

Eric Reilinger Interview

Headquarters Company, 3d Battalion, 317th Inf Reg

(Aug 2001, interviewed by COL(ret) Grant Porter)

(MS Word Audio Transcript [NOT edited, just transcribed])

00:00:16 Speaker 1

I told this my name is Eric Rilinger, third battalion headquarters company, 317th Infantry. Story involves my being captured by the Germans, and it happened as follows.

00:00:33 Speaker 1

We crossed the Seal River on the 8th of November 1944.

00:00:39 Speaker 1

The radio man who carried my radio, I was sort of in charge of a radio squad and headquarters company and he was wounded. I picked up the radio and I had to carry it on a 9th or in the evening of the 8th. The battalion commander always.

00:00:59 Speaker 1

Insisted on having me with him.

00:01:02 Speaker 1

Was also wounded, caught some shrapnel in his back, and while he didn't want to go to an aid station, I had pretty much convinced him. He better go. I was just at T4, but he and.

00:01:13 Speaker 1

I.

00:01:13 Speaker 1

Were on a first name basis actually on the 9th, the guy who took over for for.

00:01:21 Speaker 1

Colonel Roberts was going to win the war that day and he says we've got to take those woods on the other side of those beat fields. Wide open fields surrounded by hedgerows. And I peeked out of the woods where we were again. And I said the captain.

00:01:41 Speaker 1

Those are Germans in that hedgerow. It is. No. No, that's OK company. I know. You know I said they sure as hell look like Germans to us and.

00:01:53 Speaker 1

He picked up and went and I followed him, and before I knew it, we were out in the open. There was no way to pull back and they started to fire their machine guns at us.

00:02:04 Speaker 1

And me with the radio on my back made a pretty good target.

00:02:09 Speaker 1

And when I hit the ground, the shooting seemed to stop. When I got up and ran, it picked up again and this went on a while. It dropped behind.

00:02:20 Speaker 1

Which is not a good idea. With Germans along our side on the right side at least. And so I kept on running and I got.

00:02:30 Speaker 1

Hit.

00:02:31 Speaker 1

In the leg got knocked down, they hit me and they quite low and they hit me in the side.

00:02:39 Speaker 1

There were a number of people around me that were also wounded and carried on.

00:02:46 Speaker 1

One guy really yelled, medic, medic and I said I thought he might draw fire. So foxhole crawled into it.

00:02:56 Speaker 1

It was full of water. It had rained all night, and it was still raining.

00:03:01 Speaker 1

Fell into it and then it started a lot more to fire in our direction.

00:03:10 Speaker 1

And some I believe.

00:03:13 Speaker 1

That I was then hidden ahead because I must have passed out when I came to the firing had stopped and I look up and there's three Germans standing there poking their rifle at.

00:03:27 Speaker 1

Me.

00:03:29 Speaker 1

Told me to get out of the ditch and I wasn't going to help him any, so I rolled over and showed him my bloody pants on pants and two of them dragged me out of the hole and put my arm around their shoulder and the third guy and we I hopped off across the field at double time.

00:03:48 Speaker 1

And took me to a barn, treated me very well by the way, bandaged me up and there were some other wounded GI's there. I don't know how long I was out, but I found out at that time that a piece of shrapnel had gone through my helmet and got caught in the helmet.

00:04:09 Speaker 1

Miner.

00:04:11 Speaker 1

During the mortar shrapnel and just scratched my forehead ended it a little bit. It was bad, but anyway they evacuated US 3 two guys were put into a side car for motorcycle and me with a sore *** had been shot in the thigh.

00:04:31 Speaker 1

Sat on the handlebar.

00:04:33 Speaker 1

And we went cross country and I wound up in a hospital in Metz where they gave me a tetanus shot, looked at the bandage that the 1st I8 guy put on me, by the way. They had paper bandages. It was so short a supply. It was like crepe paper there wrapped around my leg.

00:04:54 Speaker 1

They tried to fish out.

00:04:56 Speaker 1

One of the bullets.

00:04:58 Speaker 1

That was hung up in the bone. Two of them went right through in and out, and the third one got hung up and after that I wound up in the hospital in Saint Avold, who was run by Catholic nuns who treated the GI's extremely well. They didn't like the Germans who were showing off their.

00:05:19 Speaker 1

French photographs and.

00:05:22 Speaker 1

Postcards among each other, and got the nuns upset. Am I going too long? No, that's fine. I was there for about 6 days and then discharged with six other guys. We wound up in a prison camp in Strasbourg, which was a temporary. Stalock.

00:05:28

Yeah.

00:05:42 Speaker 1

About by then it was about the 17th of November.

00:05:50 Speaker 1

There.

00:05:51 Speaker 1

In the meantime, they found.

00:05:52 Speaker 1

Out that I spoke German.

00:05:55 Speaker 1

They knew it when I.

00:05:56 Speaker 1

Arrived.

00:06:01 Speaker 1

They started to. That was the first time we were being interrogated all through this. These hospitals never asked any questions. I had a thing of pamphlet called the Signal Operating instructions.

00:06:15 Speaker 1

I don't know if that still exists, the battalion or the division, So it had all of the frequencies and the call signs and the passwords, the cipher.

00:06:28 Speaker 1

Real valuable. I was able to flush that down in the toilet in a hospital. I carried it between my helmet and helmet liner and they never searched me well. I got rid of it when we got to the prison camp in Strasburg. I tried to pull this name, rank and serial number stuff and the.

00:06:47 Speaker 1

With the Geneva Convention and I found out after about two days of that.

00:06:52 Speaker 1

It didn't work.

00:06:55 Speaker 1

They were more insistent than that, and they wouldn't feed us until we answered some of their questions during that interrogation period. The man, he was not a military man who questioned us. He was a Gestapo man.

00:07:14 Speaker 1

From the area, German secret police guy and he made us stand in the corner in an open courtyard as his.

00:07:24 Speaker 1

Mid to late.

00:07:26 Speaker 1

November by then made us take our shoes off, put A1 guard behind the three of us. Three of the guys disappeared. They must have talked. Three of us held out for that name, rank and.

00:07:38 Speaker 1

Serial number stuff.

00:07:40 Speaker 1

And he says don't let him lean against the wall. Don't let him talk.

00:07:46 Speaker 1

They lean against the wall, sticking with a bayonet.

00:07:49 Speaker 1

So here we stood. This is like seven 8:00 at night. About 9:00. The guard, the German guard got tired off and locked us in a.

00:07:59 Speaker 1

Room.

00:08:00 Speaker 1

And we had a chance to discuss our situation. I said, look, I haven't been with the 317th for over a week.

00:08:09 Speaker 1

The situation is so fluid, whatever I know.

00:08:14 Speaker 1

Means nothing at this point. Let's very carefully answer that question, so that if we feel it's useful to them, let's say we don't know and that's how it worked. The other two guys were away from their units. They weren't 80th division people.

00:08:30 Speaker 1

They were they're way longer and next day.

00:08:33 Speaker 1

It went like clockwork and we were fed that night after 72 hours, not 8.

00:08:39 Speaker 1

At the prison camp because I spoke German, I was eventually assigned to cleaning up the office, and I met a an Austrian middle-aged Lieutenant. He was a second Lieutenant at a school teacher who was homesick, wanted to get back with his kids.

00:08:59 Speaker 1

And he was very good. He he became a friend when he saw any of the enlisted guards get rough with the man, he would interfere. So he was a good guy.

00:09:12 Speaker 1

When the Americans started the breakthrough, this went on for about four weeks.

00:09:18 Speaker 1

When the Americans started the breakthrough, the French KPS.

00:09:24

Who?

00:09:24 Speaker 1

Were also prisoners who worked in the kitchen told me.

00:09:30 Speaker 1

That hey, the Geis, the Americans ought to be here within a few days. They're less than 6 miles from Strasbourg. They lost no time or went to see the Lieutenant and they said to him, hey, you're being sacrificed. You're going to be taken. Turn the prison camp over to me.

00:09:51 Speaker 1

And I'll put in a good word for.

00:09:55 Speaker 1

You this is. I can't do that.

00:09:58 Speaker 1

That afternoon I was called to the Commandants office, who was a Lieutenant Colonel, First World War man in his 60s, maybe in his late 60's the German current, and he referred to this conversation and he said, well, what you put in a good word for me. And he went on, he says I'm trying to run a humane.

00:10:19 Speaker 1

And the food may not be adequate.

00:10:22 Speaker 1

But I said, well, you heard the terms turn the camp over to the GIS and I'll see what I can do for.

00:10:30 Speaker 1

You.

00:10:31 Speaker 1

With this, he took his pistol belt off, laid it on the desk in front of him, turned around, took a decorated sword out of the closet behind it, and laid it on the.

00:10:41 Speaker 1

Desk.

00:10:42 Speaker 1

And I was flabbergasted.

00:10:44 Speaker 1

Here's this Austrian Lieutenant there, and I'm alone in the off.

00:10:48 Speaker 1

I said OK and I sent the Lieutenant to get a staff Sergeant who came out of the hospital with me. One of the three guys who stood in.

00:10:58 Speaker 1

The corner.

00:10:59 Speaker 1

And I explained to him what was happening.

00:11:02 Speaker 1

And.

00:11:04 Speaker 1

The Lieutenant says, you know, we've been ordered to fight to the last man and the Garrison outside was ordered to defend the bridge across the Rhine River to the last man. But make a long story.

00:11:16 Speaker 1

Should we disarm the few remaining guards they had? There were about 15 to 20 guards there when I arrived at that time, the only five of them left, they had little that thing down to a skeleton crew, and they were all old men. They were happy to give us their guns. There was no.

00:11:36 Speaker 1

Fight the the Colonel, in spite of what was later written in the Stars and Stripes, the Colonel did not object to get handing me his.

00:11:46 Speaker 1

Or.

00:11:48 Speaker 1

We took over the camp and the hardest part from there was to control the GIS and went hog wild and ate governor. The commissary ate the wrong stuff. We waited for the Americans that day. Nothing happened. The next day, nothing happened. That night I sent this staff Sergeant and another man out.

00:12:09 Speaker 1

To contact whatever he could told him, don't get involved.

00:12:14 Speaker 1

With any German controls, they made it to the western end of Strasburg, where they had been digging ditches, so we knew the way through the through town. We were digging German.

00:12:29 Speaker 1

Defenses while we were prisoners there. So this staff Sergeant contacted an outfit and allied outfit that turned out to be French. French tank battalion light tank.

00:12:45 Speaker 1

And had a hell of a time making himself understood. We didn't look like soldiers. It took him prisoner. And finally the liaison officer, an American captain, came along.

00:12:57 Speaker 1

And the story was sent back. The staff Sergeant came back. The other guy with him stayed with the French people and they said, well, they know we're here.

00:13:07 Speaker 1

We couldn't go outside because we didn't know what was happening in the streets of Strasbourg.

00:13:13 Speaker 1

So we really kept the GI's locked up. They wanted out. Wait. That day the following day and after the 4th day, we lined up all the GI's that were 164 of them, some British and some Americans.

00:13:33 Speaker 1

On each side of the street.

00:13:35 Speaker 1

We made our way through Strasbourg, never saw any Germans, the French troops at the at the western end at Strasbourg acted like they expected us and.

00:13:49 Speaker 1

We were repatriated. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. And an interesting point. We were then debriefed by Shaikh by 7th Army. We wound up in the 7th Army. Rebel Depot replacement depot and one of the things that I had to do was sign some statement.

00:14:09 Speaker 1

That I would not reveal any of the details of this takeover.

00:14:15 Speaker 1

And I didn't. Two days later I was back with the third battalion.

00:14:21 Speaker 1

Headquarters Company 317th just in time.

00:14:24 Speaker 1

For the Battle of the.

00:14:25 Speaker 1

Bulge.

00:14:26 Speaker 1

Now that's another story. All about four weeks later, I picked up the Stars and stripes. And here is a big headline staring me in the face. Nazi Colonel.

00:14:37 Speaker 1

Serena, isis. Soar to a Yank T4 and the whole story exaggerated and.

00:14:45 Speaker 1

Dramatized.

00:14:49

Pretty good, pretty good.