



UNITED STATES NAVY

A TRANSCRIPTION OF  
LEO J. HIGGINS  
NOTES ABOUT HIS  
CAPTURE  
INCARCERATION  
&  
ESCAPE  
DURING WORLD WAR II



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V - E DAY, 8 May, 1945

Middle of Atlantic Ocean (enroute from Camp Lucky  
Strike to Newport News Hampton, Va.)

October 7, 1944:

Shot down over Stettin Germany (see note 1).  
Parachuted to safety near Treptau (on the Rega),  
wounded in left hip. Spent night in German  
recuperation hospital.

October 8, 1944:

Taken on train to Hospital in Stettin. Met 4 others  
all downed the same day. 2 from my group.

Names: Walter Strogser (2nd Lt.), George L. Petty  
(Gunnery Sgt.), Raymond L. Brooks (2nd Lt. \_\_\_ (see  
note 2)), Joseph T. McKeon (Capt., P-51).

(TREATMENT POOR).

Note 1: Now Szczecin, Poland  
Note 2: Illegible



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October 13, 1944:

Strogger and I taken to Luftwaffe Hospital at Greifswald. (Brooks had leg amputated) We were put in a nice room with 4 Americans and 1 British and 1 Australian. Americans: C. A. (Pappy) Fothergill (2nd Lt., Copilot, B-24, Wash., D.C.), John J. McSpirritt (2nd Lt., Navigator, B-24, Camden, N.J.) Thomas Eade (Sgt., Gunner, B-17, Homewood, Ill.), Henry Schneider (Gunnery Sgt., Gunner, B-17, Pittsburg Pa.) British: Ken Burton (F.B MOS N Fairfield, Batn, Eng.) Australian: John Shields (Welterweight Champ, 1st Sgt, LUWE). Very modern hospital, treatment good. 1 Red Cross parcel every 10 days. Left watch here with John McSpirritt.

November 2, 1944:

Taken from Greifswald (see note 3) along with Strogger to Interrogation Center (near Frankfurt) (see note 4) via Berlin (Berlin to Frankfurt in 14 hours). Interrogated on 3rd and 4th and released on 4th.

Note 3: 19 MI SE of Stralsund

Note 4: On the Ober River, 50 MI ESE of Berlin, not the Frankfurt in W Germany.



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**November 5, 1944:**

Left Interrogation Center and traveled with a mixed group of American and British prisoners to Wetzlar (Dulag). Received Red Cross clothing and Capture Parcel.

**November 6, 1944:**

Left Dulag and got on train for Sagan, Germany (see note 5) (Stalag Luft 3). We were 3 days enroute arriving on the night of the 9th. After searching we were put into the West Compound. Myself, R. D. Crogan, John J. Kirlin, and Gordon C. Wheeler joined together and went into a room where there were already 10 fellows: W. F. Carpenter, Wilbur S. Drossel, Ralph R. Foster, Donald M. Griffin, John W. Goinn Jr., Stanley F. Liddle, Andrew J. Moran, Benj. J. Nozicka, Henry Lawson Corley, William F. Sing. Later Carpenter moved out and John B. Carder moved in.

**Note 5: Formerly Prussia, now SW Poland**



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Here we received 1/2 Red Cross Parcel, 1/6 loaf German Bread per day and a Red Cross box of potatoes a day for the room (15Y - 12) plus sugar, salt, Barley soup, and vegetables and hamburger once in a while.

**January 27, 1945:**

We were marched out of Sagan because of the advancing Russians. The first nights march brought us to Freienwalde (see note 6) where after 1 & 1/2 hours of sleep I stood by a fire in the snow trying to keep warm until 1800 (6 hrs).

**January 28, 1945:**

About 1800 we departed Freienwalde marching until 2200 when somebody yelled "Air Raid". Everybody hit the ditch but some kept running on into the woods. The Germans started shooting, at least 2 men were wounded and the column was reformed. Meanwhile the wind died down but the temperature had dropped to

**Note 6: A German Prison camp between Sagan and Bad Muskau.**



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-15 degrees F. The stops were of longer duration each time we stopped. Men were dropping from exhaustion and cold. At 0200 on the 29th we were told that we had 16 kilometers to go. Hospital cases were put up in barns. The bottoms of my feet were so sore that each step was misery. About 6 kilometers later while going up a long hill my legs gave out on me. The last 10 kilometers were accomplished only with the aid of a man on each side. We arrived at Bad Muskau at 0730 and eventually were put up in a pottery factory. We stayed here until about noon of the 31st.

**January 31, 1945:**

We left Bad Muskau (see note 7) about 1300 for an 18 kilometer march. We were pretty well rested but very stiff and sore still. Most of us had constructed sleds and had our belongings packed on them. Three of us had our equipment on one sled and we pulled two at a time, two hours on and one off. Shortly after dark we reached our billet for the night. This time it was arranged for ahead of time

Note 7: SE of Berlin, SE of Cottbus, E of Spremberg



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**February 1, 1945:**

The morning saw the end of the rain which had started the night before just as we finished our days hike and also brought warmer weather. We didn't march until nearly 1700 so we had time to cook up a batch of potatoes before we left. We finished of the nine kilometers to Spremberg (see note 8) and then went to some Army post where we were put up in a big garage. There was some hay around but most of us had to sleep on the cold cement floor.

**February 2, 1945:**

We moved out in the morning and reached the Rail Road yards where a train of about 50 cars was waiting. We were given 4/5 Red Cross parcels and 1/2 loaf of bread and packed into 40 x 8 cars 50 to 53 men to the car. We were like this until Sunday night.

Note 8: On the Spree River 77 MI SE of Berlin



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**February 4, 1945:**

We arrived at what was to be our new home, Stammlager 13D - Nurnberg (see note 9) when it was getting dark and found that there were only 8 barracks to take care of 2000 of us. But even this was enjoyable after being on the crowded boxcars for 2 & 1/2 days.

**April 4, 1945:**

End of 2 months at Nurnberg. Camp now totals 7441 British and Americans. Catholic Chaplain has to say 8 Masses on Sunday to take care of all of the Compounds.

We marched from Stalag Luft 3 - Nurnberg at 1030. American 7th Army reported 90 kilometers West and Northwest by O. K. W. (see note 10) After three hours march we stopped for lunch and an hour rest.

Note 9: The name of the Prison Base Camp

Note 10: Ober Kommando Wehrmacht





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Just before dark we reached the town Postbauer 21 kilometers from Nurnberg (see note 11). Here Compound 6 was billeted for the night. Our barracks obtained a hay storage barn at the Rail Road station.

Until now I had been definitely against trying to escape. I had been telling the fellows that it was too risky but deep down inside of me something said "This is your chance, Use it!!" So I cased the place before it got dark and decided it would be hard for the Germans to guard us and that there would be a fair chance of getting away without getting shot at. Five of us discussed the possibilities but only one, Gordon Wheeler, also a B-17 Navigator, did anything. He gathered everything together and was ready to go. I followed his example and leaving everything except my blanket "pack-sack" and food and the clothes I had on. We waited our opportunity and crept away down the Rail Road tracks while the guard was going the other way. There was no moon and while we were

**Note 11: SE of Nurnburg**



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escaping the clouds crept in and obscured our compass the stars. After we had crossed the Rail Road tracks paralleled them and then recrossed them heading Southwest as planned we stopped in a field to repack and check our course. We had with us to aid us in our journey a pocket knife, a table knife blade, a couple of nails, a fork and spoon, 2 cans of meat, 2 cans salmon, 2 cans American cheese (8 oz.), 3 cans British cheese (2 oz.), 1/2 can Kli\_\_ (1/2 lb.) (see note 12), can of Cordendo, 3/4 lb. of sugar, 1/3 D - bar, 1 box K Ration, 1/3 a can of H2O, 1/2 tin British crackers, 1 lb. margarine, and about 1 & 1/2 lbs. of raisins. We had no watch or compass and for a map a very crude copy of other unreliable copies of maps.

Only occasionally could we get a glimpse of a star and then often I couldn't identify it unless there were several of them. Gordon confessed that he was night blind and couldn't remember most of the stars so I took the lead. I was very nervous and inclined to travel too fast. Therefore we did a lot of

Note 12: Illegible



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stumbling until I learned to travel slower. After a while the stars quit peeking through entirely so we lay down to rest until dawn. We misjudged the length of time until dawn and as result only had 1 blanket out and we just lay there and shivered. We got up before sunrise and I noticed that the moon rose shortly. This was excellent for our purposes because it meant dark skies for about 2 weeks. We travelled along forest roads until we ran out of forest, then we picked the thickest thicket that we could find and holed up for the day. I didn't get much sleep that first day (April 5). Our cover wasn't as good as I had hoped for and there were peasants working in the woods near us, also there was a tremendous amount of air activity going on in the vicinity.

**April 5 - 6, 1945:**

Late in the afternoon we packed up and moved to the edge of the woods and found a village directly in our way. As we had planned to swing Southwest for a day or two we decided to swing South around it and then Southwest again. We had planned it this way to



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avoid the Nurnberg area on the way back. With the evening it started to rain and the skies were obscured entirely. The best thing we could do after we had gotten into a thick pine forest was to stop for the night and crawl into our "sacks". It protected us from the rain anyhow. The next morning it stopped raining for a while so we decided to chance our luck in travelling through the forests. After almost running into a woods crew, a German Flack position, and a lone soldier respectively we gave it up as a bad try. When it started raining once again we crawled into a haystack until the next morning.

**April 7, 1945:**

We crawled out of the haystack at dawn and set off, keeping as well hidden in the woods as we could. After crossing numerous woods and a Rail Road track a couple of times we stopped on a hill for a rest and to eat. Then although woods were scarce and thin we jumped along until we were near the Nurnberg - Munich autobahn without any cover to get across or even near it. However we were well rested



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and restless so when about 1400 a farmer left his plowing and went home we decided to chance crossing under the autobahn. We walked as quickly as we could and reached the woods on the other side without being seen by a single person!!!

It turned out that the time which we crossed the autobahn was probably the only time all afternoon long that it could have happened as it did (we watched the autobahn for the rest of the afternoon) as traffic was very heavy. We thought that we were seen trying to get out of the woods so we stayed clear of the West side of the autobahn until 1700. Then we tried again to cross the road (a minor road). As we entered the woods on the other side we were seen by a Luftwaffe Officer but why a chase didn't ensue we'll never know. On leaving the next woods we almost ran into a couple of soldiers and so we withdrew again to a thicket. No sooner did we do that than a farmer entered the same thicket not over 20 feet from us and proceeded to satisfy the demands of nature. We really "sweated him out" but



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he didn't see us and we waited until nightfall to leave the woods. We made good time through straight forest roads (heading west) that night, the stars were out until about 0300 when it got cold and we were tired. We fell asleep during one of our rests and on awakening decided to hole up for the day. It was still dark so we picked a spot as best we could and went to sleep. On awakening and finding it light I saw that we had picked poor cover so I searched and found an excellent growth of young pines where we moved to. No sooner had we moved than a couple of groups of soldiers came through the woods right over the spot where we had been. We determined then and there that after the close escapes of the day before to travel only at night in the future.

**April 8 - 9, 1945:**

We reached the edge of the woods at dusk and found fields to the West. We travelled along a trail until we could hear the Regnitz River ahead and decided it would be best to cross it by crossing straight through town, which we did. Luckily we



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weren't seen or stopped. We crossed three bridges in the town and a feeder just West of the town on a narrow plank. Later on we came to another large river and managed to cross it at a sawmill. We travelled the rest of the night on forest trails and spent the day in a thick growth of young pines.

**April 9 - 10, 1945:**

We cut our rations in half to make them last longer and after eating set out in a direction of West Northwest. Travel was uneventful and we ended up spending the night at the West end of the forest with the tank troops.

**April 10 - 11, 1945:**

The night was fairly uneventful; we came across a storage garage in a woods but didn't look in it. Later we crossed the Rail Road we were heading West. We found a pine grove not too far West of the Rail Road to stay for the day.



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April 11 - 12, 1945:

We started at dusk across fields and around forests, after a while it started to rain hard and we decided on shelter at any cost so we followed a road into a town and were almost caught trying to get into the first shed we came to. Someone yelled Halt!! but we went all the faster. Gordon and I turned opposite directions at the first turn and were almost separated. We got back together using a whistling call. It was pitch black and one couldn't see his hand in front of him. I was leading and found a shelter but when I turned around Gordon was gone again. Whistling didn't work so when somebody passed right by me I asked "that you Gordon?" and after a pair of nobnailed boots went right on by. Passing right by another German and not seeing him I went back to the shelter and there was Gordon. It was a shed for a wagon and we found some steps leading down into a barn and sat there to wait for the storm to blow over. It did and we got out of town all right but we prayed that we had seen our last rain. We ended up in the early morning in a valley surrounded by woods (in a pine thicket).





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**April 12 - 13, 1945:**

We started out as usual at dusk and decided to head North Northwest. We travelled mostly North and crossed the Rail Road again and then the double track Rail Road (heading East & West) and the autobahn, although we didn't know it at the time. Progress was slow that night and we ended up in a pine grove on a hilltop (near by was a shack).

**April 13 - 14, 1945:**

In the late afternoon we heard small arms and machine gun fire for the first time and we each swore that we were also hearing tanks. After dark with high hopes of being free on the night of Friday the 13th (Gordon was shot down 6 months before on Friday the 13th, October) we started out across the valley and at the other side found a thicket woods on the hill leading to the source of the sound which we had heard earlier. Bravely we plunged into the thicket but after 3 or more hours of branches slapping in the face and getting nowhere fast we were very highly "P.O."ed. Finally we came to a clearing on the North side and started



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down a hill. It was a desolate place (seemingly) and I was just about to say something out loud for the first time in 9 days when somebody about 50 feet ahead coughed. Nothing was visible but we stopped in our tracks and heard several more coughs in a semicircle ahead of us. Then a few minutes later straight ahead of us some Officer called the Postern and later a vehicle drove off. Head Quarters was straight ahead of us. That was enough, we pulled back into the thicket and crawled into our sacks.

**April 14, 1945:**

We slept that day and in the afternoon decided to hole up and wait for the lines to cross over us. We were very low on food having only a can of Contendo and 1/2 lb. dried milk left so we decided to try to boil some acorns and garlic and eat those to supplement our 1/4 can of Contendo ration. We had the fire well under way when what should come strolling by not over 30 feet away but a patrol of 2 Wehrmacht soldiers. We froze, one of them looked



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our way but must have been blind because they just strolled on by. That was one of our closest escapes. After that we moved our site back further into the woods but didn't have time to dig in before dark, however we used leaves for camouflage. All day artillery fire had been falling Northeast of us. There was sporadic small arms fire North and Northwest and West.

**April 15, 1945:**

The morning of the 15th saw German patrols in the woods but one good thing about Germans is that he's always got his big mouth open so they could hardly ever catch us unawares. Later a patrol started laying wire through the woods. They were heading for us but for some reason they stopped. That was another close one. The artillery fire on the previous night and on the day of the 15th was terrific (Thank God I'm not in the Infantry) but towards night it started coming from the East!! And there was no more small arms fire to the North or West after about 1800.



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April 16, 1945:

Tank sounds to the Northeast!! We decided to go investigating so we packed up and headed for the Northwest corner of the woods.

We reached the Northwest corner and could see tanks and halftracks in the road below. I sat there studying them for 20 - 30 minutes before I was certain I was seeing white stars on them. We didn't want to make a mistake after 12 days. We went down the hill with our hands in the air and waving a white flag. Halfway down the hill I saw that it wasn't stars on the tanks but crossed guns. I almost had heart failure but we kept on walking. When we reached the roadside 2 tanks passed. I yelled "Hey, are you Americans?" at the third and the fourth one stopped. We climbed on and right away started in on a K ration apiece telling our story between mouth fulls. Pretty soon I mentioned that we were going the wrong way so Captain Roffe (Ky.)



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stopped a jeep and took us back to the Command Post. From there they took us back to the next Command Post in a T-2 where they fixed us up with hot food and let us shave. After 2 more stops for interrogation we ended up for the day at 4th Division Head Quarters in Bad Mergentheim where we met Col.s Martin and Burton.

This account was transcribed verbatim from Leo Higgins' hand written notes. The only changes made are these: Spelling errors have been corrected, Military and navigational abbreviations have been expanded where possible to enhance readability. Footnotes regarding locations have been added to aid retracing progress on a map (see accompanying map).

-Terry Higgins

December 9th, 1990