

Unforgettable

The Biography of Capt. Thomas J. Flynn

World War II Veteran
28th Infantry Division, 110th Infantry Regiment, K Company



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Chapter 6 **December 18, 1944-April 29, 1945: 133 days as a German Prisoner of War**

After Patton's failed attempt to have Task Force Baum liberate Hammelburg's Oflag XIII B camp and rescue his son-in-law, most of the liberated prisoners were recaptured or killed within a week and the Hammelburg camp was closed by the Germans. All prisoners, except the very sick and wounded, were then transferred to Nuremberg, which is where the excerpts below begin.

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When Tom and his group arrived at Hammelburg on March 31, they heard that the task force had been shot up trying to get back to the American line and that all the prisoners had either been recaptured or killed in the fight. Even though they, too, had been recaptured, Tom was glad they had gone out on their own. They had at least been free for four days.

The evacuation of the Hammelburg camp had been underway for several days since the escape, as the Germans moved the Hammelburg prisoners farther into the interior of Germany to keep them away from the advancing American armies. Captain Feiker and the other men who had stayed in the camp had already been moved out by train to Stalag Luft III at Nuremberg on March 29 and Colonel Goode's contingent of men, which had been recaptured, was being marched there on foot.

The Serbians who were tending to the POWs still in the camp hospital served Tom's group a hot meal, and there were suddenly plenty of Red Cross parcels available. Among the POWs left behind was General Patton's son-in-law, Lt. Col. John Waters. Waters had been shot by a German corporal during the initial escape attempt and was one of only seventy-five wounded and sick Americans who would be liberated from this camp by the American 14th Armored Division within the week.

Ninety-six Miles to Stalag Luft III at Nuremberg— Days 105-109 (Five days)

The following morning, Tom and all remaining POWs capable of being moved were loaded into unmarked boxcars once again, en route to Nuremberg. This time, the old prison guards were stationed in each car. Approximately 10 kilometers (6.2 miles) outside of Hammelburg, an American P-51 fighter plane strafed their unmarked train. The .50-caliber ammo slamming into the metal roof of the cars was deafening and sounded to Tom like someone hammering on the roof. The fighters flew up the length of the train to shoot up the engine at the front. As the train slowed to a stop, Tom and the other POWs convinced the old guards to open the doors before the fighters came back. The guards jumped out first, and the POWs followed, taking cover far away from the train. The fighters returned to rake the train again but the men were far enough away by then to be safe.

The senior U.S. and British officers protested that their men would not ride farther unless the next train was plainly marked as a prisoner train. The German commander then gave the men the choice of walking or riding the remaining ninety miles. The majority of the men chose to walk the rest of the way to Nuremberg. The guards organized a column and they headed out on foot. It was now getting close to spring, so the march was easier than before. Tom was more than happy to be out from behind the barbed wire fences and locked gates, and he chose to be a straggler at the end of the column, and he walked as slowly as the guard would let him in order to delay their arrival at the next camp.

When Tom's group reached Nuremberg and Stalag Luft III, he found out that thirty American POWs who had been in the first group to be evacuated from Hammelburg, including Captain Feiker, had been killed during an Allied air raid of Nuremberg on April 5 as their POW column was being marched through the city. Tom was saddened by the news, as Captain Feiker had been a good officer who had really cared about his men.

Stalag Luft III at Nuremberg, Germany— Days 110-111 (Two days)

By the time that Tom's group reached Stalag Luft III at Nuremberg, the 14th Armored Division had arrived in full force at Oflag XIIIIB in Hammelburg, liberating the camps there for good. The German army continued to fall back towards Berlin and kept moving the prisoners with it in an attempt to keep the advancing U.S. force from recovering its POWs. As a result, Tom was only kept at this camp for two days. The Americans were less than sixty miles away.

Once again on foot, Tom was marched through the city of Nuremberg en route to Stalag VIIA in Moosburg, another ninety miles away. By this time, the American fighters and bombers had destroyed much of Nuremberg and as the POWs were marched through the bombed-out sections of the city, the German civilians were hostile and angry with the American POWs. The Germans were especially angry with the pilots and called them "terror flyers." (Tom later said the phrase sounded like *tier pfluger*). Tom understood what they were saying and told all the pilots around him to hide the pilot wings on their uniforms. When a group would press too close to them, Tom would point to the crossed rifles insignia on his uniform coat and tell them, "*fuss soldaten*" (foot soldiers or infantry). Tom saved all the pilots in his group from harm in this way, and they made it safely through the city with no injuries. Unfortunately, some of the POWs in other groups were not so lucky and were pelted with stones by the mobs.

Ninety-four-mile March to Oflag VIIA at Moosburg, Germany— Days 112-119 (Eight days)

Near exhaustion, Tom lost track of time on the march to Moosburg. The prisoners walked as slowly as the German guards would let them in an attempt to prolong the journey. Anything was better than confinement. By this time, both the prisoners and guards had to scrounge for food along the way from the Bavarian farmers, and thankfully, in the warmer weather, they could sleep in the large stacks of hay in the fields at night.

Yet they still were not safe, and once again, Tom's POW column came under attack by an American fighter plane. This time it was near a railroad overpass. Tom wasn't sure if they had been the primary or secondary target this time, but some POWs at the front of the column were injured. Tom remained content to be one of the stragglers at the back of the line.

Stalag VIIA at Moosburg, Germany— Days 120-133 (Fourteen days)

Tom's POW column arrived at the Moosburg Stalag VIIA around April 15, 1945. Once again, the men had to register upon arrival. This camp held by far the largest number of POWs of any camp that Tom had seen. There were men from every nation Germany had fought for the past five years. Fortunately, the International Red Cross was ever-present in this camp and it received more frequent delivery of Red Cross parcels than the other camps where Tom and the men of K Company had been held. Nevertheless,

with so many new prisoners continuing to flood into the camp, it was hard for the Red Cross to put a dent in what was truly needed.

To put the conditions of the camp into perspective, the Moosburg camp was meant to hold 3,000 prisoners but as of mid-April 1945, the census had swelled to over 100,000. With such overcrowding, there was little food and no hot water for cooking or washing. The straw beds were infested with lice and fleas. There was one outdoor latrine for every 2,000 men. The fact that this camp had been built over swampland meant there was mud everywhere. At this point in the war, the buildings were old and many were just wooden shells because the POWs had been taking them apart gradually to burn the wood for cooking on their makeshift stoves. To accommodate the massive influx of new prisoners, tents had been set up and some prisoners chose to sleep out under the stars when the weather allowed.

When Tom and the other POWs were shown where they were to stay, the American and British airmen shared with each of the new arrivals an entire Red Cross package. This was quite the luxury to Tom, as it was the first time in four months of captivity that he had gotten a package just for himself. The airmen quickly shared all of the information they had. With all the new prisoners pouring into the camp over the past month, they had gotten a steady stream new information about what was happening and where the U.S. Army was.

The airmen also shared the rumor that Hitler had ordered all American officers in this camp killed, rather than surrendering them to the American Army. Tom had no way of knowing whether this rumor was true. We can only imagine the thoughts that ran through his mind.

On April 28, there were clear signs that the American Army was not far away. Tom and the other prisoners could hear the artillery fire of American weapons in the distant southwest. The next morning at sunrise, April 29, sounds of American tanks and gunfire could be heard nearby as the 14th Armored Division moved closer to the camp. Like the rest of the prisoners, Tom was thrilled that the U.S. Army had finally caught up with him and the other POWs who had been evacuated from the Hammelburg camp.

Unfortunately, the excitement of the pending rescue was dampened by what was going on immediately outside the camp, as the prisoners soon discovered that the rumor of Hitler's orders to kill the American officers was true. At that point, the POWs had no way of knowing that their camp was the last POW camp to be liberated, so with the advancing American Army near, the SS troops began to fire their weapons into the camp in a last-ditch attempt to carry out Hitler's orders. Shots even came from the SS troops positioned on the roof of a cheese factory nearby. The POWs were told by the guards to stay inside with their heads down and "the prison guards and the German Army fought off the Gestapo and SS and saved all the prisoners' lives."¹⁴ The fighting was over in less than an hour and Tom could soon feel the vibration of the army tanks headed in their direction. It didn't take long for the sound of the moving Sherman tanks to be drowned out by the sounds of euphoria erupting from every able-bodied man in Stalag VIIA.

The Sherman tanks of the 14th Armored Division soon crashed through the fences of the compound. Each tank was immediately engulfed by the sea of ragged, emaciated, and filthy POWs. Tom wanted to join the celebration on top of the tanks but there were already so many bodies covering every inch of the tanks that the tanks themselves were no longer visible. Brigadier Gen. Charles H. Karlstad received an unconditional surrender from the camp commandant and the Americans assumed control of the camp.

Unbeknownst to Tom, Anna's younger brother, Magnus Bennedsen, had been assigned to the 14th Armored Division's maintenance unit in October 1944 and his crew was not far behind the tanks that had just crashed through the compound fences. Unfortunately, with all the chaos, neither of them would discover the other was there, and the two men would never make the connection.

As Tom joined the celebration, he witnessed the most amazing expression of freedom. At approximately 1300 hours on April 29, 1945, 1st Lt. Martin Allain, a twenty-three-year-old bomber pilot who had been a POW for over two years, revealed the treasured American flag he had been hiding for almost two years. He had sewn it between two German blankets to conceal it from the guards. Lieutenant Allain now realized what his prized flag was destined to be used for and began shimmying up the German flagpole with Old Glory in hand. The entire camp went silent as Allain replaced the ugly swastika with his beautiful Stars and Stripes. Regardless of his nationality, each man immediately came to attention and saluted the American flag. The prisoners were overcome with the emotion that most had locked away for months, if not years, and almost every eye filled up with tears. They were safe at last and going home.

With Moosburg Stalag VIIA the last German POW camp to be liberated, the army now had the massive job of not only feeding all the starving men but providing proper medical attention, clothing, and transportation back home, and helping troops of other nations do the same.

The next day, April 30, Hitler committed suicide during the Battle of Berlin, and his replacement, the president of Germany, Karl Dönitz authorized the surrender of Germany.

General Patton arrived in the camp for a visit on May 1, spoke briefly to the men, shook a few hands, and then left again. Tom made no mention of Patton's visit to the camp after the war, but that is not surprising since he was not a fan of the general and he probably wasn't impressed by the gratuitous gesture and short stay. "His blood and our guts," was what Tom would say about him when his name came up in conversation in the years that followed.

Tom was one of the first officers to be interviewed at Moosburg by Army Field Historian Capt. William K. Dunkerly on May 1 and 2, 1945, about the Battle of the Bulge and how he and the other POWs were treated during their captivity. These interview documents and numerous other historical accounts by authors, scholars, and other POWs, provided the details to recreate Tom's experiences in chapters 5 and 6 of this book. Tom received a general medical exam to attend to immediate issues. No psychological evaluation or emotional assistance was provided. Army personnel did not brief Tom on any events that had occurred while he was in captivity.

As the Army sorted through all the men in the camp, it made sure they were well fed to build up their strength and prepare them for travel. A field hospital was set up near the Landshut airstrip to provide them with hot showers, soap, delousing, and fresh clothing. The sick and infirm were quickly processed and forwarded on for treatment, as needed. As the men were processed and approved for travel, the ones who were healthy enough would wait near the Landshut airstrip until C-47s landed to resupply the 14th Armored Division with gas and ammunition. Each plane would then be loaded with soldiers for the return trip to the airbase in France. It was the first time many of them had had something to laugh about in months. One officer even purchased a couple kegs of beer in town to share with the soldiers while they waited their turn to go home.

Tom had his first plane ride in the bucket seat of a C-47 on May 7, 1945, en route to the 195th General Hospital outside of Paris for further processing. Tom was then transported by truck along the back roads into Paris that night, just before the big Victory in Europe Day (V-E Day) celebration on May 8. Tom would never see or hear from any of the men of the 28th Infantry Division again.

Tom was released from the 195th General Hospital to the Normandy Base on May 8, where he stayed until he received orders to be shipped home. On May 13, 1945, Tom boarded the U.S. merchant ship, *the John Erisco* and headed for New York. The Army made sure the POWs had all the food they could eat on their two-week trip back to the states. Tom's emaciated body packed on 45 pounds in just three weeks and he

weighed 170 pounds when he arrived in New York. This was the most he would ever weigh in his life. Thank God, he was free and on his way home.

Anna received a third and final telegram from the War Department on May 21 telling her that Tom had been liberated from the POW camps. She was ecstatic! Tom was coming home! She found out that he was on a ship headed for New York but that he would be going to his oldest brother Bill's apartment in Chicago from there. Anna immediately packed her bags and left Minnesota to meet Tom without telling anyone or turning in her resignation at the hospital.

As the *John Erisco* neared New York City, Tom could see the Statue of Liberty off in the distance. Tom watched eagerly as the ship passed all of the familiar landmarks of home and he couldn't wait to be off the ship and with his family. More than anything, Tom longed for news of Anna. The few photos in his wallet he had been allowed to keep were all he'd had to hold onto all these months. It had been nine long months since he had heard any word from her or he had been able to get word to her.

Every day while Tom was a POW, his little sister, Mel, had gone to St. Francis Church just across the street from her workplace to pray. The church had set up a special niche to pray for the soldiers and she had made nine-day novenas for Tom on every visit. Mel had not yet heard the news of Tom's freedom but as Tom's ship drew nearer to shore, Mel happened to look out her office window. For some reason, she had an overwhelming feeling that Tom was on the troop ship she was watching enter the harbor. God had answered her prayers and Tom walked in the door of their apartment that evening. Tom's family was ecstatic to see their Tommy again. They were surprised at how good he looked and they were thrilled to have him home, even if just for a day, before he left to reunite with Anna.

Tom had orders to report to the Palmer House at Ft. Sheridan, Chicago. He arrived at the Chicago apartment of his brother, Bill, on June 4, 1945. Anna was there waiting for him.

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