

## INTRODUCTION

“Greetings from Uncle Sam” – as it was called – were received on December 21, 1941 from the Local Board No. 3, Allegheny County, 125 Grant Street, Turtle Creek, Pennsylvania.

***Notice of Classification***  
***Joseph John DeCesare***  
***Order No. #S-2300, Class 1-A***

He was ordered to report for induction on February 3, 1942 – 8:30 AM. He was selected for training and service in the Army – Company H, 179<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 45<sup>th</sup> Division.

After one year of basic training at Camp Croft, Spartanburg, South Carolina, he went on for more training at Fort Devins, Massachusetts.

On June 8, 1943 my dad departed for Oran, Africa, arriving June 22, 1943. He then went on to participate in the invasion of Sicily, Italy.

My dad kept a notebook with him while he was in captivity as a Prisoner of War. It was a bit smudged and worn when he shared it with us. The following is My Daddy’s Story in his own words.

**My Life as a Prisoner of War in Germany**  
**Captured February 17, 1944 – Liberated April 22, 1945**

**Cpl. Joseph DeCesare**  
**POW #129684**  
**Stalag VIIA, Stalag IIIB, Stalag IIIA**



**Thursday, February 17, 1944**

**Captured by Romel Tank outfit at Anzio Beach Head.**

It was 8:00 AM on a very cold morning when I was captured. I was taken to a German headquarters on foot. At that time I was *put in front of a firing squad and ordered to be killed.* The order was stopped by a German High Command who was told it was not allowed by rules of the Geneva Convention.

I stayed in a dark dungeon overnight with the rats, and no food. The next morning a ration of food was given which was a piece of bread made of black flour, sawdust and some water.

**February 18, 1944**

Moved to Rome by bus. I was put in a large building said to be a Rome movie studio, with no beds, just some straw on the floor and 50 gallon drums to be used as a latrine.

**March 8, 1944**

I left Rome studio by truck and trailer and arrived in Farasabina by the next morning – stayed there 15 days.

March 23, 1944

Left Farasabina by truck and arrived in Laterina the next day - stayed there for awhile.

April 20, 1944

Today is Hitler's Birthday - we were given some fish soup.

May 11, 1944

Attended the May procession mass before leaving Laterina.

May 16, 1944


Arrived in Mantova, Italy where I stayed for 7 days.

May 18, 1944

Left Mantova by box car. I had a small pen knife and decided to carve our way out of the box car door. As luck would have it, we got caught. The door flew open. I hide the knife and the guards came in trying to find the knife. At that time we all got punished - no rations for the rest of the trip.

May 20, 1944

Arrived in Austria. We received our first Red Cross parcel. We also got deloused. Three days later we went on to **Camp V11A**. (*Stalag VIIA in Moosburg, Germany*)

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Kriegsgefangenen-Stammlager: Stalag VII A Moosburg																	Lager: Stalag VII A											
Name: DE CESARE																	Staatsangehörigkeit: AMER											
Vorname: JOSEPH																	Dienstgrad: CPL.											
Geburtsort und Ort: 30 20 TURTLE CREEK																	Truppenteil: ARMY Komp. usw.: 172											
Religion: P.C.																	Stellberuf: PAINTER Berufs-Gr.: 172											
Vorname des Vaters: ANTHONY																	Matrikel-Nr. (Stammrolle des Heimatstaates): 331476											
Familienname der Mutter: TESTA																	Gefangennahme (Ort und Datum): ANZIO 2-17-44											
Ob gesund, krank, verwundet, eingeliefert: GESUND																												
Lichtbild																	Nähere Personalbeschreibung											
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																	Wenden!											

***August 28, 1944***

Left **V11A** on a three day trip by rail.

***August 30, 1944***

Arrived in Furstenberg, Germany **Camp 111B**. (*Stalag IIIB, Furstenberg, Germany*)

I attended midnight mass and also received communion.

***November 6, 1944***

Received my first cigarette parcel from home from my mother. Cigarettes in camp were like money - buying power!! I could buy a loaf of bread from the night guard for a pack of cigarettes. I could buy a ration of bread for 2 cigarettes from our own guys in camp. They would rather smoke than eat.

***November 9, 1944***

Received my first personal parcel from home from my wife.

***December 11, 1944***

Received my first mail from home from my wife and mother.

***December 16, 1944***

We were given x-rays for tuberculoses.

***December 20, 1944***

I received a Red Cross parcel. It was our Christmas parcel.

**One year has gone by. It is now 1945.**

***January 30, 1945***

Today is my birthday. I had a good meal from my parcel.

***January 31, 1945***

We were alerted to leave camp. We were all given a loaf of bread for the *trip which was about 92 miles on foot*. We evacuated 111B at dark with our little make shift sleds loaded with our junk at 1 AM. We marched all night and all the next day and arrived at our first stop.

***February 1, 1945***

Our first stop was a farm house. Miserable, wet and all tired out, there we slept in a sheep pen with the sheep, rats included. Next morning I had a hot brew on my little blower.



*(This blower was forged from tin cans out of the garbage, belt straps of boots, a block of wood, and hob nails out of German boats.)*

***February 2, 1945***

We started marching again. We marched another 18KM and stopped again in another farm house. Next morning we had hot water for a so-called coffee and a spud which I stole from the farmer.

***February 3, 1945***

Started marching again, another 18KM and stopped in another farm house in a small town. There we helped ourselves to fresh milk, eggs, and carrots - almost got shot doing so.

**February 4, 1945**

This morning we started out again and marched another 18KM. At the end of the march we stayed in a school house. There we bought some bread and spuds and had a hot brew. Again the cigarettes came in handy.

**February 5, 1945**

Once again we started marching, this time for 15KM until we reached an evacuated town called Zehresndorf where we slept in an old barn. There we cooked some rice in our helmets – we got the rice from the Germans. We also slept in the old barn that night.

**February 6, 1945**

We started to march again. At this time the march was beginning to take its toll. I had a slight hernia and it was starting to pain. That's when I started shedding all my junk - ***except my little blower which was used to cook***. I was slowing down when a guard came up to me and put a gun in my back and said, "KEEP MOVING." I had no choice. As we kept marching I saw Jewish prisoners along side of the road dead. They were probably killed for the same reason. They wore the black and white uniforms. Germans hated them bad - I had no reason why.

I only had one thought in my mind. I had to get back home. ***I had a wife and daughter I haven't seen for a long time***. We marched another 20 KM and finally stopped in a garage at Kummondolf in some war plant.

***. . . . . That's where I saw Hitler in person.***

***February 7, 1945***

We started our march again until we reached the camp which was on the outside of the town of *Luckenwalde - Stalag IIIA*. There we found large tents - no buildings - with 400 men in a tent. No beds, just straw down on the ground. We were all tired out from the long trip and were very hungry at this time since the bread ration they gave us was gone. There was no water at this place - just a water pump outside and slit trenches for a latrine. We had no heat. Of course, we never did have heat or a bed no matter where we were. We just had wooden bunk beds stacked three high with some straw.

***February 8, 1945***

This morning we had to go outside for roll call which was done in every camp we stayed at. It was plenty cold outside - not much different from the inside.

***February 16, 1945***

I was sick again like back in July 1 of 1944 with malaria fever, chills and GI's. I had nothing to eat but German rations.

***February 17, 1945***

***One year of prison life.*** I was sick, lying on the ground in a tent of Stalag IIIA. Life was miserable at this place. The camp was small and this was the German's last stand. We were only 50 KM from Berlin. We could hear the action.

***March 1, 1945***

A big wind storm came up and tore our tent to nothing but rags. That night we had no tent, we slept outside under the stars - very cold.

***March 2, 1945***

There were only three tents left standing out of seven so that day four of us gathered up the remains of a tent and made ourselves a make-shift tent where we stayed for the night.

***March 3, 1945***

Still had no tent repairs, still out in the weather, storm was dying down.

***March 4, 1945***

Sunday – had mass outside and received communion – the first time since **IIIB**.

The weather got bad again and it started to snow. The wind picked up again and we were still out in the cold. At this point I was really getting tired and hungry, never knowing what the next day would bring, praying a little maybe the next day would be better and not to give up hope.

***March 5, 1945***

We were finally given a Red Cross parcel which was four men to a box. This was the first box issued to us since **Stalag IIIB**.

Can't complain – better than what they had given us. I always figured - have patience, things can get better.

***March 9, 1945***

We finally got a new tent, moved back in a new tent – and that day was a good day. We received another Red Cross parcel which was one box per man. Happy days again!!!! I was able to eat good one more time.

***March 20, 1945***

Today we had to go for another x-ray for tuberculoses.

***March 25, 1945***

Palm Sunday as a POW. In Stalag IIIA not much happening that day. It was the same old thing - lay around and do nothing.



***April 1, 1945***

Easter Sunday - a sad day as usual. We were cut back on German rations. Eight men had to share a loaf of bread and things were happening fast. I could feel it coming. Everything seemed to be changing. The Germans looked worried. All day and all night we could see the flashes from the bombing. Berlin was really taking a beating. We could see the bomber and fighters going over the camp, which we hadn't seen for a long time. It made me feel good.

***April 11, 1945***

Received more mail from home – a letter from my honey, my mother and Aunt Mary - which made me feel better.

***April 12, 1945***

Notice came down from headquarters that we were not going to move to another camp. This was the greatest news we had for a long time. It meant no more walking; also, I figured they had no place to move us. We were close to Berlin, their last chance. Things were at a close for the Germans. We were waiting for the big link up when all the armies came together.

Also that day we got the sad news that our president (*President Franklin D. Roosevelt*) had passed away - a shock to all Americans.

***April 21, 1945***

I woke up this morning, went outside to find that the Germans had left camp overnight. We were now in control of ourselves. We felt free to do as we pleased.

***April 22, 1945 - LIBERATED***

Russian tanks and infantry men came crashing through the fence and we were free once again. After they secured the camp they took off for Berlin. We were on our own once again. From that day on we were on our own. But it wasn't all over yet. Their planes came over camp and started to shoot at us. We gathered all the white material we could find and hung it on the fences. When they saw this they took off. Reason for that was our fighters were on their tail. We saw the biggest dog fight since we left the front lines.

Now we must wait until the Americans come to get us.

So now we have to eat. We had some cooks. They said they would cook if we got the food - so we did.

We spotted some pigs and cattle out in the field. Our job was to kill cattle and pigs. We had farmers in the outfit that knew how to do that. Now we need bread. We took a handful of men and went into town to the bakery; helped ourselves to a horse and wagon. People were outside of the bakery waiting for their rations for the day.

We felt – no way – now it's our turn to be in the driver's seat. So guess what we did. We went inside and raided the bakery, loaded up the wagon full of bread and went back to camp. That day we had a feast of steaks, pork chops and bread and fresh milk. It felt good to feel full again.

***May 5, 1945***

American trucks entered the camp to evacuate all the sick.

***May 6, 1945***

We were evacuated by Americans by truck from Stalag IIIA under American control and arrived at a town called Shonebeck at 11:30 AM.

***May 7, 1945***

We left Shonebeck at 8:00 PM and arrived at the airport in Hildesheim.

***May 8, 1945***

Still waiting for a plane to take us out of here. In the meantime I was able to write two letters back home - one to my wife and one to my mother.

***May 11, 1945***

Plane finally came to take us out. We left Germany about 8:30 AM on a plane called Lady Lillian and arrived in France at 12:00 noon in good shape at a place called Reims, France.

***May 12, 1945***

We left Reims airport on a C46 at 12:06 noon arrived in LeHarve at 11:30 and were taken from there by truck to a camp called Lucky Strike. That's where we were registered and took a shower and were given clean clothes.

***May 13, 1945***

Mother's Day is a quiet day, a day to be free and roam around the camp and meet men I haven't seen for a long time.

I sent a telegram home to Mary that we were alerted to move to D area which is a processing area to complete paper work to ship out. It rained like hell that day.

But, rain and all, we moved to D area after supper.

***May 24, 1945 - PROCESSED***

This was the day I was processed - given all kind of shots and a good physical.

***May 26, 1945***

We moved back to C area, C79.

***June 4, 1945***

Left Camp Lucky Strike at 11:00 AM by truck; arrived in LeHarve, France, which is a shipping port. My passage home was good old USA. It was about 2:00 PM and we were served coffee and doughnuts by the Red Cross. We boarded the SS Admiral Benson at 3:00 assigned to Deck A44, our sleeping quarters.

***June 5, 1945***

Finally at 8:00 we left LeHarve and were on our way home. *Nothing could be finer.*

The same day on board ship we were given a Red Cross parcel and good old GI money. Now I thought things were getting back to normal. **NOT SO** -- The ship spotted a floating mine off portside about 3:00. It took the Navy about an hour to sink it. Finally after an hour of battling with that stupid mine, we were on the way again.

***June 6, 1945***

Still sailing along and getting into rough water, the ship started tossing around and as you know, I was getting sea sick again. That is a miserable feeling. It continued all through the night.

***June 7, 1945***

Still on the high seas, weather still rough and I am still sick. Thinking to myself – will I EVER get back to the United States.

***June 8, 1945***

Our fourth day out to sea we ran into a heavy fog. Things aren't getting better. I was on top deck and saw the USS Johnson. It was one of the other boats heading the same way. At this point we were about half way home. Am feeling much better, knowing that we have a good chance of making it home.

***June 9, 1945***

This is our fifth day out to sea. The captain came over the speaker and said we were now three quarters across, making good time. Once again I was feeling bad. But, I didn't care. It won't be too long and I'll be off this old tub, **never to get back on another boat again.**

***June 10, 1945***

Our sixth day out and the captain said we had about 500 miles to go. He said hang in there fellows, I think we are going to make it. The weather was getting much better and the ocean was calm and a beautiful, sunny day was ahead. He always tried to make us feel good. He knew we were a bunch of sick POWs wanting to get back home. I felt much better now.

***June 11, 1945***

We sighted land at 7:00 PM. We anchored out in the harbor and stayed there overnight.

***June 12, 1945***

We set sail again and at 6:30AM finally passed the good old Statue of Liberty. She is the most beautiful lady one would ever want to meet after all the time on the water. It was a good feeling to know after all that time overseas I finally made it back.

**(AMEN)**

We docked at 7:30 AM in Manhattan, New York on Pier #98. There we were ferried across to New York and then put on a train to Camp Kilmer. But before we were put on the train we were given coffee and doughnuts by the Red Cross.

***June 13, 1945***

We are still at Camp Kilmer. We were processed and paid. We were supposed to go to Fort Dix but it was overloaded and we had to wait.

*June 14, 1945*

We were allowed to move to Fort Dix – 7:30 AM. We arrived at Fort Dix at 11:00 AM. There we were fed good food - all we wanted. At that time I was about **88 pounds from 135 pounds**. We had steaks, ice cream and all the cake we wanted.

*June 15, 1945*

The next morning we had a good breakfast and left at 4:30 PM. We were heading to a Philadelphia train station. When we arrived at the train station we boarded the train around 11:15.

*June 16, 1945*

We arrived in Pittsburgh at 7:30 AM. Now I know that I am really home. From Fort Dix I was given a 71 day furlough starting from June 15, 1945. When I got home *this was the first time I saw my daughter and wife*. My daughter was already two years old. It took quite a while to get acquainted with her. I spent the 71 days with my family and friends. Before I left I bought furniture and set my wife and daughter up in a two room apartment. I had to report back to Fort Dix. When I got back to Fort Dix I was given further orders. I was sent to Asheville, North Carolina. From there we were put on a train and went up to the mountains to the Biltmore Hotel for a rehabilitation program.

When we got there we were all given our own room. I felt like a VIP. I went down to breakfast the next morning and had a large breakfast. At the counter were all kinds of things to do - movie tickets, golf, free dinners at different restaurants, free bus tours - anything you wanted to do - FREE. I went on a bus tour that day to see the sights.

The next day I had to report for a physical. I had a different physical every day I was there. After five days of that I was sent back to Fort Dix for new orders. At Fort Dix I was given orders to report to Indiantown Gap for a discharge. I arrived at Indiantown Gap the next day and was processed, given my pay up to date and traveling expenses.

*September 8, 1945 – Discharged*

To save travel money I hitchhiked from the turnpike to Pittsburgh. I got a ride from a drunken couple. Traveling about 70 miles an hour I thought I'd never make it home. I got out at Westinghouse Bridge, took a cab from East Pittsburgh and . . . . .

**HOME.**