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RODRICKS: Memories of 1944 horror, gratitude for survival at Christmas

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Bill Arrington for the rest of his life.

Like many elements of the 106th Infantry, Arrington's company had been surrounded by German forces early on the morning of the first day of the battle. So Arrington, a private and a lieutenant went off toward St. Vith in search of help.

They never got there. Encountering German units, they decided to hide overnight in a Belgian house; a woman there gave them bread and milk. But before midnight, there was a rap at the door. The place was surrounded by a German company. Arrington and his two comrades surrendered. As the Germans led them away, Arrington heard the woman screaming from somewhere behind the house. He never learned what happened to her.

"That's why he never wanted to tell us that story," says his son, Jeff Arrington, of Cockeysville. "Her screams."

A week later, as Christmas approached, the Germans were still advancing toward the Meuse, and still demanding the surrender of Bastogne. Americans had withdrawn from St. Vith, but reinforced units were fighting stubbornly at dozens of other places in the bulge, and fighter bombers in clearing skies were pounding German supply lines. Twenty miles from St. Vith, near Prum, Germany, Bill Arrington and 60 other prisoners were locked in a wooden boxcar on railroad tracks. The box car had been used to transport horses.

> *"Things looked pretty dismal."*
> **BILL ARRINGTON**

"There were about 4 inches of horse manure covering the floor," Arrington wrote in his memoir. "We used our helmets to scrape it into one end of the car. When you put 60 people in a place built for 40 not all can sit at the same time. In shifts we sat on the floor or stood in the manure.

"After two days there was a sound like 'wham-bang-thud.' An engine was attached and through the darkness of night this steamer moved us to a siding in a railyard at Limburg. . . . Our food consisted of two slices of bread and two drinks of water, a half a cup each time — the total for seven days. The cold of winter was finding its way through the cracks in the boards, the same cracks that the sun had shone through before it went down. It was the eve of Christmas."

Arrington started thinking about home. He remembered a Christmas pageant at a Sykesville church; he had played a wise man. He tried to remember passages from Matthew and Luke, about peace on earth, goodwill toward men. "Things looked pretty dismal," he wrote. "It could take years for the allies to win the war."

It was about 9 o'clock when someone in the boxcar started singing, "Joy to the World," and soon everyone was singing.

Then they sang, "Deck the Halls."

"It was great," Arrington wrote. "It was helping us to remember and to forget. Really ecumenical — the Jewish fellows were singing, too. 'Silent Night . . .' and on and on we sang, many repeats but not many second verses.

"Overhead we heard the engine of a plane. Couldn't be a bomber. Didn't sound like one. Besides, it was Christmas Eve and there was always the one-day truce. Several minutes later there was a soft glow of light sifting through the cracks of the boxcar. Had they turned on the lights in the railyard to celebrate?"

Someone figured it out quickly. The light came from flares on parachutes descending gently into the railyard. Then came dive bombers. And bombs. And young Americans balled up in the fear of death by friendly fire.

"The shrapnel pounded the side of the wooden boxcar," Arrington wrote. "The hunger pangs had gone, as had the thirst for water. The whine of the diving planes and the bombs made you forget all this. There wasn't room for everyone to sit but everyone was down — manure or no manure. The car was rocking on its undercarriage. Then a violent lurch, flying debris, screams of pain. There had been a direct hit on another car. The bombing seemed endless, though it was probably over in 10 minutes."

Arrington looked around at all the young men. All their lips were moving, all of them praying, grateful for life. Christmas Eve 1944.

1994-12-16 Christmas Eve PART TWO

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