



1982

Reverend David Schmit of Drake: Germany, World War II

David Schmit

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.und.edu/nd-pow-reports>

Recommended Citation

David Schmit. "Reverend David Schmit of Drake: Germany, World War II" (1982). *North Dakota Prisoner of War Reports*. 34.

<https://commons.und.edu/nd-pow-reports/34>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections at UND Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in North Dakota Prisoner of War Reports by an authorized administrator of UND Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact und.commons@library.und.edu.

PRISONER OF WAR

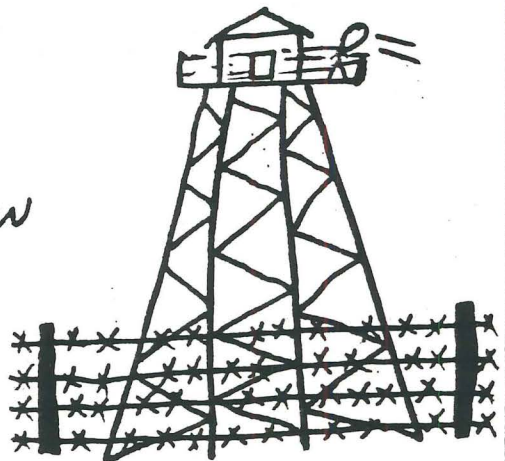
A TRUE STORY

BY: REV. DAVID SCHMIT

DRAKE, N. DAK.

AMERICAN PRISONER IN EUROPEAN
THEATER OF WAR
GERMAN PRISON CAMPS
WORLD WAR II 1941-1945

BOOKLET PREPARED IN
COOPERATION WITH:
N. DAK EX-POW ORGANIZATION
AND
CHESTER FRITZ LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF N. DAK.



St. Margaret Mary Church

P. O. Box 197
Drake, North Dakota
October 19, 1982

Elmer T Lian
2520 Chestnut Street
Grand Forks, N. D. 58201

At the time of the return of the Vietnam prisoners our pictures appeared in the same article in the Grand Forks Herald.

I do not know if this will still be of value to you. I finally decided to send it in, though I do not agree with all of the reasoning you had in your cover letter.


I do not think it is of great interest to many, if any, of my relatives. It was a topic of conversation for a few weeks after my return home in 1945, but now—it is an incident of the past; of no more interest than what anyone else was doing during those years.

Whether it is unique part of the 20th century warfare is also questionable. The only uniqueness is that it happened to me, so in one sense I suppose it is a unique part of warfare.

Does the history of warfare contain anything of the efforts of those who were more dedicated to peace than we who took up arms. I am thinking specifically of Fr. Robert Branconnier, who was a part of the institution of UNR, and the tragedy of the pain inflicted on him for his conscientious stand in the Vietnam times. Such records might be of much more value for peace and the history of warfare.

I cannot say, honestly, that I am sorry for the long delay. If they (the answers) are no longer of value or use or importance to you—such is life.

Yours—


Rev. David Schmit
St. Margaret Mary Church
P. O. Box 197
Drake, N. D. 58736



EX-PRISONER OF WAR QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Name: David Herman Schmit

Current Address: St. Margaret Mary Church
P. O. Box 197
Drake, N. D. 58736

Address at time you went into service:
Fairmount, N. D.

Birthday: 3 May 1925

2. Family: (spouse and children)
None

3. Work and educational experience prior to going into service?
High School graduate. One Summer on Milwaukee railroad section crew in Fairmount.

4. Dates and place of entry into service?
19 August 1943

5. Summary of events from time of entry into service and until just prior to capture or entering status as a POW?
Training with 42 Division in Camp Gruber, Oklahoma.
Overseas as replacement, reporting to 88th Inf. Division and assigned to Co. B. 349 Inf Regiment.
At time of reporting I was the only man in my squad. the 88th division had a 300% casualty count during its time of service in WWII. We filled the platoon to around 75% and very soon suffered heavy casualties from artillery along a mountain road near the Arno River.

6. Unit, Country, time, area, weather, etc., at time event occurred which resulted in POW status?
349 Inf, (Co. B.) 88th Division. 10:00 am July 20, 1943. Weather clear and very warm. This was in the mountains south of San Miniato, Italy.

7. Describe military or other events that resulted in your POW status?
Destruction of bridge on Arno River--through we were able to cross on one beam that became implanted very securely on both banks of the narrow, rapid river after the destruction. We crossed at night and took a hill, leaving a house with several machine guns in it behind us. With the action at the river and on the hill, with some trying to leave the hill one other man and I were the last two on this hill. The Germans managed to fire a hay stack and could still see our movements at night. We left the hill. A shell hit the trees and killed the other man. I had shrapnel in my pack. Later the next day, in trying to find some allied force, I blundered into three German soldiers. That was it.
8. Following your capture, describe what happened. How many men were involved? Where did you go? How did you go? What type of personnel (military or civilian) took control of you?
I was only involved with military personnel. The front line troops at first and rear echelon officers later. I was in San Miniato for several days, later for a week or so in a city Jail in Florence. Later transported to Germany. The original movement to Florence was on foot. To Germany in trains. 40-8 cars.
9. Were you able to hide or escape? If so, tell what happened. Where did you hide? Food? Clothing? Water? Weather? Sleep? etc.
No.
10. How did your escape end? Returned to U.S. control? Discovered by enemy?
We were liberated ~~in the West~~ ~~Polish~~ ~~territory~~ northeast Germany by the Russian troops shortly after they crossed the Oder river.
11. Could you describe in sequence the various places you were interrogated and the methods of questioning the enemy used?
The front line troops did not bother with questioning. In ~~the~~ San Miniato they asked many questions, trying to influence me by say some of our officers had readily answered their questions. I told them name, rank, and serial number. The only other question I answered was to say "I walked across on the bridge," when asked how deep the water was in the Arno river. This question was later repeated. I gave the same answer which may have had some influence on the later questioning in Florence.
In Florence they began asking about my ~~question~~ training in the US. I said nothing. The interrogating officer gave me a paper to read--an account of the 1st Division of the U. S. Army shooting about 50 German prisoners. One had played dead and reported this to them. I read and returned the paper whereupon I was asked:

"Now you know what can happen to you, don't you?" I got the hint, but still refused to answer any questions. The officer grabbed a pistol that had been lying on the desk all this time, kicked his chair across the room and said, "You've had your chance. Let's go!"

At that moment, I accepted death. I believed they were going to kill me. I walked from the room. Down the hallway I was shoved into a long, narrow room with a bench along one wall, and a floor drain in the corner. The room was obviously being used as an indoor toilet without any plumbing. I was left there for about four hours. When taken out I still expected to be killed. They returned me to the main cell of the jail. No subsequent questioning. If they thought they could get information they failed. If they were trying to scare me for my response about the bridge on the Arno river, they succeeded.

12. Did you have a weapon on yourself when you were captured? Did it effect your treatment? Yes, an M1 rifle. It did not affect my treatment. One German sergeant asked me to break it down. I did that very quickly and he was unable to see how I did it. I refuse to reassemble it.
13. Were you at any time considered a civilian or an enemy spy or a wrong nationality? If so, how did this effect your treatment?
No.
14. When captured or escaping, what clothing or equipment were you wearing? What changes did the enemy make in your clothing?
I did not have an escape venture, although I did assist in way of food in the escape of one or two others. They were, unfortunately recaptured.
15. What was your first food you received after your capture and what was your food from that date on? The first food was whatever the German troops had available. Subsequent to that it was mainly potatoes, ersatz coffee, bread, both in Italy and later in Germany. That was the diet until we were issued the Red Cross parcels.
16. Did your nationality, religion, or race have a bearing on your treatment from the enemy? I think the name Schmit made them think I should be on the German side. They like to use that name--especially for any details of work.
17. What was your impression of your captors? Were they arrogant, considerate, professional, troubled, confused, anxious, etc.? The front line troops were considerate--realizing, I believe, that they faced the same possibilities. Farther from the front there was a considerable amount of arrogance which they combined with a few threats to reduce information.

18. Were you alone or with others? How many? Same unit? Other units? Other services? Other nationalities, etc.?

As far as I know the only one from my unit who lived to be captured. In Florence there were a couple of other Americans, some British, A Canadian and an Australian.

19. At time of your capture, did you have higher or lower ranking persons with you? Did the difference in rank effect you? AS above, I was alone.

20. Following your capture, how did you feel about your family at home, and at what point or time did you feel they probably knew about your POW status? I was not overly disturbed about the family at home. They were at home. I did not know that they knew about my POW Status for sure, until I received some mail from them. I knew the Red Cross informed them--but I had no idea how long it took. In actuality, they knew before they were officially informed. The Germans put many names on short-wave propaganda programs. My parents received 90 cards and letters from people in the U. S. who had heard my name and address on short-wave radio.

21. When did you receive your first letter, package or information that your family knew of your capture? Probably in September or October. I do not know for sure.

22. In regards to your interrogation or questioning--was this conducted formally at a special camp or location? Did you have special or skilled interrogators? What did they want to know? How long were you there? Then where did you go? I would not have considered the interrogation as anything but routine, most likely by assigned unit intelligence officers. As seen above, questioned at San Miniato and Florence. At San Miniato interested in unit information. At Florence in U. S. Training. I was at each place only as long as needed to arrange transportation to the next point.

23. How did you feel the war was going when you were captured?

I knew that it was going in favor of the allies. With Allied troops in Italy and in France, it was only a matter of time---and lives.

24. Did you think you would eventually get home? Yes, though there were moments later that gave one pause.

25. Did you have an opportunity to observe the enemy in combat, training, camp, or moving from one place to another?

No.

26. Did you suffer any injury at the time of your capture? What was done about your injury or illness following your capture?
No. Later developed some infection from flea bites that was on long in clearing up, leaving several scars on my legs.

27. At your permanent camp or camps, would you describe your conditions. Food? Living area? Beds? Food ration? Health? Water? Weather? Number of men? Guards? Size and location of camps? Organization in camp by enemy and by U.S. forces?
Food--a lot of potatoes--very unbalanced diet. Red Cross parcels were probably the salvation of most of the prisoners. Living areas very crowded. Food ration inadequate in amount and balance. Water reasonable. Weather--whatever it happened to be wherever we were. Number of men varied from a few a beginning to thousands in 7A and 2B and about 15 in the farm labor assignment. Guards--varied. Usually two on the farm.

28. While in your permanent camp, did you know what was going on in the war? What did guards say about the ending of the war?
Very little. The guards said little or nothing. One guard who had had much time on the Russian front wished our planes would make the birds get down and walk--just to get the war over. He did not last long with us as a guard.
29. If you worked in camp or lived in work camps, please describe your daily transportation, work, food, punishment, etc.? From 2B we were sent to a farm in pre-war Polish territory. no daily transportation. Food somewhat better ~~than~~ in the major camps. No punishment. But hygienic conditions were very much better. We were housed in a new building and we determined to keep it clean--with a high degree of success.
30. Was your camp or camps ever bombed or damaged by the enemy or friendly military action? No. Some allied bombing of the railroad yards in Florence while we~~s~~ were locked in the cars prior to transportation to Germany. ~~No~~ No damage or injury to ~~other~~ ^{any} prisoners. I do not know if our cars were marked in any way to indicate Prisoners of War.
31. Could you describe your roll call or counting procedure in camp?
In major camps a formal fall-out roll call. On the Farm--very informal head count.
32. What type of guards did you have? Age? Rank? Weapons? Number? Service, etc.? Too many and too varied. Usually older men. with a minimum of armament.

33. Could you describe your camp? Size? Fences? Guard towers? Latrine? Ration distribution? Hours? Lock-up? Heat? Recreation, etc.?

The major camps 7A and 2B sure you have descriptions of. On the farm a small wood frame building with barbed wire fence--outside latrine. Rations morning noon, evening, except bread given on loaf basis for so many days. We had adequate heat, were locked in at night. Guards lived in room attached to our building on the farm. Little recreation available. We worked from sun-up to sun-set on the farm.

34. Could you describe the men close to you or the men you knew best? How did you get along with them? I am afraid that this would take longer than I have time for this now. In the farm we got along very well--with some strain at times because of the very confined quarters and room. We also had some stress at times over racial views with some southerners in the group. We had on the farm one German Jew who had escaped from Germany just ahead of the Gestapo, was drafted and ended up as a POW. We were very united in not letting him be transferred from us. I suspect he would have simply disappeared, though I do not think any of us were aware of the Jewish final solution going on in Germany at the time.

35. Could you tell about epidemics or sickness in camp? What were the medical facilities? How were you medically treated in camp?

No epidemics where I was . Hardly any medical facilities or treatment. My leg sores(infection) were treated merely by paper wrappings for them.

36. Were any prisoners killed in camp or taken from camp and disappeared? None where I was-- or least while I was there.

37. Could you describe the ration or food distribution system? How much? Fresh, canned, stale, dried, etc.? Local foods, Red Cross parcels, parcels from home, trade with guards or civilians? potatoes in abundance. hardly any meat, ersatz coffee and what the Germans then called bread-held together I think with sawdust. Regular distribution. Red cross parcels were distributed regularly. (I found this rather amazing, since the Germans had little more to eat than they were giving us.) A little trade with guards--but very little because they had nothing to trade us.

38. Describe the type of work or responsibilities you were assigned within the camp from friendly or USA prisoners? Just my turn at the regular routine assignments for cleaning, carrying food, Nothing special.

39. What were some of the things that kept you going while in camp? Your health? Age? Faith in U.S. Armed Forces? Religion? Family? Aid from other prisoners? My faith was a very strong element. I think to the conviction that the war could not last very much longer. I suppose my age(19-20) and health were important.

40. Did any prisoners become mentally sick or irrational in camp and were they removed?

No.

41. Did you have any secret radios, newspapers or outside news sources in camp from which you received information? What information did the enemy give you? No. The only information the enemy gave us was usually so out of date that we knew it to be false. For instance one guard in Germany told us they had captured Eisenhower in Africa--when all of us had been in Italy.

42. Did you have any serious illness in camp?

The infection from the flea bites. Or it may just have been the inability of blood to combat the infection. On sore on my leg was there from September until the next March. I do not know why this did not result in more serious problems.

43. Did you have any riots in camp?

No.

44. How did you first know that war was coming to an end?
When we moved out of Poland ahead of the oncoming Russians and were held west of the Oder river about 20 miles. We could see the war activities at that distance.
45. What were some of the tricks you played on guards?
The group I was with played no tricks on the guards. One that we had for a long time was very touchy. We did nothing to antagonize him.
46. What about escape procedures and methods used by you or others that you have knowledge of or direct information about?
From our farm we sent one through the wires equipped with food and clothing. he made it to within a few blocks of the Russians in Warsaw, was captured and returned. We had no special or elaborate procedures or methods.
(No Hogans heroes.)
47. Were you ever bombed by friendly or enemy aircraft?
Only in the railroad yards at Florence. In our short stay west of the Oder a plane flew over, dived, and dropped leaflets to us, announcing Roosevelt's death and Truman's swearing in as President. I assume it was a friendly plane.
48. Describe any special train or ship trip you took while a prisoner?
Only the trip from Florence to Stalag 2B. in the 40 and 8. with 60 men in it. Very uncomfortable. We had to take turns sitting and standing. Hardly anyone could lie down. We could not see anything of the country through the two small openings just under the roofs of the cars.

49. When were you close to death or felt all was not worth living and you probably would die or be killed?

as described in previous questions about the ~~type~~ interrogations.

50. Could you tell about any special religious observances by the enemy or special occurrence when they relaxed or tightened security rules?

No that I was aware of.

51. Would you describe in detail any particular holiday, if observed, by enemy or prisoners, such as, New Years or Christmas.

No observation of holidays--except no work. And our own talk about such celebrations at home.

52. How did you feel about food in camp? How did enemy food agree with you? What was food? What were utensils? What did you make to eat with? Pots, pans, cups, plates? Now we are getting a bit repetitious.

We were provided with tin cups or allowed to keep our army canteen cup.

53. Were you aware of any other American or Allied POW camps in your area? Civilian camps?

No, except for another farm group not far away. We were taken there one day in observance of the funeral of an American there who had died while working in the field, apparently of a heart disfunction. I do not remember his name.

54. In reference to your mind or yourself, how do you feel you held up in camp? Did you suffer periods of depression, crying, hysteria, headaches, loss of memory, etc.? How about the other men in camp? How do you feel you and others were able to live without nervous breakdowns?

I think that many of us felt that we were fortunate to be POW'S. In may case, was I better off as a prisoner, or as one of the many dead from my platoon? I think also the encouragement we gave each other was enough to carry us through. I believe it was also good for us, in the small group, to be on the farm, with the outside activities and work nearly every day. I think we would have suffered much more mentally without this physical activity.

55. How do you feel other American POW's behaved or acted while in enemy hands? Please do not name an individual by name if you feel their behavior was not correct or up to the standards you set for yourself. AS far as I know all were very honorable. I suspect there were some who were not, but not among those I knew. The closest was one who won a lot of our "pay" in German marks from others in the group on the farm, and then gave it to the Germans for banking with interest. With the bad time we gave him about it, he realized how foolish it was! Really something very minor.

56. Towards the end of the war, what were first signs that the war was coming to an end in our favor?

Moving ahead of the Russians; all the nearby combat activity. This was in January of 1945 when we moved across the Oder River back into German land.

57. How did the enemy guards or administrative personnel treat you towards the end of the war or when it was apparent the enemy would lose the war?

I think there was not much change. The German guards still felt a responsibility to guard us and keep us from being liberated. That attitude lasted right up to the appearance of the Russians.

58. Could you describe how your POW status ended? Outside a town, the name of which I do not know. Four of us dropped out of the group moving ahead of Russians. We stopped in a creek bed which was overgrown with brush, dug holes, crawled in and waited for the Russians to go by. We were there overnight--in no man's land--with the war being carried on over our heads. The next day the Russians moved by and we crawled out of our holes and went back to the town, yelling "Americanski" and were just waved on to the rear by the Russians.

59. When or where did enemy guards leave? Did guards say or do anything at the end of the war? Our guards left at the above mentioned town--far ahead of us in the flight. That enabled us to take refuge in the river bottom brush. Our guards did not say or do anything different at the end--except as mentioned--to outrun us.

60. What did the American staff at the camp do at the end of the war? It was about two weeks before we were transported to American command. We spent most of that time just avoiding the Russians. 90% of them were drunk about 90% of the time and very careless about targets for their every ready guns.

When we were eventually transported to the Americans, we were immediately deloused, showered and given new uniforms. They were very careful about what and how much we ate. We were interviewed eventually about our POW time and itinerary. Very sketchily though.

61. At the end of the war, where did you move? What was your food? Your health? Your morale?

We were turned over to the Americans in Northwest Germany. Then moved to Namur, Belgium, then Brussels, then Camp Lucky Strike near Le Havre, France. Food was good, health good, morale good--we were going home.

With the Russians we were given their Army Rations. Not a lot better than the German subsistence.

62. Could you describe some of the confusion that took place when you were liberated at the end of the war? Time, place, friendly or enemy forces involved, food, health, morale, POW discipline in camp, contact with U.S. military forces, etc.?

There was not a lot of confusion. Just after liberation the Russians left us (four) on our own. We slept in farmhouses, found our own food, investigated a couple of small towns, until we got to Neu Brandenburg which seemed to be an assembly point for Allied prisoners in the area. Liberated on April 29, 1945 I think the rest is in the previous questions.

63. After liberation or the war ending, what happened? Did you move as an individual or group, go by foot, train, bus? Where did you go, to another U.S. camp? On foot to Neu Brandenburg, by truck (Russian) to American to American command, by plane to Namur, by train to camp Lucky Strike.

64. What happened at your camp prior to returning to the States? Did U.S. military officials interrogate you, examine you physically, give you food, clothing, etc.? Yes.

65. How, when and where did you arrive back in the United States? Did you stay at some camp? Did you go home by train?
Arrived in U.S. by ship. to Camp Patrick Henry, Virginia in mid-June. then to Fort Snelling by train and from there home by train.
66. What things today remind you of prison life in your day to day living?
Very Little, if anything. By comparison, my life today would not remind me of it. Occasionally when I hear people complaining about food, I mention to them that they have never been hungry, and that I haven't been hungry since 1945
67. Do you have any complaints about how you have been treated since your POW days?
What would there be to complain about? I, like other Veterans, was given the finances for Education; I have found a life of service in the priesthood. I have spent 20 years with an army reserve unit (medical). Any treatment that I would find to complain about would not have any connection with POW.
68. Do you have a picture of yourself prior to being a POW, preferably a picture in uniform? Do you have a picture of yourself following the war? Do you have a picture of yourself and your family recently taken, or taken within recent years? Any or all of these pictures would be appreciated. They will be returned to you after we have made copies of them. Yes, I have one around somewhere of me in uniform before going overseas. I have a rather recent picture of myself. The first may take sometime in finding. I do not know where, exactly, it is stored away.
69. Do you have any copies of telegrams from the War Department or the U.S. Government regarding your becoming a POW? Or your release, or war time status as a POW? These or copies of these would be appreciated. If you wish them returned, they will be sent back to you. I am not sure. My mother kept all that junk. Recently one of my sisters gave me a bunch of it--including all the letters ~~from~~ in regard to the short-wave broadcasts. What all is in it, I am not sure. I am not sure either that I have the time nor inclination to investigate.

70. Do you have any letters or copies of letters you sent home or received from home during war or during period you were a POW? These or copies of these would be appreciated. They also will be returned if you so indicate in your reply.

See answer to 69. The first letter I sent from Germany, I picked up at the Post Office in Fairmount in July of 1945.

71. A few POW's were able to return to the U.S. or home with a few articles they may have made, been given or in some way secured in POW camp. Some of these could be: paper notes, camp regulations, clothing, cigarette lighter, insignia, hand made pans or pots, special cans used in camp, small tools, etc. If you have any of these, we would appreciate a picture of them. If you desire they could be sent with this report and we will take a picture of them and return them to you if you so desire. None

72. The above questions or suggestions are limited and you may write or explain many items not included; therefore, feel free to express yourself in any manner you desire.