

Captured at the Battle for Kesternich, Germany

December 1944

By Ken Nokes

Imagine, its October 1944 you are an 18 year old American soldier stationed in the USA and things are going pretty good.

Two months later you are freezing in a German prison camp, barely surviving on stale turnips and moldy bread. This is what happened to Jim Murray

Jim made a list of the dates and places he could remember from the time of his enlistment in Massachusetts, to boarding a ship in England for the trip home in 1945. This covers the time from 16 December 1943 to 8 May 1945. [See addendum for Jim's handwritten notes.] It covers his training, battles, capture and release. I have added notes from the Army history, internet searches, other historical sources, eye witness accounts from this period and a map showing his travels.

Family

Ernest (Jim) Glen Murray was born on 9 August 1925 at the hospital in North Adams, Mass. North Adams is a short distance south of the family home in East Pownal. He had severe problems at birth and his doctor advised he be taken to the Hospital in Bennington VT, a short distance north of his home. He was so small he was carried to the hospital in a shoe box and spent his first year of life in the hospital.



Where he had to fight for survival from the very beginning. Ironically, he was cared for by a German nurse (who had come to the US after WWI), and she became very attached to him.

Eventually, the family moved to Vernon VT on the Mass/VT border where Jim attended and graduated from High School in Northfield Mass.

Jim's Grandfather, George Sumner had served in the civil war and Jim's father, Glen Murray served in the U S Cavalry during WW I. Glen was a hard and difficult man. He had a scrap metal business where Jim helped out. The elder Murray said he could get Jim a deferment from service in WWII because his business was considered important to the war effort. Against his father's wishes, Jim enlisted. 1

Family photo

After the war Jim Murray and Evelyn Reed were married and settled in Vernon Vermont and their son, Ernest James Murray served in the US army during the Vietnam conflict, someone in the Murray family served our country in every major conflict from the Civil War to Vietnam.

Enlistment and Basic training

On 16 December 1943 he had his general exam and was sworn into the army in Springfield Mass.



Fort Devens wooden barracks
Courtesy Fort Devens Museum

1a



2a

On 7 January 1944 he reported for active duty at Fort Devens, Mass.

From February-June 1944 he attended basic training at Fort Blanding FL. Built as a training facility it was used to train federal troops for WWII. During 1944-1945 a great number of troops were trained here to fill the ranks of combat infantry units.²

In July 1944 he was sent to Camp Van Dorn for more training (named for southern Civil war General Van Dorn, who despite being wounded twice in combat died at the hands of a jealous husband).³



from Mississippi digital library

3a



No. 1602

TYPICAL STREET—CAMP PICKETT, VA.

3b

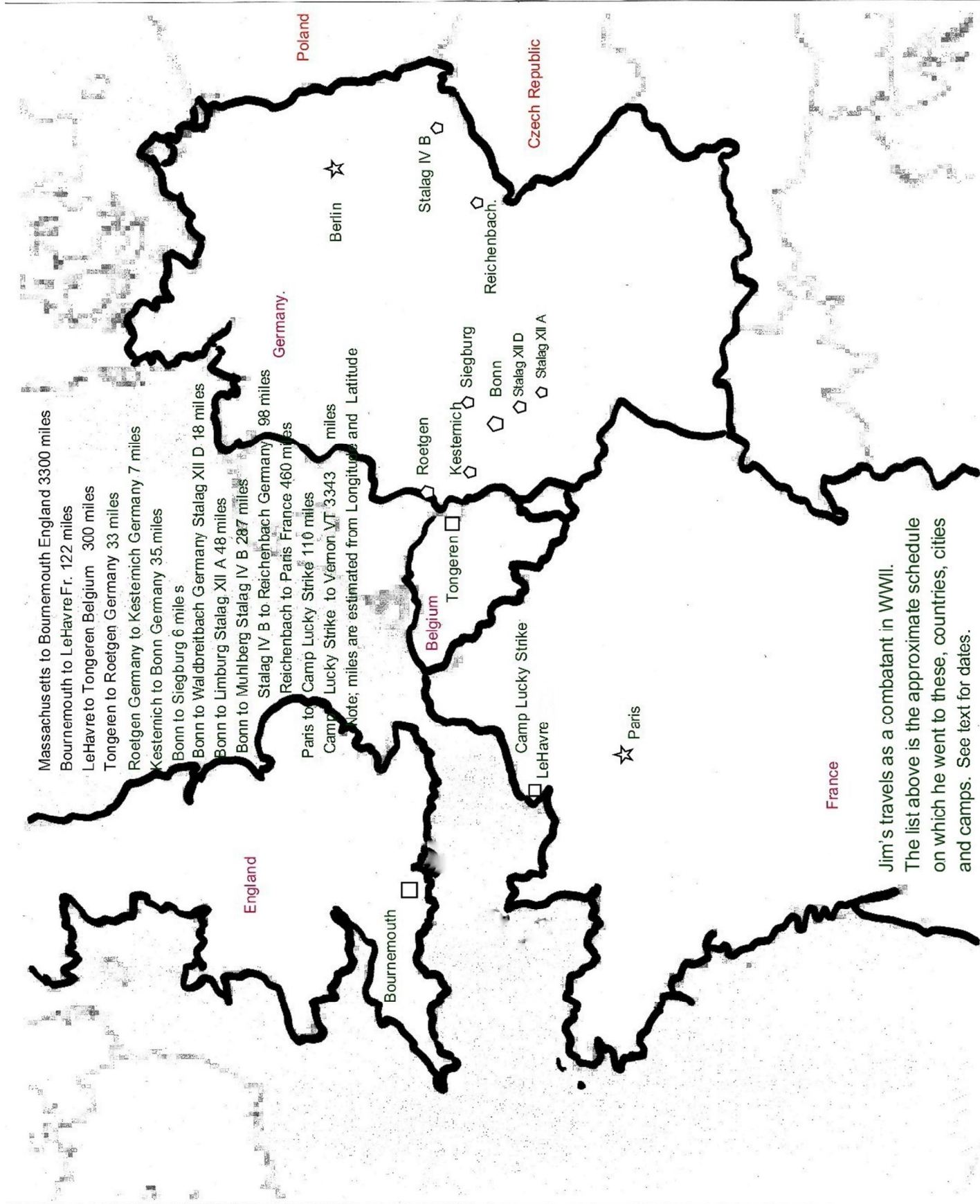
Also during July, 1944, Jim was sent to Camp Pickett VA. (Pickett of Pickett's charge fame), where he was attached to Company E, 2nd Battalion, 310th infantry, 78th division. Here the division got ready for their deployment. ⁴

Off to Europe

On 13 October 1944 they were on a troop ship in NY harbor.

On 14 October 1944 they sailed for England.

On or about 26 October 1944 the 78th arrived in Bournemouth England.



Jim's travels as a combatant in WWII.
 The list above is the approximate schedule
 on which he went to these, countries, cities
 and camps. See text for dates.

On 22 November 1944 they arrived in Le Havre France. La Havre was retaken by the Allies on 12 September 1944. The city was in ruins and many ships were sunk in the harbor. 5



*The destruction of Le Havre allowed the French to basically rebuild as a modern city
Thanksgiving, 1944, was spent in a muddy place in France. 5a left, 5b right photos*



27 November 1944, on to Tongeren, Belgium 50°- 47N,5°- 28E; the oldest city in Belgium and just over the border with France. It's about 50 miles from here to Kesternich. Today Henri-Chapelle American Cemetery is near here. It contains the remains of 7,992 Americans. Most lost their lives from the American advance into Germany and the Battle of the Bulge in late 1944-1945.

6a

7 December 1944 the 78th bivouacked in a forest near Rotgen, (Roetgen) 50°39'N 6°12'E. This was the first German town to fall under American control. 7

Roetgen, Germany, Siegfried Line, www.thanandnow.com



1944 7a



now

7b

Engagement with the enemy

The 309th and the 310th infantry regiments of the 78th began its assault on the towns of Bickerath, Paustenbach, Witzerath, and Simmerath, located in western Germany, and took them quickly.

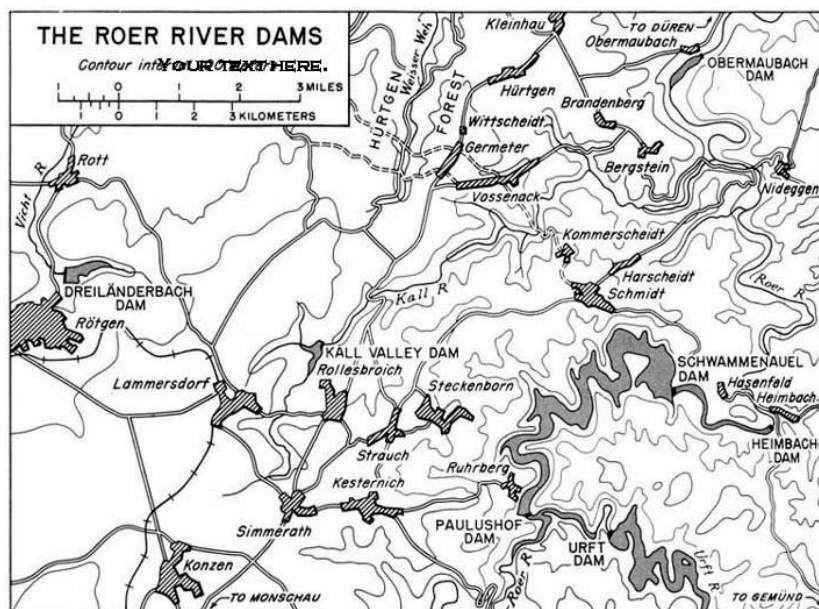
On the evening of 13 December 1944 they were on the outskirts of Kesternich. This surprised the Germans.

A note about the overall situation.

The Americans had landed on D-Day and made great advances toward Germany. The Battle of the Bulge was a last ditch, all-out effort by the Germans to drive a wedge (bulge) in the Allied lines where they would least expect it, and push to the English Channel as they had done to the English in 1940, thereby dividing the Allied forces and giving the Germans a chance to get back in the war. They failed in their attempt. This was a very difficult battle for the Americans, many with no combat experience. There was a lack of communications with command. Some Germans spoke English, were in American uniforms and had infiltrated American lines. Also, the local populations thought the Germans would win. It is well documented that the leadership, tenacity, ferocity and ingenuity of the Americans was the key to their victory.

A quote about the Battle of the Bulge from the WWW.army.mil/botb/overview.html! ("Never again would Hitler be able to launch an offensive in the west on such a scale. An admiring British Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill stated, "This is undoubtedly the greatest American battle of the war and will, I believe, be regarded as an ever famous American victory". Indeed, in terms of participation and losses, the battle of the Bulge is arguably the greatest battle in American History.) 8

The Germans picked difficult terrain for its beginning advance of the Battle of the Bulge. They thought they would surprise the Americans, who would not expect a major German offensive in this difficult area and they could smash through the green American troops. The 78th was trying to move forward and unaware of the major German advance ran right into them at Kesternich (Actually the American recon. and intelligence wasn't that good, which was a real problem in this battle).



MAP 5 WWW.HISTORY.ARMY.MIL

9a

The first Battle for Kesternich

Kesternich Germany, 50°36'N 6°19'E near the Belgium border was situated on a high ridge above the Roer River valley and the the Schwammenauel and Urft dams. The first battle of Kesternich was an assault by American forces on Kesternich as part of the campaign to capture the Roer River dams. 9a, The Americans wanted control of these dams to be able to control the 8a water level. The Roer River was

the last major natural obstacle in the push to the Rhine. These dams were about 32 miles from Bonn Germany. Many feel that this battle and the Americans that fought in it never got the recognition they deserved for the disruption it caused the Germans in their effort to begin their offensive, known as the Battle of the Bulge. This area was crucial to them and when the 78th took it the German offensive was dealt a serious blow. The Germans had to get it back. This took them time and valuable resources, including hundreds of casualties at the hands of the 78th.⁹



Bundesarchiv, B 145 Bild-F003632-0006
Foto: Steiner, Egon | 15. August 1950

There were two American infantry regiments, the 309th and the 310th involved in the first battle for Kesternich.

The battle took place from 14-16 December 1944; it was very cold and foggy with 12" of new snow on the ground. The morning of the 14th the 309th attacked. The 310th was held in reserve and sent in the next morning (the 15th). There was a 9a bunker or pill box laying

down fire and blocking their access to the town. Some couldn't get by it. One man from the army air corp. who for some reason was attached to the 78th attacked the enemy position and kept throwing in hand grenades and destroyed it, allowing their access. The unknown airman was killed in the action. The men were told to take off their overcoats in spite of the cold, and were told to shoot anyone wearing an overcoat. It was to distinguish each other in the poor visibility.

The 310th fought house to house going down into the cellars looking for enemy soldiers and clearing the village. The Americans captured the town. However, as mentioned above, the loss of Kesternich upset the German's plans for their offensive (now known as the Battle of the Bulge) would start 16 December 1944. The Germans brought in more units and began a murderous counter-offensive and encircled the town.

According to reports and personal stories about the battle, the American tanks wouldn't go in without a dozer in front to clear the road of snow and debris and the dozers wouldn't go without a tank in the lead for cover. According to one German story, the Germans acquired an American radio and could hear the Americans and what they were doing. Some soldiers were sent into houses to clear them and some were trapped by the heavy machine gun fire. Soon the commanders didn't know where all their men were located and when they went to look for them in houses, etc. many were dead. The 310th lost their commander, were almost out of ammunition and with bad

communications and very little tank cover they were surrounded and captured. Not to be outdone the Americans sent a jeep driver back for reinforcements, cooks, truck drivers, anyone with a weapon (why a jeep driver, I do not know)

On the same day, the 16th the Americans began a counter-attack to try to rescue survivors and retake the town. There were Americans in and around the town that had evaded the Germans and when the reinforcements arrived, they rejoined the battle. They drove the Germans out, but neither army could hold Kesternich. They and the Germans fought to a standstill with no one regaining control of the town and each army withdrew to opposite ends of the town.

By then, many of the survivors, including Jim, were on their way to German prison camps. Jim was captured at 6am on 16 December 1944, and liberated by American forces on 17 April 1945.

During the seven days of fighting from 13-19th December 1944 the 78th infantry division lost approximately 1,515 dead, wounded, missing and injured according to division records. German loses were 770 dead and captured. The 78th didn't have figures for wounded and missing Germans.

The Second Battle for Kesternich

The 78th Division attacked Kesternich again on 30 January 1945 and captured the town on 2 February 1945. Of course Jim had no part in this battle, as he was captured in the first battle for the town. *Picture below is from the 2nd Battle for Kesternich.* 10





10b

Plaque located in Kesternich to commemorate the battle



A picture from Kesternich today

10c



Life as a Prisoner

Prisoners of war captured by Germany were treated differently and were sent to different places depending on if they were; air force, navy, army, enlisted, officers, male, female, or their country of nationality (etc). Countries that signed the Geneva Convention agreement were treated better than those prisoners who came from countries that didn't sign. Russia hadn't signed and the Russians were treated very poorly, which was too bad for the Germans when the Russians took over.

The most dangerous time for new prisoners was between the time they were captured and when they arrived at their permanent POW camp. It was especially so if they were in the control of the SS, or Schutzstaffel. This is because OKW, Germany's Armed Forces High Command, the unit that insured compliance to the Geneva Convention wouldn't be responsible for the prisoners until they were at their a permanent POW camp. It was also safer if a soldier was captured by the regular German Army than the SS troops.

New prisoners were first interrogated and then sent to a prison camp. Transportation was on over-loaded railroad box cars. These cars were the lowest priority and they were often put off on sidings to let other trains through.

Jim's initial treatment as a POW was surprising there were some good (humane) German soldiers. On 17 December 1944, Jim got lucky. He couldn't walk because of frozen feet, so he was carried piggy-back (after dark) across the Schwammenauel Dam by a (humane) German soldier, and put on a truck to Siegburg. That German soldier could just as easily have shot him, but Jim's treatment at the hands of the Germans was not always that kind.

He arrived at Siegburg Germany, 50°48'N 7°12'E, about six miles NE of Bonn and was carried into a large church in early evening. Those that could walk were taken out. He was not permitted to go with them. There was heavy bombing that night. The church was not hit, but Jim thinks some of his fellow soldiers who were taken out were killed, probably in the air raid, because he never saw them again.

From 18 December 1944 until around 6 January 1945, Jim was moved around the Bonn area. Bonn is about 32 miles from the Roer River dams and the Kesternich area. The prisoners were moved from place to place by different means: on a railroad passenger car with all windows broken out, on foot, and probably by truck. By the end of the war (which was coming fast for Germany) Germany had over 98,000 American prisoners plus the English, Russians and others. There were 75 or more main prison camps and smaller ones all over Germany, so it was hard for the prisoners to say all the places they were. He was at a another camp (probably Stalag XII A or Stalag XII D), around Christmas (the prisoners had holiday decorations put up). The men were questioned and searched many times as the Germans were always looking for information, money, or jewelry for their personal gain. The soldiers protected fellow soldiers who were Jewish by any means possible.

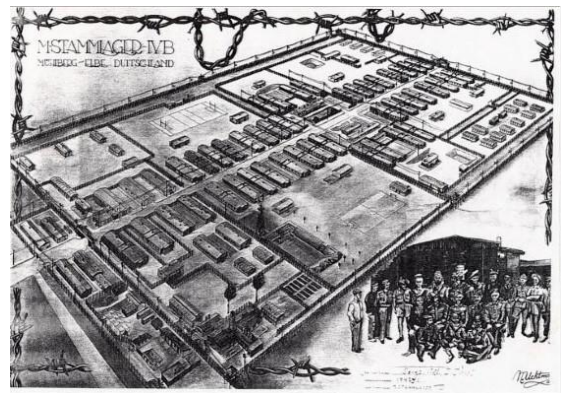
By 1 January 1945, Jim's foot had improved enough so he could walk on it, and around 6 January 1945 they were loaded on a boxcar, about 120 men to a car, for the trip to Stalag IV B Muhlberg Sachsen (51-13).

Conditions on the boxcars were appalling, little or no food, no heat (it was winter), a bucket for a toilet and not enough room for everyone to have a place to lie down. Jim lost track of time. His friend Bill Volfre thought it was 9 days. They were rarely let out of the boxcar, except to be questioned and searched.

Jim arrived at Stalag IV B on 13 January 1945. Army archives have Jim held at Stalag IV B Muhlberg Sachsen 51-13. 11



11a



Left; Stalag 4B main Gate. Above; impression by N Uchtman 11b

Stalag IV B was a huge camp, located north east of the town of Muhlberg in Brandenburg, east of the Elbe river, not far from Czechoslovakia, about 30 miles north of Dresden. Dresden is along the Elbe river. Berlin is north east and not too far away. Writer Curt Vonnegut was at IV B at the same time as Jim.

This area would be descended upon in force by the Americans from the east and the Russians from the west by April 1945. 15a + b



12a

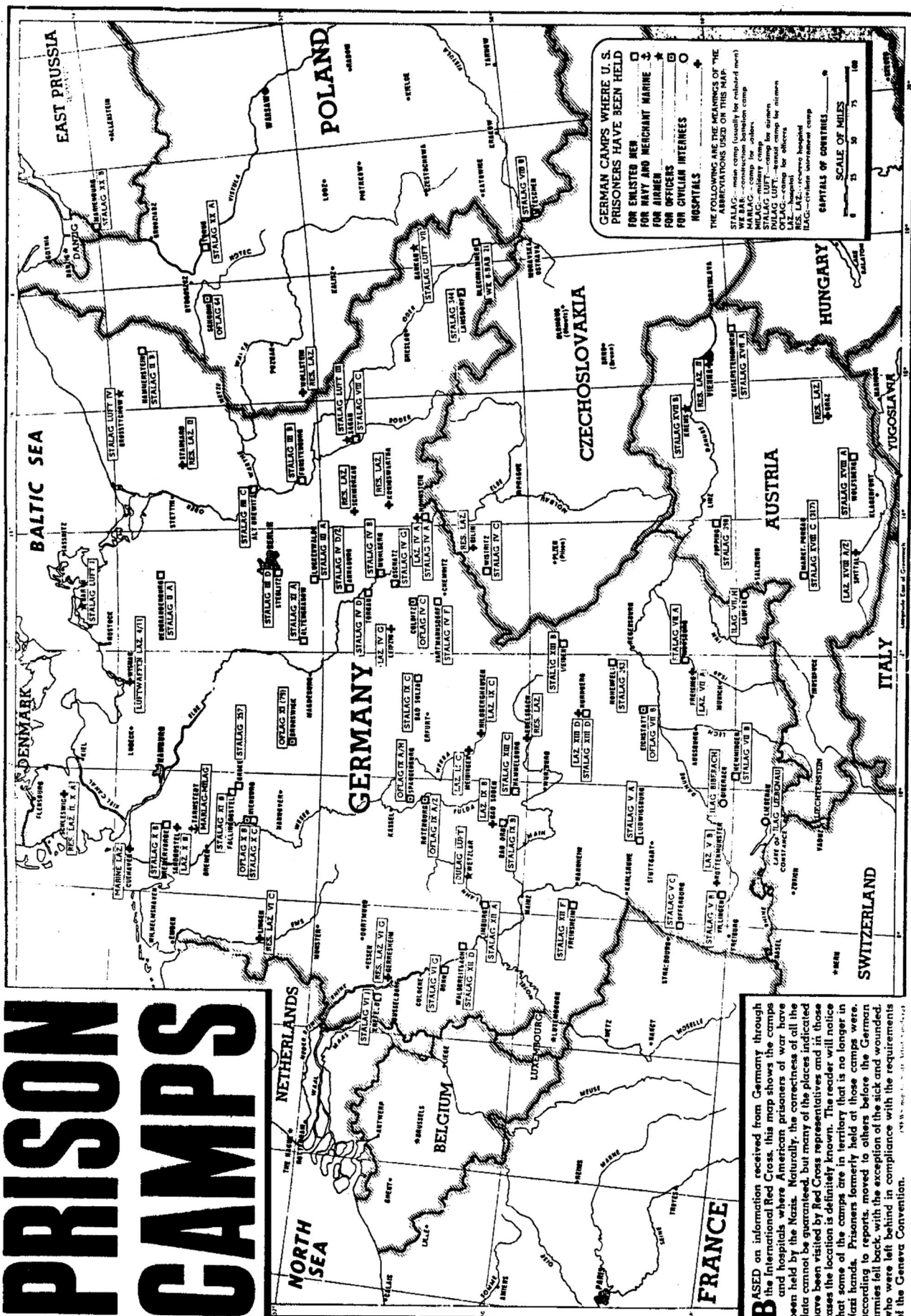


12b

Left; Main Street 4B during war.

Right; Main Street 4B Today

PRISON CAMPS



BASED on information received from Germany through the International Red Cross, this map shows the camps and hospitals where American prisoners of war have been held by the Nazis. Naturally, the correctness of all the data cannot be guaranteed, but many of the places indicated have been visited by Red Cross representatives and in those cases the location is definitely known. The reader will notice that some of the camps are in territory that is no longer in Nazi hands. Prisoners formerly held at those camps were, according to reports, moved to others before the German armies fell back, with the exception of the sick and wounded, who were left behind in compliance with the requirements of the Geneva Convention.

Jim's incarceration was in more than one camp. On 1 February 1945 He was taken to a work camp at Reichenbach. They didn't work much because they were quarantined for Diphtheria most of the time. They worked the first week or ten days and the last week or so. 13

The Germans were brutal to the Americans. Once during the march when he was helping a wounded soldier stay on his feet, a guard made him drop the injured man and Jim said he never saw him again. He said they shot those that couldn't walk and struck others with their rifle butts if they weren't going fast enough. They were put on cattle cars, one hundred and twenty five prisoners per car that really should only have held forty. The trip took one week. There was a German soldier's hospital at one camp and during air raids some of the prisoners, including Jim, were forced to carry the wounded German soldiers from the upper floors of the hospital to the bomb shelters.

Life in the camps was bleak. Jim remembers acts of kindness as in the case of Palestinian prisoners (Jewish Palestinian regiments, Jews not Arabs, fought for the British) who had blankets and would share them because two bodies are warmer than one and some of the Americans didn't have blankets. He is still not fond of the English; they were in charge of the camp and, according to Jim, did not distribute the food evenly between all the prisoners, favoring instead other English prisoners. He lost so much weight that his watch, which he had hidden from the Germans, could be strapped to his upper arm as it had been attached to his wrist. Jim said he will never forget one tall slim German guard who was especially mean.

Things started to change for the prisoners. They were marched to a gravel bank and then a church for protection during air raids. The guards started treating them better. They knew something the prisoners didn't know; the Americans were very close and the Germans feared reprisals.

On 17 April 1945, Jim was in luck again. He was in the Reichenbach work camp when the 89th infantry, known as the Rolling W, fought their way to the town. The Americans had bombed the town previously and the Mayor, against the wishes of the Socialists, surrendered the town without firing a shot. One of Jim's rescuers was a soldier he knew from basic training. Jim said "there were only about fifteen of us left out of thirty" {that were captured with him}. The first thing Jim did was visit a bakery in Reichenbach that he had only been able to see at a distance and get some pastry for himself and the others and have them send the bill to Hitler.

After the 89th left, the Russians took over the town.

If Jim had been at Muhlberg he may not have been released until July because the Russians liberated IV B and everyone took their sweet time repatriating the Americans. He had lost so much weight he may not have survived until July. As it was he was moved immediately back to the rear. He was put aboard a cargo plane and flown to Paris and in a few days found himself at Camp Lucky Strike near LeHavre.

Cigarette camps were originally opened as staging camps for troops arriving for combat in Europe. For various reasons these staging camps were named after

American cigarettes. The troops would go from the staging camps to assembly camps, which were named after American cities, where they would get ready to go into combat. By early 1945, Camp Lucky Strike, with a capacity of 58,000 was like a city and was processing released American POWs and others being sent back to the USA. 14



14a

Left, Camp Lucky Strike in 1945

Right, Today, Lucky Strike was built around a long runway. It looks like some of it is still there.

14h



The 89th Infantry, the same unit that had rescued Jim, managed the reception of troops at Camp Lucky Strike. German POWs served as cooks and waiters to the freed Americans.

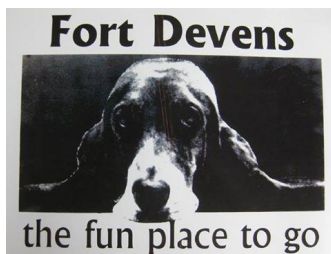
18 May 1945 he was put on a ship to England and then an American ship and returned to New York. The trip was uneventful. 15



Left; leaving Lucky Strike, below, Queen Mary being used as troop ship. 15b



15a



Jim physically recovered and was sent to Fort Devens, Mass. to wait for his honorable discharge. While at Fort Devens someone thought it would be a good idea to have him help guard the German prisoners on post. He said "okay, but I'm going to treat them just like they treated us". He was asked what he meant and he said; "if they don't do what I tell them; I'll shoot 'em". They decided it wouldn't be a good idea for recently liberated American POWs to be guarding German prisoners.

Jim Murray is indicative of many returning American service personnel who did their duty for their country, came home, raised a family and never spoke about the war until later years. Asking Jim why he didn't speak of his service, and he said "the war was over and I needed to put it behind me and get

on with my life". In a letter to a Mr. Hough in 2006, Jim explained why he couldn't supply information about the mans grandfather by writing, "Things happened so fast and that was a long time ago. I didn't allow myself to talk about it or think about it for many years". 16

Jim saw the end of the war in Europe unfolding and when he was liberated by American forces on 17 April 1945, he witnessed the pandemonium that ensued. Freed Russian prisoners and displaced persons used as slaves were trying to get home, taking anything they could carry with them, Some trying to hunt down and take vengeance on their German jailers. Many of his fellow soldiers were killed at Kesternick and many died in captivity. Survival required luck and a strong will to live.



16a



US Army color guard at the dedication of a monument to German and American soldiers, Kesternich Germany.

Jim's rank was Technician (T5) 5th grade. On 14 February 2005, Jim, in the presence of family and friends at the Veterans Hospital in White River Junction was presented with the citation and Bronze star he earned in WWII. 21 The 78th "lightning" Division was de-activated in May 1946, later reactivated.

VE (Victory in Europe) day was 8 May 1945.