

Escape at at Laroche



"You're a smart Alec, aren't you?" said the SS man

By Sgt. ED CUNNINGHAM
YANK Staff Correspondent

WITH THE 84TH DIVISION IN BELGIUM—The recapture of Laroche by American troops has revealed the almost incredible adventures of two 84th Division soldiers who made their way back to their own lines after eluding the Germans in a series of dangerous yet ludicrous situations reminiscent of an old-time Hollywood Western chase sequence.

T-5 Herman J. Smalley, a Headquarters Company radio operator from Yuba City, Calif., and Pfc. Frederick E. Patterson, a platoon runner from Milwaukee, Wis., are the Americans who led the Jerries a chase behind enemy lines.

The story starts with the adventures of Pfc. Patterson. Shortly after dark on Dec. 26, he was sent forward to tell two GIs who were reconnoitering the enemy to come back for chow. Patterson missed his men in the darkness and crawled under a barbed-wire fence right into the midst of 150 German soldiers. An English-speaking Jerry lieutenant stuck a burp gun into the pfc's stomach and told him he was his prisoner. It wasn't until later, when the lieutenant's solicitude became more evident, that Patterson realized the Jerry had mistaken him for an officer, thanks to the dark night.

The German outfit which Patterson had unwittingly joined was moving out of the line. He had to march with them across a field that was under American artillery fire, and he narrowly escaped getting hit. Two Jerries in the line of march were not so fortunate. They were badly wounded.

The Jerry lieutenant who guarded Patterson personally on the march was very talkative. He said he had lived in New York City from 1939 to 1941 and thought it the greatest city in the world. He had also been to Chicago and to Milwaukee, Patterson's home town.

Patterson figured the German was trying to build him up to talk freely, hoping to get military information. His suspicion increased after an incident that occurred during a 10-minute break the Jerry officer called during the march. While Patterson was resting, a German soldier came over and demanded his overshoes. That enraged the lieutenant, or at least so he pretended. He ordered the soldier to carry an extra pack as punishment.

Another incident shortly after convinced Patterson that his solicitous captor was like any other Nazi. The Germans who had been wounded were having difficulty keeping up with the other marchers. They begged for a ride on passing German vehicles, but the lieutenant refused their plea. They fell several times going up a hill and lay moaning. Each time, the Jerry lieutenant went back and kicked them until they struggled

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to their feet. Finally, when they stumbled and fell again, the German officer waved deliberately to an oncoming tank. The tank driver came, either in blind obedience to the order or because he really didn't see his two fellow soldiers lying there in the darkness, and drove his 30-ton vehicle over the two prostrate forms.

"They tried to crawl out of the way," Patterson said. "They were screaming and crying, and trying to push the tank away with their hands. There was one yell that slowly faded as the tank passed over them. It echoed a long time in my ears. It made me sick, but I didn't give them the satisfaction of showing it. I watched the Germans, but it didn't bother them a damn bit.

"When this Jerry lieutenant came back to me, he just said they were slowing up the progress of our march."

The next day, 1st Lt. Edward Gedrich and other 84th Division men found the bodies of the two Germans in the area Patterson described. They were crushed to a pulp.

AFTER a two-hour march, Patterson and his captors reached Laroche. American artillery started shelling it heavily just as they arrived.

The Nazi lieutenant, who still hadn't seen Patterson in the light, ushered him into a room where a young but typically granite-faced SS officer was seated with his feet propped up on a stove. Preceding his captive through the door of the lighted room, the lieutenant clicked his heels, snapped to attention with outstretched right arm and, still speaking English, said:

"Heil Hitler! Look what I have captured——" His voice dwindled away unbelievably as he turned for his first real look at Patterson.

"You're not an officer!" he shouted accusingly at Patterson.

"Who said I was?" the pfc asked.

Ignoring his junior officer after a few contemptuous remarks in German, the SS man spoke to Patterson in good English, though gutturally accented.

"You are a smart alec, aren't you? We will see how smart you really are."

With that he issued an order in German to the still discomfited and angry lieutenant. In contrast to his entrance, Patterson was unceremoniously ordered out of the room. He was surrounded by seven German soldiers and marched to a section of town which was under heavy American shelling. They ordered him to stand in the middle of the street, unprotected against shrapnel that fell around him. The seven guards trained machine pistols on the American to forestall any break for cover.

For 15 minutes, Patterson stood in the middle of the street with artillery bursting on all sides of him and frags falling like hailstones. Finally he was taken back to the SS officer's quarters. He had only five guards on the return trip. Two had been killed outright by a bomb burst. All five of the others had suffered minor cuts from flying frags. Patterson didn't even get a scratch.

Four other German officers were with the SS man when Patterson got back. They were eating large slices of bread and jam and drinking steaming coffee.

"Were you wounded?" the SS man asked.

"No, sir."

"You have a charmed life, haven't you?" the German said in mixed disgust and anger.

"Yes, sir," the pfc agreed.

Patterson was then ordered to stand in the middle of the floor at rigid attention. The officers continued eating. After each bite of bread or sip of coffee, one Nazi looked at Patterson as much as to say, "Don't you wish you could have some, too?"

Finally, after several such mocking glances, Patterson smiled back. The SS officer immediately asked him why.

"I just had a turkey dinner," said Patterson, gloating a little himself. It was no made-up story. His company had been fighting Christmas Day and didn't have time for their turkey dinner. They had it the next night—the night Patterson was captured—instead.

Thoughts of his turkey dinner against their bread and jam enraged the Germans. The SS officer again ordered Patterson taken to the section of town where the shelling was heaviest.

Patterson was made to stand at attention in the center of the street while two guards covered

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They got some cigarettes from the German's suitcase.

him with pistols from the doorway of a nearby house. After five minutes in the middle of the American barrage, the 84th Division platoon runner was taken back to SS headquarters. Neither he nor his guards had been wounded this time.

The SS officer was more conciliatory now.

"I'll give you another chance," he told Patterson. "All you have to do is tell me how many trucks and jeeps your army has at Hotton."

"I don't know," the pfc answered.

"How much gasoline is there?" the SS man demanded angrily, losing his conciliatory tone.

"If you want to know, go down and find out. I don't know."

So pointed a reply from an enlisted man sent the German into another tantrum. Cursing Patterson again, he ordered him back under the artillery for a third time. The American's ordeal was cut short this time when both his guards were wounded. One was hit in the stomach by shrapnel, the other got it in the thigh.

It was the same story when he returned to the SS officer's quarters.

"Are you wounded this time?" the SS man asked hopefully.

"No, sir."

"What's your name?" he asked angrily, again losing his temper because Patterson wasn't cracking up under the strain.

"Patterson, sir."

"Put him back in the street again!" the German shouted to a new set of guards.

On his fourth experience as an artillery target, Patterson stood for about 15 minutes. The American shelling finally stopped. He was taken back to headquarters.

His luck was evidently too much for the SS man. Despairing of making him talk by such means, he ordered him to the PW cage.

It was at the PW cage, located in a school building up on a hill, that Patterson first met up with Smalley. The other 84th man had been captured the same night when the Germans overran his OP.

Less than an hour after the two Americans got together in their classroom-prison, a flight of U.S. bombers came over the town. The four German guards stationed at the PW cage ordered Smalley and Patterson to stand in the classroom while they took positions in the adjoining hallway, where they could keep their prisoners covered without exposing themselves to flying glass if the windows were shattered. At least, that was the plan. It didn't work out too well.

The first bomb shook the building, shattering some windows and forcing the two Americans to huddle in a corner to escape flying glass. Their guards waited safely in the hallway. The next bomb was a direct hit on the building. It landed squarely in the center of the roof, continuing down through the hallway where the Germans had taken cover.

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When Smalley and Patterson dug themselves out of the debris, they found various legs and arms of their four guards mixed in the ruins. All had been killed. The two Americans escaped with only scratches.

In the debris, the two Yanks found some German blankets and a couple of mattresses. But food was another problem. After going all the next day without eating, they decided to do a little scrounging. About midnight, they cautiously approached a house about 125 yards away. It was evidently a Nazi billet, for they could hear German voices in the front rooms. That deterred them for a few minutes, but not permanently. They were too hungry to stop now.

They sneaked in a back door which conveniently led into the pantry. While three Jerry officers talked unmindfully in the front room, the two American fugitives ransacked their larder. There were no staple foods, but they did find a jar of jam, some sugar and butter, and six bottles of red wine, all of which they quickly appropriated. Still searching for meat or bread, Smalley and Patterson tried an adjoining room. It turned out to be a German officer's sleeping quarters. From the German's suitcase they got five packs of Jerry cigarettes and two badly needed handkerchiefs for the head colds they had contracted as a result of exposure.

During the daylight hours, the two Americans, from their vantage point on a hill, watched German soldiers trying to repair roads and bridges which American artillery and bombers had knocked out. They also saw the Germans load ammunition and jerry cans of gasoline into ambulances plainly marked with Red Cross signs.

FINALLY, on the afternoon of Dec. 30, the two Yanks decided to make a break through the German lines. After three days on a jam, sugar and wine diet, they were ready for any kind of a changed menu, despite the risk involved. Starting at 1800 hours, they headed southwest from Laroche. They passed within 20 feet of the German guards at the outposts but were not challenged. At 0400 hours, dead tired and cold, they sneaked in a barn behind a Belgian farmhouse and decided to spend the daylight hours there.

That night—it was New Year's Eve—they started out again at dusk. They walked until 2100 hours when they came to an open field about two miles square. Right in the middle of the moonlit clearing they spotted three Jerry patrols coming toward them. They flopped down in the snow and waited.

Two of the patrols passed by, but the third had spotted them. The patrol leader flashed his light. When they didn't answer his signal, he started toward them. After 10 minutes of hair-graying suspense, the patrol cut over near a clump of trees. When they saw their chance, Smalley and Patterson ducked into the woods and got away. It was just minutes before midnight, Dec. 31.

"That was the most exciting New Year's Eve I ever want to spend," Smalley said later.

Just before dawn, they walked into a quiet little town which seemed to be deserted. After conning the place from the outskirts, they decided it was probably part of no-man's land. With hands in pockets, they walked casually down the middle of the main street. Turning to go down another street, they bumped square into a German soldier.

The Jerry, apparently unarmed, let loose with a frightened yell: "*Amerikaner! Amerikaner!*" He started running. Smalley and Patterson followed suit—but in the opposite direction. A few seconds later, from houses all over town, about 40 panic-stricken Germans, some without shirts or coats, rushed out and headed for the nearby hill toward which the Americans were running. At first Smalley and Patterson thought they were being chased. When a couple of Jerries sprinted past them in the darkness they caught on. The Germans thought the town was under American attack.

Taking shelter behind some trees on the hill, Smalley and Patterson watched the nervous Jerry soldiers cautiously return to the town. Standing there to meet them was someone—evidently an officer—sounding off in explosive German. He kept hollering "*Dummkopf! Dummkopf!*" at his shame-faced soldiers.

At a village a few miles down the road, the two Yanks ran into more trouble. Trying to get across a bridge, they were spotted by seven or

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eight Jerries. They took off down the river bank with the Germans in pursuit. At what they figured was the narrowest point, Smalley and Patterson waded out into the icy water, fully clothed. When they reached the opposite shore they were soaked to the skin and shivering in the near-zero temperature. The Germans were still searching for them on the opposite bank.

THAT was 0630 on New Year's Day. At 1530 that afternoon, after twice circling around German positions, the two fugitives reached a hedgerow. Here they felt safe enough to stop and build a fire to thaw out. After nine hours walking in freezing temperatures, their water-soaked clothes were coated with ice.

Suddenly they heard an English-speaking voice on the other side of the hedgerow.

"That's an American!" Smalley whispered.

"No, it's not," Patterson said, "still mindful of his recent English-speaking German captors. 'They're Jerries.'"

After a few seconds they heard more voices. Patterson was convinced himself this time. He yelled: "Are you Americans?"

"Yes," came back the guarded reply.

"So are we!" Patterson hollered.

"We don't trust you," said the Americans on the other side. "Come out with your hands up. One false move and we'll blow your brains out."

The half-frozen fugitives came out with their hands up to be met by 15 leveled MIs and the guns of an American tank. After identifying themselves, they got medical treatment for exposure from a battalion aid man. Both got to their outfits in time for New Year's dinner that night.

Other than minor exposure symptoms, the only ill effect of their six days of hide-and-seek behind enemy lines was Smalley's loss of his fur-lined gloves, wristwatch, cigarette lighter and overshoes. They were taken by the Germans who first captured him.

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