

James Dew

106th Infantry Division

August 21, 2005 - [Survivor of POW camp recalls terrifying battle](#)

Like many people, 82-year-old James Dew knew what was happening during World War II because he heard about it on the radio.

Beginning in January 1944, Dew listened to the BBC every evening at 5 to hear the news from around the world.

When President Roosevelt died April 12, 1945, Dew heard about it on the radio and held a service with his friends. And when the Russians pushed westward through Germany the same month, Dew heard about it from the BBC.

But Dew had more interest in the Russians' advance through Germany than people back home in the U.S. listening on the radio. He was a prisoner of war in Germany from Dec. 19, 1944, through April 25, 1945, when the Russians' advance led to his liberation from a prison camp in Luckenwalde.

Dew, an Ohio native who now lives in Missoula, was in college at Oberlin before joining the Army in May 1943. After his training, he was sent to England with the Army's [106th Infantry Division](#), where he stayed until his division moved to France on Dec. 1, 1944.

Fifteen days later, Dew found himself in the middle of one of the biggest battles of World War II and the Germans' last major counteroffensive - the Battle of the Bulge. It began on Dec. 16, 1944, when the Germans launched a surprise attack on the war's Western Front at Ardennes, a heavily forested region on the border of Belgium and France.

The [106th Infantry Division](#) was stretched thin in the area, and when the Germans attacked, they pushed the front west, creating a bulge in the Allies' line of troops - thus naming the battle.

"The Germans hit us first when the bulge started," Dew said. "Nobody knew what was going on. I know - I was with a battalion colonel."

The surprise attack forced nearly 7,000 members of the [106th Infantry Division](#), including Dew, to surrender within the first few days of the battle, he said. He surrendered and was captured by German soldiers on Dec. 19.

"It was what we call utter chaos," he said. "I'm sure if there hadn't have been a surrender, we would've all been killed."

Dew recalled being terrified when he surrendered, sure he was going to die. Just two days earlier, the Germans had killed more than 70 prisoners of war in Malmedy, Belgium, in what became known as the Malmedy Massacre.

But Dew wasn't injured at the hands of the Germans and today recalls the tedium of life as a POW.

Dew and his fellow prisoners were marched east into Germany and then put on a train. The 10-day ride was the most trying experience of his captivity, he said, because the boxcars were packed tight with prisoners and on one night, British forces bombed several of the cars.

After a brief stop at a temporary camp near Dresden, Dew was sent to a prison camp near the German border with Poland. That was when the boredom started - and the radio came in.

Dew doesn't know where the radio came from, but every night at 5 o'clock the prisoners would tune in to the BBC. Other than that, they just sat around and talked.

Dew developed a business in the camp, sketching portraits of prisoners' girlfriends from photographs they had and receiving cigarettes in return, he said. He had studied art before the war and taught at Montana State University - then in Missoula - after he returned to the U.S.

Treatment from the Germans wasn't bad, Dew remembers, but the food was. An average meal was dehydrated rutabaga soup that tasted like a pulp mill smells, he said. Sometimes it was a Red Cross food parcel.

As the Russians advanced through Germany, Dew and his fellow POWs marched nearly 90 miles to the camp in Luckenwalde. The Germans retreated as the Russians drew near and on April 25, 1945, American trucks picked him up. Soon after, Dew was back in the United States.

Now, just as he did when he was captured, Dew feels lucky to have been a prisoner instead of a casualty of one of the biggest - and costliest - battles of World War II.

"I don't know the figures (death toll) exactly," he said. "But I'm extremely lucky. I could've been killed with shrapnel right off." PETER BULGER, The Missoulian - Missoula,MT,USA

Page last revised 12/06/2006

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