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Henry A. Wise, Jr.

Henry A. Wise, Jr., finished Virginia Union University in I94I and taught one year before being drafted. As his story relates, he remained in the POW camp with 300 other prisoners until liberated by the Russians. Returning to the States he went on War Bond Rallies in Washington, D. C., and in Richmond. He served as a flying instructor at Tuskegee Army Air Field, training inspector at Godman field, Kentucky, and Lockbourne Army Air Base, Ohio. Mr. Wise was awarded the Air Medal, Purple Heart, European Theater Ribbon with several battle stars, American Theater and the Victory Ribbons, and a Certificate of Valor from the 15th A.A.F.

I was one of the unfortunate persons in the war who had the undesirable experience of being a prisoner of war. The experience is still quite vivid in my mind as I remember clearly the day and hour. It was August 19, 1944, about 1100 hours. I, as a member of the 99th Fighter Squadron was returning home, Italy, from a long-range, high-altitude escort mission to bomb the famous Rumanian oil fields at Ploesti, then being worked by the Germans. The mission had not been particularly exciting as we had not encountered any German fighter aircraft, as it was our job in our fast P-51's to keep the enemy fighters away from the heavy bombers. Having escorted the bombers to the target, covered them while they dropped their bombs, and made their withdrawal, our job over, we were enroute home. I was flying at an altitude of 25,000 ft., approximately 400 miles from my home base, when my engine failed. I had been hit by the ever-present German flak from the ground guns, 25,000 feet below me. At an altitude of 900 feet, with the plane now on fire, I was forced to parachute.

Being forced to jump from such a high altitude, I was easily spotted, and the enemy troops were waiting for me when I hit the ground. There wasn't a chance to escape. From where I sit now the situation, although grave at the time, seems quite humorous, as I experienced quite a bit of difficulty trying to get these heavily armed enemy soldiers to understand the feeble English, I was able to utter at the time. Even the few words of high school French I knew, and the Latin so laboriously drilled into me by the late and beloved Dr. J. B. Simpson deserted me at this time. u I was taken to headquarters where an officer was found who could speak English. I learned that I had landed in Bulgaria, a German occupied country, just outside of a city named Vratsa. My plane had crashed and burned on the other side of town. Having been thoroughly questioned by the intelligence officer, the English-speaking officer made a statement that I shall never forget, "-for you the war is over!" I was taken to the guardhouse and left to brood over the thought of the firing squad which I was certain would be coming at sunrise. I was wrong, fortunately.

Two days I spent alone in this guardhouse at Vratsa with, I later learned, the perennial diet of soup and some version of "tea." Then with a guard I started the trip across country to the prisoner of war camp. Again, the humor creeps in as I recall this trip. Although a prisoner, I was a novelty in Bulgaria. The majority of Bulgarians had never before seen a Negro! Enroute, we stopped for a few days in Sofia, the capital, where I think I had the dubious pleasure of staying in every jail in the city. The jails were filthy, yet the inmates seemed quite healthy. Here I was joined by three other American flyers who had been forced down in the country and we were moved together to the prisoner of war camp at Shumen, where there were three hundred allied flyers dejectedly waiting to hear our hard luck story.

The camp was a small stone building up on a hill from the city built to house about fifty persons enclosed in barbed wire. Many of the men slept on the floor, on straw or the best way they could. The clothing was miserably lacking, especially in the case of the men who had been there quite a while. The diet, as previously mentioned, was quite consistent. At breakfast we received a loaf, of bread and a dish of a liquid which resembled our tea. The bread had a date stamped on it and if you had a loaf only five days old you had a fresh loaf. For lunch you received a bowl of soup and for dinner or supper, another bowl of the same type of soup. The prisoners named the soup "goat's head soup" because a familiar goat around the camp disappeared, and we found bits of meat and bone in our soup the next day. Sanitation, or rather the lack of sanitation, was the worst part of the camp life. A bath was out of the question, as was a toothbrush, a shave, haircut, medical treatment, etc. Flies and body lice of all types were plentiful and naturally much illness resulted. There was no physical punishment of the prisoners in this particular camp, nor did we have any work to do. Nothing to do but wait and hope for liberation or armistice. Finally, it came! The Russians moved into the country, and we were freed about one month after I was shot down. The trip back to Italy was pleasant as we traveled by train, boat, truck and plane in our roundabout way home. We passed through Greece, Turkey, Syria, Egypt, Palestine, and finally Italy.