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No Ordinary Day

Read an excerpt from Mizzou alumna Sue Johnpeter's book.

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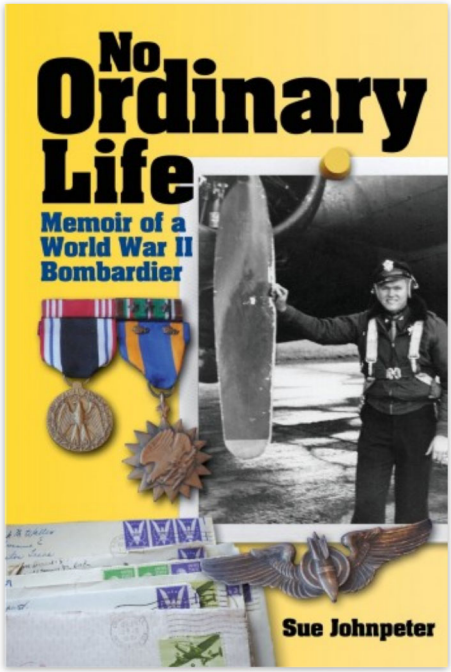
The following excerpt by Sue Johnpeter, BJ '77, is from *No Ordinary Life: Memoir of a World War II Bombardier* (CreateSpace, 2014), a biography about Glenn King, a bombardier in the U.S. Army Air Forces who spent six weeks as a German prisoner of war.



No Ordinary Life: Memoir of a World War II Bombardier by Sue Johnpeter, BJ '77 (CreateSpace, 2014)

Chapter Five: Starvation

On the train to Stalag XIIID, a POW camp in Nuremberg, Germany, Glenn met soldiers who had been captured trying to liberate Gen. George S. Patton's son-in-law.

Word filtered back on the train that the guys "took the Germans by surprise, liberated the son-in-law and then went around and

shot everything up. Then they ran out of gasoline, and everyone got captured," Glenn says. It is, at best, a controversial story in the history books. It was hardly a morale-booster at this stage of the war.

The camp at Nuremberg, enclosed with barbed wire, housed thousands of Allied POWs in unheated barracks. They slept on triple-deck metal bunks with no mattresses. There was little to no food. Starvation was the order of the day. Conditions were filthy, and sanitation was non-existent. "They weren't feeding us. We realized we were going down so rapidly, so that we literally lay in our bunks all day long to conserve what energy we had," Glenn says.

Even joking about food was off limits, as Glenn recalls being hollered at by a soldier reclining on another bunk:

"Hey King! Are you busy?"

"No, not really."

"Well, let's go down to the corner and get a hamburger and a shake!"

The whole barracks reared up as one and yelled at the soldier to SHUT UP. "They didn't want to be reminded of food."

As a child, Glenn recalls, his parents, firm believers in thrift and economy, made him eat his peas, which he loathed. "While I was a POW, I could see those damn peas. And hear my Dad say, 'Son, eat those peas. One day, you may wish you had those damn peas.' I never told Dad that story."

Food, if it can be called that, sometimes arrived at the front gate. For those thousands of men, there would be a goat or sheep carcass along with ten loaves of black bread.

"On this one day," Glenn recalls, "one fellow, possibly an officer, just decided he wanted a whole loaf of bread for himself. And he was discovered.

"We knew we were all starving, but someone who would go ahead and steal from his fellow man for his own good is not worth a damn. We ought to just ask the Germans to shoot him. We talked about this.

"Instead, the men conferred and said, 'You know, this guy likes bread real well, so for ten days, the only thing he's going to get is bread and water.' Before that ten days expired, they put us on the forced march to another prison camp at Moosburg, so they rescinded the order."

The carcass-and-bread menu perked up later on with the addition of a sack of beans. "And we thought, 'Oh boy! They're finally going to feed us.' There was a regular kitchen there for us, and we had guys who knew how to cook. They made soup out of the beans.

"When we went down to eat it, you noticed there were little black flecks floating on the top. You'd pick off the flecks with your wooden paddle and knock them on the table. We finally noticed each bean had a black speck. They were weevils, insects. The Germans wouldn't eat it, so they gave it to us. But our cooks said, 'You know guys, we just boiled the devil out of this, so we don't think it'll hurt you. Why don't we go ahead and eat up. It's the most food we've had since we've been here.

"So we ate our soup. Nobody got sick."

Glenn still has the paddle-like spoon that he used to eat whatever came his way. He made it by whittling a scrap of wood with a borrowed "knife" crafted from a nail.

"We were with guys who'd been POWs for a long time, and they had learned the Germans would take anything like a knife away, so they would crawl under the barracks to search out the biggest nail they could find. The bigger the nail, the better. They would work at it until they got it loose from the barracks.

"At Nuremberg, there were a lot of rocks protruding from the soil. They would sit there with this nail and a rock and pound on it day after day to shape it to be like a knife. Then they would hone it on another rock.

"I borrowed one of those knives, found some wood and whittled it into a paddle to eat with, if there was anything to eat."

A watery bowl of soup and a two-inch square of black bread mostly made of sawdust were barely sustaining the men. "I knew I was going down rapidly," Glenn says. "To go to the toilet, you'd learn to get hold of the bedpost because you knew you were going to black out from low blood pressure. So then you'd come to and go about your business. But our organs were shutting down. We didn't have bowel movements."

At night, the British Royal Air Force (RAF) was busy bombing Nuremberg. As the Germans sent up antiaircraft fire, the POWs would listen to the flak as it rained back down to earth, skittering across the roofs of their barracks.

Glenn is not entirely sure at what point the Red Cross made a tiny dent in the vast deprivation that was Nuremberg. But when a truck out of Switzerland delivered five-pound food parcels to camp, it was a pinpoint of hope. "We never got very many of them as a group, and we'd always have to share what was in this parcel. Spam, a can of sardines, tuna fish, a can of oleo margarine, sugar cubes, cigarettes, soap, and dark, dark bitter chocolate – the kind we're supposed to be eating now, but we hated it then. Those were the main ingredients. Very

substantial."

One day, Glenn was given a can of tuna. "What was common with the fellas was they would pool themselves and say, 'Let's eat your tuna fish today. We'll eat my sardines tomorrow and the Spam the next day.'"

Glenn thought hard about that can. He'd look at it and think, "You know, I can make it today. I'm feeling okay, so I'm going to save you for tomorrow." Then tomorrow would come, and "I'd get my can of tuna out of my pocket and say, 'I can make it today. I'm going to save you for tomorrow.'"

Everything, he says, was about survival. "That's all you really thought about." But the flyers did what they could to help. "One of our guys came by waving a twenty dollar bill asking for cigarettes. And somebody called out, 'Here!' and tossed him a pack from a Red Cross parcel. 'Keep your twenty.' That was the attitude."

As the prisoners' health deteriorated, Glenn (and everyone else) could see that anyone who went on "sick call" never came back. "That was the last thing you wanted to do."

Even when medical help was provided, it was questionable. A navigator who had bailed out of his plane had broken his arm, which was set by the Germans at a painful angle. "I could never understand at the time why the Germans couldn't set an arm. Until I learned he was Jewish. I concluded the doctor wasn't interested in his having a straight arm."

Everyone's health was in steep decline. Glenn figures his weight, 225 pounds when he was shot down, was well below 180 pounds. He'd been at Nuremberg approximately three weeks. On April 3, 1945, the prisoners learned they were to march to Stalag VIIa in Moosburg, a POW camp approximately 100 miles

south toward Austria, not far from the town of Dachau.

There would be hard-won food and exercise on the road, two things entirely absent from camp. The march would save Glenn's life.

"I don't remember the sequence of various things that happened between Nuremberg and Moosburg," Glenn says, "except the first day out and the chickens."

Thousands of men, marching three abreast, filled the streets and villages of southern Germany. All Glenn could see behind him and in front of him were the heads of American soldiers bobbing in formation. Once out in the countryside, edibles were made manifest in the form of chickens. "Guys caught some of these chickens when they locked us up in a farmyard. They cooked and ate them. The next morning, they lined us up and said, 'We know that some of you caught and killed chickens last night. From now on, anyone caught stealing chickens will be shot.' And that was the end of the chicken dinners."

Glenn recalls that a few days into the march, "they passed the word back that the Germans had put together a big batch of soup, and everybody would get a bowl. Well, we stood in the rain all day long, cold, waiting, and moving up just 50 feet once in a great while.

"Finally, it got to be dusk, and the word was passed back that they ran out of soup. So we got nothing."

The farmers' fields, however, were another story. Potatoes, turnips, and wheat became fair "game."

"Every farmyard had a dump yard someplace," Glenn explains. "Somebody was scrambling around and found an old coffee grinder, and we would share that to grind wheat, which we'd

stuff in our pockets. Then we'd cook it like a porridge. That was good nutrition."

With a little more food came hope – and ingenuity borne of hunger. In what would be known as the Great Potato Theft, Glenn explains that it was customary for a farmer to build a cellar into the side of a hill, add a door at the front and leave a hole in the top "so he could drive a wagon over the roof and drop off his turnips, potatoes and so on." The harvest accumulated on the cellar floor.

"This one place we went into we found the little cellar, and I went out of there with my pockets stuffed with potatoes, my shirt was stuffed with potatoes, I was going to eat potatoes for a long time. And I like to tell this story because it had more to do with building morale than any other thing – turned out that the farmer discovered what was going on and his potato pile was going down rapidly. He put a lock on the door.

"That night, I looked out about dusk. It was probably not dark enough to be shot if you were outside. There were three guys up on this roof and they had found a stick and some nails. They drove the nails in one end, found a rope and tied it to the other end. They were up there dropping that pole down the hole in the roof and spearing those potatoes, pulling them up one by one and going back to get more.

"That's when I told myself, if they leave us out here in the country, we're going to make it. We'll flat steal the farmers blind."

At night, the guards locked the POWs in farmyards and barns for safekeeping. Campfires were lit for warmth and for cooking. "The word was, don't be caught out after dark or you'll be shot." As far as Glenn knows, no one was shot on the march.

Occasionally, Allied prisoners knocked at the back doors of

these farms in the hope of trading something, such as soap, for eggs. Glenn still remembers the phrase: Sie haben Eier für seife*? "We tried this a few times. The answer was always '*Nicht*.' They didn't want anything to do with us." And the men never found any eggs.*

The German guards, Glenn observed, weren't eating much either. If they were near a town, the guards might slip into town for a decent meal, but on the road, come noon, "they'd take out a little container of oleo margarine and a three-inch slice of black bread, and that was it."

March snows had given way to March rain. The wool coats Glenn and many of the others had been provided by the Red Cross were sodden. "They weighed a ton. If I remember correctly, the Germans had us in kind of a forest type area where we could rest and hang up our coats to give them a chance to dry out.

"I had a bug bite, or something, next to my thumbnail that wasn't healing. I was concerned to the extent that I was watching for red streaks going up my arm from infection." The break in the march gave him the opportunity to light a fire and heat water in order to soak his hand throughout the day. By night, it had improved.

Glenn relates that leaflets ordering the men to quit trying to escape were dropped during the march. "You're hampering the war effort when you escape because as soon as you get to our people, they're going to be taking care of you instead of fighting the war," he explains. Rather than being discouraged, Glenn says, the soldiers took it as a sign that the Allies were coming. And soon.

Orders were orders, so surviving – not escaping – was uppermost in his mind. The sound of B-17s flying five miles

overhead reminded Glenn of how much he worried for his parents. "It just really gnawed on me that if there was some way I could get word to the guys on that plane to tell Mom and Dad I was okay. That really bothered me." Still does.

Glenn had known no one in the Nuremberg camp, but he did hear about a P-51 Mustang pilot up ahead in the column named Carlson, whose exploits had been part of a pep talk given at Glenn's last briefing at Great Ashfield. Glenn reconnoitered the sea of Americans in hope of meeting up with the pilot, who had surprised a group of German pilot trainees in the air and forced them to land abruptly.

"Apparently, Carlson got a little over-enthusiastic chasing down this one student, and he caught the scoop of his aircraft on a German runway and bellied in. He didn't catch fire nor did he ground loop.

"This is what they told us in this briefing: that he stayed in the plane and called out to the rest of the squadron, 'Get this SOB at 9 o'clock; Get this one at 11!' He stayed in the plane in full view of the fight until his plane started to smolder. The last time anyone saw him, he was running for the woods with the Germans chasing after him. That's what they told us before my last mission."

Hearing talk of this fearless P-51 pilot and his unconventional landing in Germany, Glenn wanted to meet the guy, so he reconnoitered the roadway and finally located him. "I told him the day I was shot down, they told us about how you snagged your scoop."

Carlson confirmed that he was indeed the same pilot.

"And I told him I heard he was being awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross because of it."

Carlson, a man of very few words, just nodded.

Glenn later learned that Carlson had wanted to fly so badly that he joined the Royal Canadian Air Force and ended up flying from England. Then he flew Spitfires with the RAF. When the 8th Air Force finally got to Europe, he joined the Army Air Corps.

(Improbably Glenn would run into Carlson on a street in Santa Monica, California, after the war. "He was still in uniform, wearing the DFC with many clusters. He was about as good as they come, a real leader. There is no way I can stress how unassuming he was. Obviously, a cool cat in a P-51.")

While the POWs were on the march to Moosburg, buses loaded with Germans soldiers were traveling in the opposite direction. "You could see them in there, and their weapons," Glenn says.

Also appearing on the road was a Red Cross eighteen-wheeler, what the prisoners referred to as a White Angel. "They were headed someplace else," Glenn explains, "but the ranking officer told them, 'No one is in any poorer condition than these troops. We're going to unload it now.*" The men liberated the truck of its food and distributed it right there on the road.*

Outside of Nuremberg, the men were corralled in a railroad yard. "All of a sudden," Glenn recalls, "P-47 fighter bombers – ours – circled over us to make a bomb run on this railroad yard.

"Directly one of them peels off and we all scattered. I was able to fall flat on my belly behind a big ol' tree and as he came in, he's firing his 50 mm machine guns and kicking dirt up on me. There was a big boom and I felt something hit my legs, and I thought I'd been hit.

"Then he obviously discovered things weren't right, seeing all these troops scattering as he came in for his run. So did the

other two guys, thank God.

"So as soon as we saw what was happening, we all jumped up and ran into the woods in case they were going to make another run. I jumped up and ran over there too, though I thought I had holes in my legs.

"When I got to the trees, I took a look. What hit me was the mud thrown up when the bomb hit. And that looked awfully good."

Quietly, he adds, "About ten of us were killed that day."

The next day, U.S. Army Col. Darr Hayes Alkire, commanding officer of the march, sent word through the lines of soldiers that by running, "We behaved like Germans. If this happens again, we're not going to run, we're going to stand in the roadway and wave something white.

"Sure enough, the next day we had two of our own P-51s circling over us. One of them peeled off and came in, and as he crossed the stream of guys ahead of me, I wasn't looking down any gun barrels, but the guys in front of me were. No one broke and ran."
The story is still difficult for Glenn to tell.

As the pilot crossed over the sea of prisoners in the roadway, he circled and flew at the height of a telephone pole. "I literally saw him in the cockpit signaling OK with his hand, telling us everything's okay."

The hundreds of Air Force men on the march immediately recognized who was doing the buzzing, and shouted "'Hell! That's one of our recon outfits! They're taking pictures of us!'

"From then on, every morning, and if you'd had a watch you could have set it, at 8 o'clock you had two P-51s, circling overhead."

Things were, as they say, looking up.

Details about the march from Nuremberg to Moosburg are described on a website created by researcher Greg Hatton (www.B24.net). According to Hatton, on April 9, 1945, "the column reached the Danube, which Col. Alkire flatly refused to cross, since it meant exceeding the 20-kilometer a day (marching) limit. With his refusal, the Germans lost complete control of the march and POWs began to drop out of the column almost at will. The guards, intimidated by the rapid advance of the American Army, made no serious attempt to stop the disintegration. The main body of the column reached Stalag VIIa (Moosburg) on 20 April, 1945."

About all anyone needs to know about Moosburg is that on April 29, 1945, when Gen. George S. Patton liberated the camp of more than one hundred thousand prisoners, he surveyed the emaciated men and unspeakable conditions and said, "I'm going to kill these sons-of-bitches for this."

Glenn and the men from Nuremberg were among the lucky ones. They had foraged for food during their nearly three weeks on the road. They were in much better shape, relatively speaking, than the guys who already had been starving for a very long time in Moosburg.

One of the newspaper stories at the time told how an American soldier liberated his brother from Moosburg. (Mrs. King had clipped that story, too.) Sixty-nine years later, Glenn would watch the liberation films made by the 166th Signal Photographic Company, on his computer monitor. That day in April, however, he was frantically looking for someone to get a letter out to his family and not having much luck.

Glenn had managed to cadge a blank V-mail form from somebody and scrawled a note to his parents to reassure them

that he was alive. But how does one post a letter from the heart of wartime Germany? As American soldiers were tramping through the camp, Glenn got the attention of a captain. "I went up to him and said 'I've got a V-mail here. Would you mail this for me? This tells my parents that I'm alive.'"

The captain used some colorful language, mostly about being asked to do something, until Glenn leaned in and said, "Look, this doesn't mean a damn to you, it doesn't mean a damn to me. But it does to somebody else." Glenn shoved the V-mail in the man's front pocket and said, "Mail the damn thing!"

May 1, 1945 Germany

Dearest Mom, Dad and Jerry,

I'm hoping this finds you all in the best of health and I also hope you haven't been worrying too much about me being M.I.A.

I'm O.K. and feeling fine. Nothing has happened to me – not even as much as a scratch.

We have been liberated and are very happy not to be P.O.W.s any longer. They tell us we should be in the states in at least 3 weeks and I hope they're right as I'm really looking forward to being with you.

I'm running out of space so I'll just hope I can beat this letter home.

So long,
Your loving son,
Glenn xxxxxx

Hi Jerry xxx

After liberation, the men remained in camp a full week. "We got absolutely no food during that time," Glenn says. "Our front-line troops were moving so fast, they didn't have anything for us. The only way you'd get something was if by chance a guy walking through the barracks, looking for someone from home, might slip you some K-rations. But barring that, there was nothing for us to eat."

While waiting to be evacuated, a bunch of the former POWs raided the Moosburg camp office and brought Glenn his induction papers from the interrogation center. He has them to this day. And while they have faded to an odd orange color, the furious face of Glenn W. King, age 21, is caught for all time on its pages.

While they were out scavenging, the men raided a silverware chest and brought bits and pieces back to their friends to share. Glenn picked up a spoon and a knife, which he still has. The swastikas imprinted on the handles are faint but still visible.

Glenn also held on to that tuna can because, well, you never know.

"Some of the guys had more of a spirit of, I don't know, discovery. See what they could find, a German Luger or food. I didn't scrounge for souvenirs because I felt there was some exposure to that. But the other thing was all the time I was a POW, I tried not to do anything to get noticed because of my size. I tried to stay hid. I only wanted to see tomorrow."

One thing Glenn did notice was "the pallor on the faces of those frontline troops. After the war, I figured out they had to be coming from Dachau (thirty miles southwest of Moosburg). It wasn't normal to see a garrison of our soldiers look the way they

looked."

The deprivations of those imprisoned in Germany and the depravity of their captors were just beginning to be publicized. Patton and the Third Army had a front row seat to the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis. Glenn would be one of many witnesses.

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