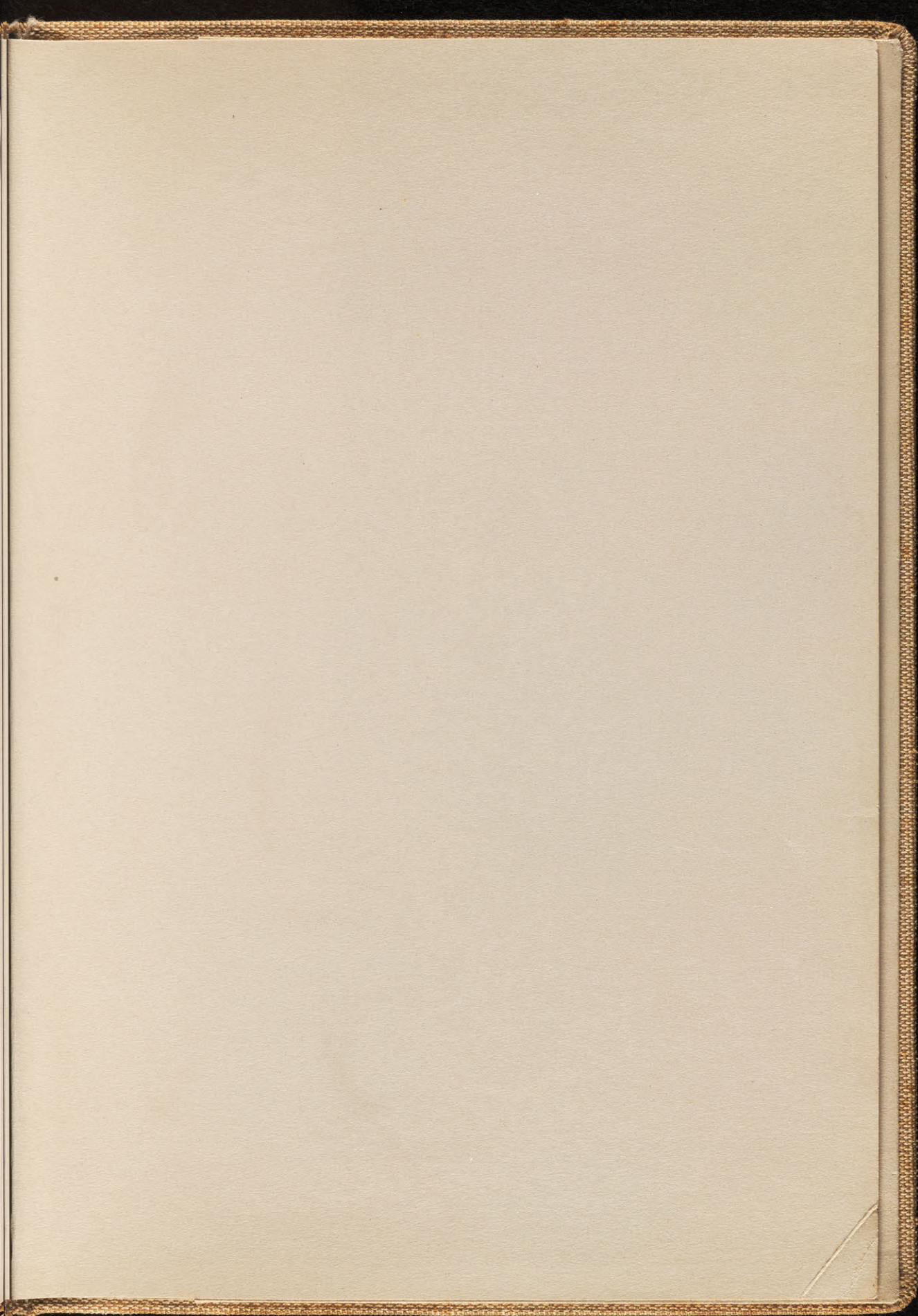


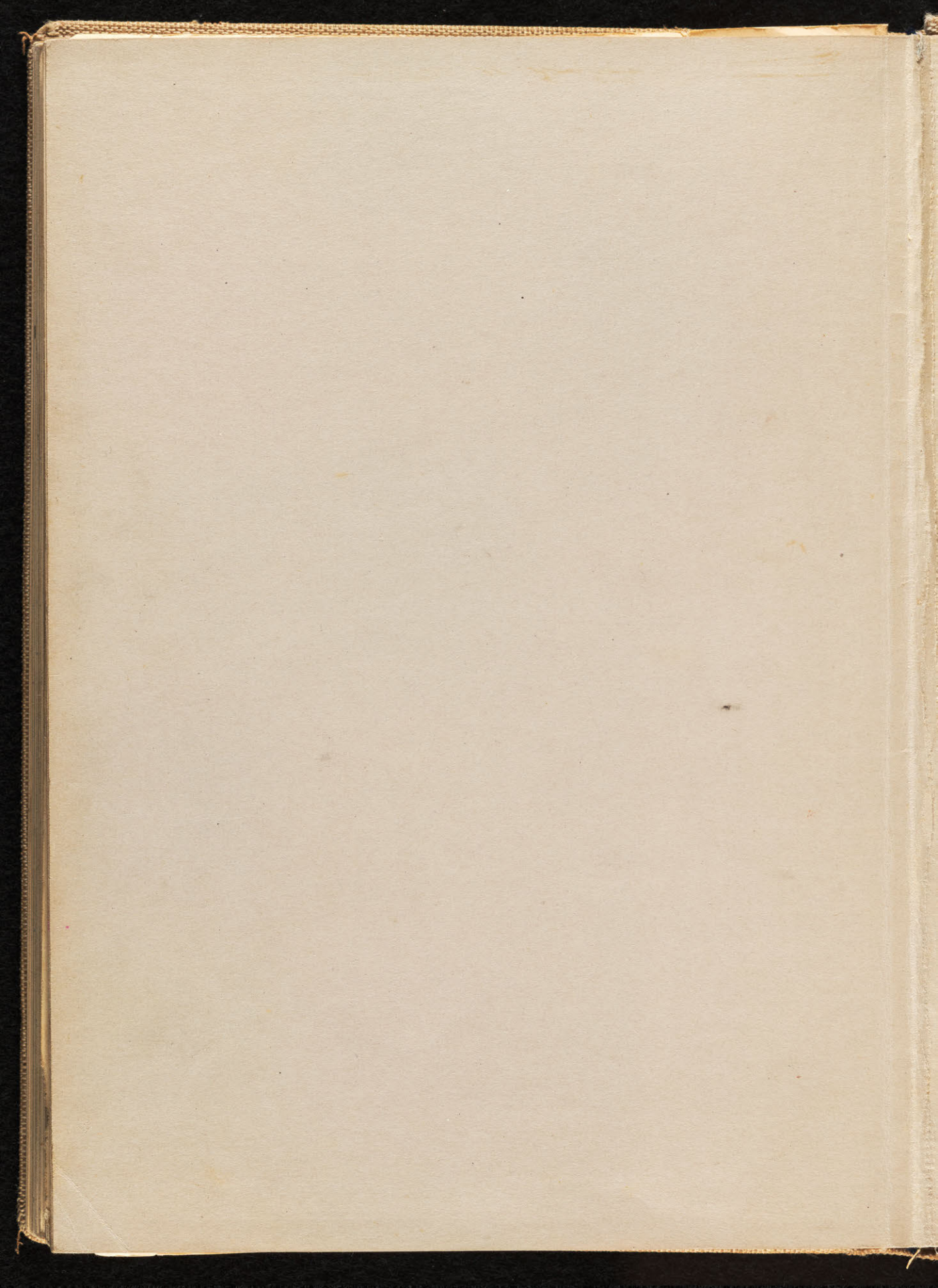
just layed down like a bunch of cattle and fell asleep for we knew that we had another hard day tomorrow.

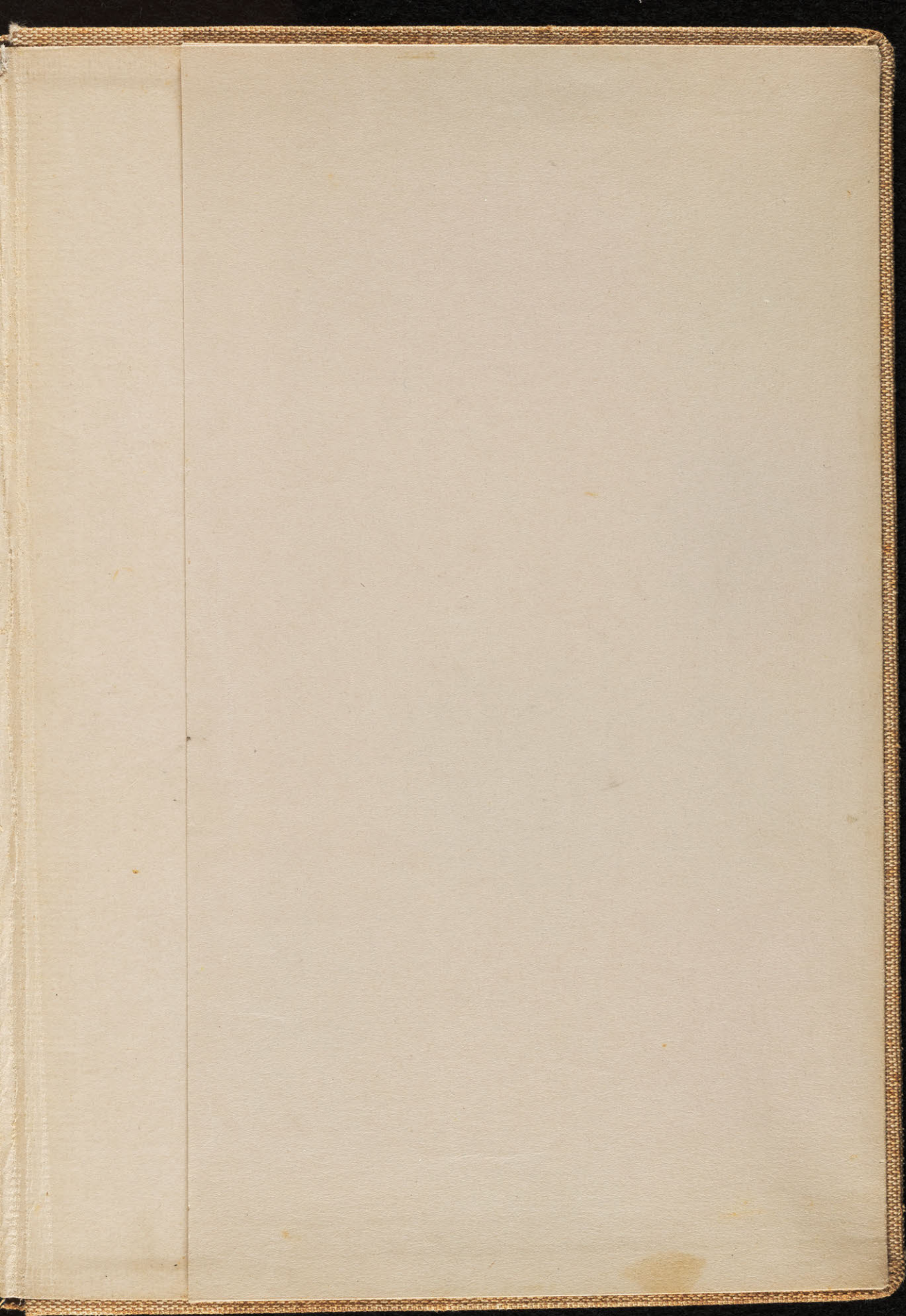
We arose again early on February 15 and had roll call. Quite a few men were missing but their whereabouts were unknown. The sun was trying to shine beneath the clouds and this helped some although the men were still tired from yesterday's march. We were told that we would march approximately 15 miles today and the Germans were still pushing hard again. The column began to straggle out now and men were dropping fast. Most of the trouble was men's sore feet although a few had died. Around noon it began snowing again and when we arrived at Marchin, Germany there was another covering of snow on the ground. We were placed in bunks again and given hot water although by this time very few men had any coffee to mix with the water. Just about everyone's rations were cut by this time. Our camp leader kept asking for more bread but the only answer he could receive was that they didn't have it. They had promised us a new issue just as soon as we arrived at a town where they had facilities to bake it. Course the men couldn't live on the promises but it did help some. The men were locked in early again and so ended our tenth day of marching.

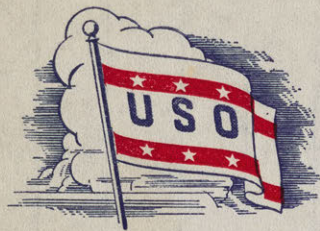
After leaving Marchin, the Germans began to let us take our time again. Our ranks were thinning out considerably and where the men were going to no one knew. We were again told that the Gestapo was still following us. A few more German guards were picked up this day. Our previous guards were six force men and the new ones were Infantry. They were a little more strict than the Air Force men. He tried to question them about the Russian front but all they would say was that the Russians had been stopped at the Oder River. It must have been quite a battle there as wounded men were passing us up all during the day. After walking 30 kilometers, we arrived at Postlaw, Germany.



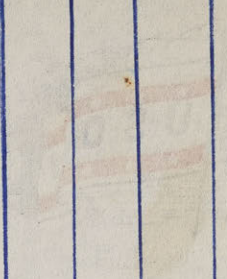








THE YOUNG MEN'S CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATIONS • THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC COMMUNITY SERVICE
THE SALVATION ARMY • THE YOUNG WOMEN'S CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATIONS
THE JEWISH WELFARE BOARD • THE NATIONAL TRAVELERS AID ASSOCIATION



Handwritten notes at the bottom of the page, including the word "Lecture" and some illegible scribbles.

