Captured American Airmen Speak

Two days later, the entire group was assembled, including the men who were being held at SALONIKA, and placed on an evacuation train destined for BUDAPEST. The train never got beyond BELGRADE, however, as the railroad had been cut by partisans. During the trip via SKOPLJE, MITROVICA and KRALJEVO, frequent halts were made while the locomotive was “borrowed” to move other trains with more important shipments. These delays sometimes lasted for two or three days at the end of which time the locomotive would return and the journey would be resumed.

Before they started on the train ride, the Americans were given some canned rations. This fare, supplemented by a watery soup, was the only food they had during the 20 day ride.

Unable to proceed beyond the Southern edge of BELGRADE, the train returned to MITROVICA where the captives detained and were placed in a prison camp which had formerly been a school. The camp consisted of a group of buildings surrounded by a wire fence. The American prisoners were billeted in an unfurnished, insect infected building together with five British POW’s.

The Germans provided only black bread and soup, and these in such small quantities that had it not been for Italian POW’s who worked in the German supply dump and stole food for the Americans and British, the situation would have been extremely serious.

The Germans kept a close guard on the American prisoners and appeared to be afraid to give them any freedom, probably because of the extent of partisan activity in the area. The Italian, Russian and Bulgarian POW’s were allowed considerably more freedom.

On 5 November 1944, the Germans started evacuating the camp and making preparations to march on foot to Germany. The eleven Americans, together with one British POW, one Bulgarian officer and four Russian airmen, left camp in a party guarded by 12 Germans and 12 Italian Fascist guards.

On the morning of the third day, about 37 kilometers Northwest of MITROVICA, the Chetniks entered the temporary camp and demanded that they be given custody of the POW’s. In the resulting skirmish the prisoners scattered but were rounded up by the Chetniks who also captured the German and Italian guards.

The Americans, British and Russians were taken to a Chetnik Corps Headquarters in the vicinity of POPOVGE where they remained until 24 November. During this period, the Chetniks, who were constantly engaged in attacking German troops and convoys, accorded them excellent treatment.

The party was subsequently taken by the Chetniks to Bulgarian Headquarters at LEPOSIVAC where arrangements were made to transport them to SOFIA. They arrived at SOFIA on 4 December where they lived at the American College until they were evacuated to BARY on 25 December.

COMMENTS: The experiences of these eleven Fifteenth Air Force airmen confirm some of the basic rules of escape training. It should particularly be noted that:

1. Even when imprisoned and closely guarded by the German opportunities for escape frequently arise.
2. Patience is essential, and this combined with a full assessment of the situation with escape as the object, contributed largely to the escape of all the Americans. They were aware at all times of the presence of friendly forces in the vicinity and were prepared to make a break when the chance was afforded them.
3. They bettered their living conditions by making friends with the Italian POW’s who supplied them with food.
4. In the BALKANS assistance can be expected from the Chetniks as well as the Partisans.
5. POW’s can successfully refuse to give any information other than name, rank and serial number.

The End