

**What Was Private Wilbur Primmer's Experience  
As a of Soldier of World War II and Prisoner of War and  
How Has It Affected Him Personally?**

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During World War II 15 million men were taken captive and became Prisoners of War. One eighth of those captured died within eight months of captivity. Many faced diseases such as dysentery, beriberi, malaria, scurvy and pellagra (Wernick P40). They were subjected to horrendous conditions, and starvation diets. It is amazing any human being could survive the conditions they had to endure. Not ever experiencing such conditions makes it hard to understand how the prisoners kept going. They had many other deplorable conditions and endured exhausting work and grueling marches, unbearable heat and intense cold. The following are recollections of Private Wilbur Primmer during his tour of duty in World War II and his experiences of being captured as a Prisoner of War. He was one out of 15 million men who became Prisoners of War during World War II.

On October 12, 1941 at the age of 23, Private Primmer received a letter in the mail. He had been drafted. He reported to Fort Hayes in Columbus, Ohio the following day. At Fort Hayes he received his uniform and was transported to Camp Wheeler in Georgia for basic training. During his last week of basic Pearl Harbor was bombed, and the following day Private Primmer and the other men were transported to Fort Dicks in New York. They were supposed to board the U.S.S. Normandy to go to Ireland. However, when they arrived at Fort Dicks they found the U.S.S. Normandy burning in the harbor. The troops waited for ten days for another ship to come to take them to Belfast, Ireland. On February 12, 1942 they boarded the replacement ship and were taken to Ireland. Fourteen days later they arrived in Ireland. Their assignment was to keep Hitler from making a beach head around the British Isles. They encountered the Germans bombing the area that the troops were staying at constantly. Their assignment was for

nine months- the bombing never stopped the entire nine months he was there.

On November 8, 1942 Private Primmer and the rest of his platoon received orders to move to North Africa. They invaded North Africa and held Algiers. They stayed in Algiers for approximately six weeks. It was the day after Christmas 1942, when Private Primmer's platoon received new orders and moved to the front in Tanzania. They started moving at one o'clock in the morning through the countryside. They moved at one o'clock so that there would be a smaller chance of the Germans finding where they were going. The driver of the truck carrying them missed a turn and due to the fact they were in the desert the driver was unable to stop the truck. It rolled over and over. He recalls the truck rolling nonstop all through the night! When the truck stopped rolling it was morning, the platoon learned that they had rolled for approximately 14,000 feet or about three miles in length. Surprisingly no one was seriously injured. After they reached the pass to the front of Tanzania each man carried a belt of hand grenades, this was their only protection. Every night they would throw the grenades at the Axis Power, led by Rommel. They threw the grenades for two weeks. By February 14, 1943 throwing grenades had turned into an all out battle. There was mortar fire, artillery fire, and dog fights. Private Primmer was in fox holes during the whole battle, his assignment was to throw grenades.

The platoon Private Primmer was in had a disadvantage against Rommel's or "Desert Fox's" Army. The men in Rommel's Army were college educated and spoke several languages, one being English. Unknown to the American troops, Rommel's troops

understood everything the American troops said. This greatly impacted the troops when they received a hand written orders to retreat. Until then, they had never received orders while in Tanzania. It is thought that Rommel had heard all of their battle plans the Americans had and written the letter of retreat- he had tricked the Fifth Army again Private Primmer and many others in the Fifth Army feel that Rommel had written the authorization. To this day no ones knows for sure, but how else would they have known?

The Fifth Army continued to hold their spot in Tanzania. As the men marched one day, a Tiger Tank came into view, the men dug in the sand and watched at what appeared to be French soldiers getting out of the tank. As the men came closer to his platoon, the American Army heard the men speak German. They had been tricked again. Rommel was a very conniving General; his deception and trickery were some of his most famous traits. The Germans were trying to find the Fifth Army and were dressed in French uniforms to deceive them. The American soldiers threw grenades at the tank, and disabled it. The Germans returned fire. Private Primmer found that his ear had been grazed by a bullet later at camp. He also suffered permanent hearing loss from his injury.

The next few weeks German planes flew by night and day, bombing the battlefields. While this was happening, Private Primmer and other soldiers prayed constantly. Although he was in great danger, Private Primmer had no sense of fear. He attributes this to placing his life in God's hands. He relays that his brain only functioned to survive, he never thought about how close he was to death. After a few weeks of bombing, Rommel defeated and captured the Fifth Army, he is unsure of the name of the

battle. Private Primmer as well as his platoon had become Prisoners of War. This would change his life forever. The Fifth Army prisoners were taken to different prison camps. Only 20 other men in his platoon were taken to the prison camp Private Primmer was taken to.

The Fifth Army captives marched nonstop from Tanzania to Algiers. At Algiers the prisoners were to be loaded into planes and flown to Italy. If a prisoner would stop, for any reason, on the march they would be instantly shot and their fellow prisoners would walk over those who had fallen before them for if they had stopped they too would be shot. Finally those survivors reached the runway, but the planes were not there, for they had been bombed by the Allies. The prisoners had to wait for relief planes to take them to the prison camps. When they finally arrived in Italy, it had been one month since the prisoners last meal. Malnourished and tired, the prisoners were placed in stockades for ten days. The women of the town would come every morning and dump bread over the side of the stockade for the prisoners to eat. The bread was so hard the men could barely bite into it but they ate it as well as they could- for this was their only source of nourishment. From Italy they were taken by train to Austria where they were deloused and placed back onto trains, they were on the final leg of their journey. Their prison camp was located in Germany, near the Polish border. As the prisoners got off the train, the guards greeted them by saying, "For you the war is over." Really the battle for their life had only just begun. All of the Prisoners of War in this camp had the job of filling the valleys with dirt. The Germans plan was to make power plants on the filled valley. For 27 months, the prisoners had shovels in their hands. During this time, Private Primmer's main

objective was to maintain his sanity. People who thought about the difficulties of the War or those who became depressed during this time usually went insane or committed suicide. Keeping Private Primmer's mind was just one of the challenges he had to face on a daily basis.

Another challenge Private Primmer had was that the German soldiers assumed that he was Jewish due to his dark complexion and hair color. Every Sunday, the prisoners were interrogated by German soldiers who were specialized in interrogating. During basic training the Americans soldiers were trained on how to respond to interrogations. All the prisoners was authorized to tell them was their name, rank, and social security number. Many horrendous things could occur during these interrogations. Private Primmer experienced horrible treatment during these interrogations, however he would not disclose information about the inhumane treatment that happened to him personally. Once during an interrogation the German soldier asked him questions that Private Primmer was not authorized to give. Once, Private Primmer was interrogated to the point where he came an interrogator with a shovel. This could have proven to be a deadly move, but instead he gained respect from the soldiers for his bravery, and his resolve not to divulge any information. Interrogations were not the only way the Germans tried to get soldiers thought to be Jewish to confess. The Germans put all men with dark hair in a small room for one month. There were 55 men in his prison camp who were considered Jewish. Every day during that month, they were given only one parcel containing coffee and a sawdust biscuit for ten men to share.

Food was another obstacle for the prisoners. Under the Geneva Convention

Agreement of 1929, Prisoners of War were required to be fed a minimum of 33 percent below the starvation level. The prisoners rarely had true meals but when they were fed, they received one cup of warm water with one pod shell or bug in it. This was called bean soup. They also received a sawdust biscuit made of actual sawdust. After eating the first couple of biscuits they found that it would cause gas to form in their stomachs and cause the prisoners to lay in agony all night long. So the prisoners would dispose of the biscuits in the latrines instead of eating them.

Another hardship was not knowing what was going on in the world, but especially World War II. The Germans tried to break down the prisoners by repeating over loud speakers that the Germans were winning the war and that it would soon be over. This is the same tactic the Germans used to break down the men and women in the concentration camps. However, Private Primmer was not effected by this. He was given a special job during this time so he knew the truth about the War. A local blacksmith by the name of Harris Urchert came to camp every morning to get Private Primmer. Private Primmer would help him in his blacksmith shop. He was given this special job because all of the blacksmiths apprentices had gone to fight for Germany. So in return Mister Urchert had received help from the prisoners. Unknowingly, Urchert gave Private Primmer the courage he would need to remain strong during his last year in the camp. Private Primmer also found out that the citizens of the small towns were being treated just as horrendously as the Prisoners of War. He found that the town's people had hardly any food and that they would try to trade with the prisoners. They hoped to get the Prisoners of War's parcels. They saw the supply trucks coming into the camps to make deliveries but they

did not know the terrible food that was in the parcels. Urchert also helped the prisoners by telling them information about the War. This information in turn helped the prisoners form a strike to protest against the harsh treatment of the men in the camp. One night Private Primmer and a fellow prisoner told everyone in the camp to freeze in their spot when the order was given by the captain to line up for the nightly roll call. When the time came, all the prisoners dropped their shovels and refused to move. The captain threatened the men with death but the men still refused to listen. The order to shoot the prisoners came but instead of shooting them the guards just watched. Not only were they in awe at the prisoners' bravery but they too wanted better conditions. The guards were sympathetic to their cause and especially wanted the better treatment because they too had poor living and food conditions. The following week a new captain came to look after the camp. He came with an order to feed the men one parcel each. This was the first time the prisoners received this much food since being captured. The amount of food the prisoners gradually dropped after a few weeks had passed however, and the prisoners had to endure the meager food that they had before the strike once again. The malnutrition of the men in the camps led to many major health problems and hygiene problems. These conditions still plague them today.

Disease and poor hygiene were a huge problem for the men in the camps. After being deloused in Austria the prisoners never took a shower or received new clothing or shoes again during their three year imprisonment. Private Primmer developed psoriasis of the skin due to the conditions of the prison camps. He was taken to a German doctor to be treated. The doctor applied a salve to his skin. He was then put into long johns and

sent to bed. Every morning, Private Primmer found himself naked, for the salve had eaten threw the material. It also turned his skin green. After the psoriasis was cured, Private Primmer sent back and was given the duty of shoveling dirt into the valleys once again.

In the days after his hospitalization, Private Primmer had no sense of time. He and the other prisoners knew only when it was Sunday because a Polish priest was permitted to give the prisoners Reconciliation and Holy Communion. On Sundays the prisoners were given a different job. Instead of filling in the valley with dirt, they moved and unloaded concrete to the towns around them.

There was a period of time when the bombing increased all around the prison camp. The bombing was relentless. During the bombing one night near the end of the War, a bomb blew up the valley the prisoners had worked so hard to fill. By morning you could not tell that the prisoners had spent three years of their lives filling up the valley.

Finally the time had come. The day the prisoners had set their sights on since they were captured. It was their Liberation Day. The German troops had surrendered, the prisoners were now free. The German guards marched the prisoners to the boats for the men to go home. During their march that lasted several days, the prisoners saw first hand the horrors of the Holocaust. Lining the rivers in Germany laid hundreds of swollen, naked bodies that had either been gassed in the gruesome gas chambers or shot during the famous death marches. Private Primmer thought that the unusual thing about the bodies was that they had no odor, and to this day he is puzzled by the odorless bodies. I wonder if it had anything to do to his sense of smell being weakened by his malnourished state.

After Liberation Day, the prisoners were better fed because American troops came

with provisions. Every other night the men received a small piece of chicken. They were gradually given more food as their bodies became adjusted to the larger portions of food. Many men died after Liberation, however. Many died from eating more than their starved bodies could handle. During the march, they passed a chocolate factory. Some of the men were given a small square of chocolate by women who worked in the chocolate factory. By nightfall many of those that had eaten the chocolate died. It was more than their systems could handle. Private Primmer refused to accept the chocolate. He now thinks that his Guardian Angel was looking out for him.

Finally the men reached the ships. Private Primmer boarded the U.S.S. Erickson. Twelve days later, the ship landed and he stepped onto the United States soil for the first time since February 12, 1942. From New York, Private Primmer traveled to Indiana and finally to Lancaster. He arrived in Lancaster at one o'clock in the morning. His wife met him in Lancaster and took him to their home in Sugar Grove. Mr. Primmer felt that during his time in the War the most important changes occurred for him when they moved at one o'clock in the morning. He felt that it was fitting that he returned to his home at one o'clock in the morning.

Coming back to "civilized" life also proved to be a challenge. Mr. Primmer was not debriefed, nor were any of the Prisoners of War that he knows, however he did receive many physical examinations. Still today, Mr. Primmer has medical problems due to his imprisonment. All Prisoners of War have a Twenty-one Presumptive list. This list has many medical problems the Prisoners of War might expect to have due to the conditions of his imprisonment. Many of these medical conditions include heart and stomach

problems, and frostbitten appendages. The heart and stomach problems are related to the food, illnesses, and treatment of the prisoners in the camps. Frostbite was not recognized as a problem of Prisoners of War until recently. Many of the men lost limbs or feeling in their limbs due to the extreme cold the men faced during the winter months and during the long and extensive marches. Mr. Primmer has a 50 percent probability for developing traumatic stress syndrome, and a 27 percent chance of developing cirrhosis of the liver. The probability decreases with time but could still happen at a later date.

Mr. Primmer still to this day declines to disclose some of his most terrible moments. I noted that when I asked a question about his physical or mental treatment that he experienced during his imprisonment, he grew introverted and his facial expressions showed me that he was reliving the horrors. He would then return eye contact with me and simply state, "you wouldn't want to know, you wouldn't want to know."

The most challenging part of coming back to "normal" life was seeing his daughter. She had been born while he was away and was three years old when she met her father for the first time in her life. When he came home he tried to give her a hug and she ran away from him. It was hard for Mr. Primmer to get acquainted with life as he once knew. It was also difficult for his family to adjust to his coming home.

Mr. Primmer, like so many others are concerned about my generation respecting, understanding, and appreciating what we have received by the men and women who gave so freely of themselves to ensure our freedom. Mr. Primmer points out the attitude change of our society. An example of this change is that he fought with and watched many young men die. Even at age 18 a young man would give up his life for his country

in war- that is the same age of many our senior class members! He feels that today it is not uncommon for many 18 year olds to refuse to give even two hours of community service.

Mr. Primmer enjoys coming to high schools to give lectures about his experiences. It is his way of teaching today's young men and women what the young men and women of yesterday did to ensure and retain our country's freedoms. We enjoy our freedom today because of what they gave so willingly years ago.

Mr. Primmer and 15 million other Prisoners of War have overcome these hardships and sacrificed many things for us. It is important to remember the dedication they had to provide us with the freedoms that we are blessed with today. It is now our duty to honor them by remembering all their hard work and sacrifices. We need to thank them by showing respect for those who have so freely given of themselves for the welfare of the rest of the United States of America. We also must remember not to take our freedoms for granted and to protect and cherish our freedom for future generations.

### Works Cited

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