

Kriegies & Goons: My Life in Nazi POW Camps

James H. Lang

CreateSpace (Jun 24, 2010)

Unknown \$16.00 (216pp)

978-1-4499-1184-3

For Americans, most knowledge of World War II prisoner of war (POW) camps comes from television shows such as *Hogan's Heroes* or films portraying the camaraderie of prisoners, their interactions with the guards, and their often futile attempts to escape.

The reality of the Nazi POW camps is descriptively and poignantly brought to life by James H. Lang in his memoir published posthumously by his four sons. The sons had heard bits and pieces of what decorated airman Lang had experienced in his more than two years as a POW and knew that he later had worked on "the Book." In its publication, they were faithful to his original document and include astonishing pictures that Lang took before his capture, in the camps, and during liberation.

"Kriegies" is short for *Kriegsgefangeners* (prisoners of war), and the goons were the German guards.

Lang's compelling tale begins on March 28, 1943, the day before he, then twenty, was shot down over Sfax, Tunisia. Badly burned, he parachuted into the sea, was rescued by Italian fishermen, taken to an Italian hospital for treatment, and later was turned over to the Germans. They moved him to Rome, then to a POW camp, Stalag VII-A, near Moosburg, Germany, and finally to Stalag XVII-B near Krems, Austria.

Conditions grew increasingly bleak over the course of the war. Much depended on what supplies were available, whether food, toilet paper, blankets, or shoes.

With an almost photographic memory for detail, Lang describes daily camp life: attempts at escape (sometimes humorous), pranks on guards, the contents of packages from the Red Cross and from home (including items his mother baked with banned ingredients such as garlic and cumin seed to flavor their chili beans), the deplorable outhouses, and the frigid cold temperatures inside the barracks.

He observes wryly that, "Germans learned not long after taking the first American prisoners that we were a bad influence on other nationalities. The freedom in which Americans are reared makes us strong-willed and not easy to confine and control...Even worse for the Germans was the contagion of our wild spirits." As a result, the Americans were often separated from other prisoners.

Shortly before they were repatriated, the POWs were forced on a 240-mile march.

This heartwarming and sometimes heartbreaking memoir could benefit from additional polish, even though the sons were uncertain about the amount of editing that should be done. For example, the first page lists the year of Lang's crash as 1942, when in fact, it was 1943, and "foreword" is misspelled at the beginning of the book.

Besides the fascinating photographs and newspaper clippings, Lang's narrative is beautifully descriptive, placing the reader in the scene. For example, he writes, "With a whipping crack our tent stakes suddenly pulled free and the tent went blowing across the sands, followed by whatever loose gear the wind could catch."

Lang's book gives testimony to his ability to survive the horrors of war and to write about it with grace. *Kriegies & Goons* deserves a wide reading.

LINDA SALISBURY (October 21, 2010)

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