

**Das Stammlager der Luftwaffe VI in St. Wendel
by Roland Geiger, St. Wendel**

American Veterans of World War II recall their involuntary stay in our hometown in August 1944

"Statement:

"We give our word of honor as American NCOs that we will not undertake an escape attempt during our journey from Wetzlar to the prisoner-of-war camp of the Air Force number 6, St. Wendel". This statement was signed by T/Sgt John Davis Bacon, as the senior American Non-commissioned Officer (oldest American NCO) of this transport for all prisoners of war who participated in this journey. Each man, who broke this oath would be court-martialed in Germany or its allied countries.

Wetzlar, 17 August 1944

Technical Sergeant John Davis Bacon"

If allied air crews from England, France and later also America were shot down over Germany during WWII reached the ground alive and were captured without incurring more wounds, they could be called lucky men. Many of them heard that famous phrase which turned them from active soldiers into prisoners of war who were at the mercy of the enemy: "For you the war is over!"

Well, that was not really true. The POWs were locked up for that day and night and next morning transported by car or train to Oberursel, a town located north of Frankfurt. Here is where the so-called "Auswertestelle West" (=Interrogation Center West) was situated. The POWs were placed in solitary confinement and were interrogated. Often it turned up that those who interrogated them knew more about them and their units than the prisoners themselves.

From Oberursel the POWs travelled the Dulag Luft in Wetzlar, the transit camp of the German Luftwaffe. From there they move to one of the permanent camps near the Eastern border of the German Empire, the "Stammlager der Luftwaffe." These camps were better known by the abbreviation "Stalag Luft."

There were four of them: Stalag Luft 1 near Barth at the Baltic Sea was used mainly for officers; Stalag Luft 3 near Sagan SE of Dresden housed mainly officers and non-commissioned officers. Only NCOs and enlisted men were imprisoned at Stalag Luft 4 near Grosstychow, Pomerania, and at Stalag Luft 6 near Kiefheide, Lithauen. Other POWs were taken to camps of the German Wehrmacht which were spread throughout Germany and the occupied territories. Stalag 17B at Krams, Austria, is one of those camps. Many American and British veterans associations are full of ex-POW who had lived in these camps. They have many tales to tell.

In summer 1944, Stalag Luft 6 far away in the East was closed, not only because of complaints from the International Red Cross but also because of the Russian pressure against the Germans along the Russian front. The POWs of Luft 6 were transported to the new Luft 4 in the holes of old coal -transport ships under conditions far removed from any Geneva Treaty. Luft 4 opened on May 12. Up to 6500 POWs lived here. Once this camp was full, allied officers were taken to the Luft 1 and 3 like before. Enlisted men were taken to Luft 4 near Grosstychow-- and for five weeks to the brand new Stalag Luft 6 in the west of German Reich at St. Wendel.

In the so-called flak camp--today that's the street named "Am Schlaufenglan" behind the new market garden--a large truck shed was surrounded with barb-wire and placed into service as a permanent camp for POWs. But all of these measures were absolutely provisional at first.

"I do not think Stalag VI was ever really built. During my short stay there we lived in a building perhaps 60 to 80 feet or more long and 15 to 20 feet deep with [a] large huge door opening to the front and no beds or other furniture, enclosed with wire fence + gates."

John D. Bacon from Auburn, Minnesota, described his days at Stalag VI. He was the flight engineer of a B-24 Liberator shot down over Saarbrücken on August 9, 1944. Bacon, also known as "Kriegsgefangener Nr. 4198." became leader of 117 American POWs--the first contingent to be accommodated in the "new" camp near St. Wendel.

Martin C. Chavez from Albuquerque, New Mexico, was shot down on August 6, 1944, over Brandenburg near Berlin by flak. After nearly a week of interrogation at Frankfurt he came to St. Wendel by train:

"The camp was an old German motor pool with fencing around it. No doctor, no latrine. We used a "ditch"--eliminated at night in old wine barrels-- dumped into ditch next morning. There was nothing special--no books-- walked and talked all day--very boring, boring."

Among the first to arrive was John H. Anderson from Mexico Beach, Florida. His B-17 Flying Fortress had been shot down during a mission to Berlin. He hid his diary in the inside cover of his bible. Here are his impressions and experiences, as he wrote them down day by day:

"After one night in a jail in Berlin I was sent by train to Frankfurt the next day. I stayed a while at Oberursel, just north of Frankfurt, for interrogation and then took a train to Dulag Luft at Wetzlar on August 10. On the 14th a group of close to 100 men left Wetzlar on a train and went back to Frankfurt where we witnessed an American bombing raid. We arrived at St. Wendel on the 16th and marched through town to get to the camp.

"The camp was not yet completed. We were placed in a large garage-like building just outside the camp. The Germans opened all the canned goods we had so we had to eat the food immediately.

"Thursday, August 17

Finished up Red Cross food. Helped unload beds from truck. The weather is rather hot. Bread for breakfast, soup for lunch and bread for supper."

Radio Operator Charles W. Hartney from Wichita Falls, Texas, was shot down August 6, 1944, over Hamburg. He rode a train through destroyed Hamburg to the Dulag Luft at Wetzlar and arrived on August 10. August 15 found him at St Wendel. He remembers the way to the camp very well:

"We walked--can't remember how far though. The camp was on a hill--we crossed over the river on our way. From the camp when we looked at the hospital there was the Marshal Tobacco Co. on the right. I was there again in 1959 and they were building new houses on that spot. This hospital was large and had several barracks. I was taken there to get my upper plante [denture] repaired which had been broken into 3 pieces when I was captured. On the way from town to the camp was a road sign "38 km to Saarbrücken." I saw that sign again in '59

The area had huge truck, maintenance like, barns. I think that we were all in one large building with 3 bunks. We used a huge wooden vat for[an] overnight latrine (like half a large wine cask). The Germans had their own latrine (toilets). In fact, Frank Dwyer and I hid in one of the boarded up stalls in an escape attempt the night before they moved us out. That night we were placed into solitaire within the German compound.

I came in with the first group--probably 15 Aug 44. I think that about 3 groups joined us-- maybe 500 total--all US and we left 9 Sept 44 (Frank Dwyer kept a diary) by rail..

(from Anderson's diary)

"Friday, August 18

Three enlisted men of my crew arrived and joined two of us in camp. Helped them eat their parcels. It is good to have friends. Things could be worse.

James I. Myers from Logansport, Indiana, was shot down on July 31, 1944. He was on his 31st mission--four more and he could have gone home. Instead, he landed in a small police station not too far from Saarbrücken.

"The town's people came to the jail to take us out and hang us. The soldiers stopped them. Next morning early they trucked us out to St. Wendel.." Like most of the other ex-prisoners of war, Myers still has his German dog tag "tags that I was given, I believe while at St. Wendel. Stalag Luft 6 No. 4123"

(from Anderson's diary)

"Saturday, 19. August:

Didn't do much all day long. The soup for lunch and supper was quite poor. Washed and shaved. Washed clothes. Need a haircut. A lot of extra time on my hands. Camp going better. New latrine tomorrow.

Ray E. Cook from Marianna, Florida, was a ball turret gunner of a B-17 nicknamed "Green Banana" when his plane was shot down on August 16, 1944, near Zeitz. From his time at St. Wendel he remembers that one morning a German guard ordered him and some others to come along to the outside of the camp "to steal some potatoes for food".

(from Anderson's diary)

"Sunday, 20 August:

Up at 6:30. Was on detail making beds. Missed part of church service. Had better dinner. Potatoes in soup. A little more soup for supper.

Karl Haeuser from Cayucos, California, was front gunner of "Mopsy", a light bomber of the A-20G type. His plane was shot down on the evening of August 4, 1944, near Couronne, France (SE of Rouen) by German flak. He was taken to the local air force base, then by truck to Evreux where he stayed two days in a church near a German airfield. He and other captives proceeded to Paris and Metz by train. During the eight-day trip their train was strafed by allied fighters. They reached St. Wendel on August 20.

"I think we walked from the train. The barracks were on a hill and we could see the town from outside."

He remembers airplanes that dropped leaflets on the town and the camp in which the people were asked to surrender in peace.

"Because I could speak a little German and understand more, I spoke as often as I could with the Hauptman in charge. He had been wounded on the Eastern front and was no longer fit for combat duty. He told me that we should be home by Christmas, and also that his home was only about 300 kms from there, and he had not been home for 3 years!" Unfortunately he cannot remember the name.

(from Anderson's diary)

"21. August:

Up at 6:00. Read New Testament some more. Had fair lunch. Played cards. After dinner I helped peel potatoes. Ate a couple of raw potatoes and felt better.

"22. August:

Worked outside of camp shoveling dirt into a hole. Felt weak. Wrote letter home. Slept a little while. Quite hot. Took a cold water bath. Food fair. Cabbage in soup. Played cards.

"Just a short distance from camp was a tremendous hole, probably dug for an air raid shelter and then abandoned. According to the Geneva Conventions, sergeants who are prisoners of war do not themselves have to work but may be made to supervise work. All the POWs at the

camp were sergeants from the Air Force. We talked it over among ourselves and decided to protest the work assignment. The Germans cut our meal saying, "no work, no eat". We met again and decided it would be wise to work, or, at least, give the appearance of working. A work detail was out filling up the hole most of the daylight hours, but we didn't work hard. It would have taken months to fill up that hole.

"23. August:

Had to go on detail shoveling dirt again. Worked harder this time. Had jam on bread for both breakfast and supper. Soup not so good. Didn't do much afterwards. Helped make a deck of cards. Hot today.

"24. August:

Stayed in bed most of morning. Went on detail putting beds together. Not hard. Took cold water bath. Got Red Cross parcel. Had 2 bowls of soup for supper and salmon. Morale much higher. Felt good.

"25. August:

Up early. Played cards during morning. Rained. Chow was late. Soup was good. Had a couple of air raid alerts during day. Last one during supper. Food is plentiful now. Talked with fellows. Good fellows. Had haircut.

SSgt Leeland T. Engelhorn from San Diego, California, (15 AF 55 Bomb Wing 456 BG 780 BS), was a ball -turret gunner on a B-24 when he was shot down on August 3, 1944, on the way back from Friedrichshafen to Italy high above the Alps. He was captured 18 days later and taken to a hospital near Imst, Austria. A German officer accompanied him to Dulag Luft, Wetzlar, and then directly to St. Wendel. He arrived August 25. There he met three other members of his crew. He recalls the camp:

"The building that I was detained in was, I think, a large round building-- used as a motor pool, garage or maybe house barn--open--with straw on floor--no latrines--very filthy. It was surrounded by barbed wire with machine gun towers at intervals. All of us picked up body lice there because of the unsanitary conditions."

(from Anderson's diary)

"Saturday, 26. August:

Had air raid during night. Bombs fairly close. After roll call I washed clothes. Another air raid. Slept part of afternoon. Another alert at supper. Food like oatmeal (barley) today. Tomorrow we eat good.

"Sunday, 27. August:

Stayed in bed late. Roll call at 9:00. Went to church. Could be better. Ate a lot of food for dinner. Slept in afternoon. Air raid twice.

"Monday, 28. August:

I should accomplish more. I would feel better. Got another Red Cross parcel. Still had some cheese left from last one. Played cards with crew.

"Tuesday, 29. August:

Cooler. Ate breakfast. Had jam on bread and coffee. Roll call. Had soup and milk for lunch. Soup and milk and corn beef for dinner. Rained some. Not enough to do. I believe this was the only time we were given some milk. It probably came from powdered milk in the Red Cross parcel. Evidently, the food was being prepared in the kitchen inside the camp. At the next camp each "kriegie" (POW) received 14 cans of powdered milk a week to do with as he pleased. Except for Thanksgiving and Christmas weeks [which] were on half-rations of Red Cross food. Food was more plentiful at St. Wendel

"Wednesday, 30. August:

Cloudy and cooler all day. Stayed in bed most of morning. Maurer sick. Took a nap in the afternoon. Started to think of music. Wrote to my sister Vivian. Had air raid as usual.

"Thursday, 31. August:

Cold and cloudy all day. Played cards. Slept. Meals fair. Hope we aren't here too long. Talked as usual.

"Friday, 1. September:

Air raids off and on all day. Six raids altogether. No bread for lunch and not much for supper. Laid in bed and thought a lot. I wish I had something to do to take up time.

"Saturday, 2. September:

Rained all day long. Got two slices of bread for breakfast. Soup no good for lunch. Opened up can of salmon. Had spinach for dinner. Slept in afternoon. Washed. Quite cool. Talked a lot.

"Monday, 4. September:

Cold night. Windy and cold but finally warmed up in afternoon. Air raid lasted all morning. Talked with Maurer. Dinner was late. Read Testament. Had two cups of coffee for supper. Sat in sun awhile.

"Tuesday, 5. September:

Air raid lasted all morning. Went after potatoes for dinner. Had plenty to eat. Tanks getting close so they evacuated camp. Marched down to railroad. Got in box car. Quite crowded 46 men & 7 guards. Plenty of bread and butter. Played cards.

"We were not surprised to have to leave camp. We must have had a minimum of 15 air raids while we were there during which we had to remain under cover. There were a number of Italians around camp who were workers, but they did not work very hard. If we had ever been able to get into the camp it would have been a nice set-up, but this was not to be."

The approaching tanks which Anderson described were some hundred miles away. On June 6, 1944, allied troops had landed in Normandy and were fighting their way through France toward Germany. It would last another 7 months until March 19, 1945, for the first US tanks to reach St. Wendel.

From St. Wendel to the East

All prisoners were moved by train via Frankfurt to Stalag Luft 4 in Pomerania. They marched through St. Wendel where the German guards took their shoes to prevent them from escaping during the train ride. They were kept in the infamous and totally overcrowded 8x4 cattlecars. In addition there was a machine gun position at every corner ready to fire at will. It took them five days to reach Kiefheide and Stalag Luft 4. Here they were given back their shoes and were forced to walk to the camp.

Stalag Luft 4 was evacuated on February 6, 1945, as the Russian forces drew nearer. In one of the coldest winters of the century, the POWs were forced to leave the camp. It was icy cold and their clothing and equipment and clothes provided little shelter against the bitter cold. Those without any power to walk fell to the ground. The fortunate ones were allowed to lay on a cart pulled by their comrades. Others froze to death or were shot down without mercy. The Death March moved through Northern Germany in all directions and ended up 83 days and 1,200 kilometers later near Hamburg where they were "captured" by the advancing American and British forces.

Return to St. Wendel

The Stalag Luft 6 camp of St. Wendel is not depicted on any maps including those in various POW books published in America. I happened to find a note about it by pure chance. Local sources, like the St. Wendel City Archives, only contain a very short reference about it. The archives state there was a camp for British officers who came from the East and went later back to the East.

And so it happened that former American prisoners of war returned to St. Wendel to see what happened to "their" camp and didn't find anything left. No trace was left of the site nor was there a trace in the memory of the people from St. Wendel.

Winfred Riemer: "My wife, Melva, and I made a trip to Germany in 1972 and drove to St. Wendel in search of the camp that was called Stalag-Luft No. 6. However, we could find no trace of the camp, but we did visit your city. Unfortunately, when we asked for information, no one could help us."

Carl Haeuser: "I went there in 1987. I hoped to locate the barracks, or some evidence of the camp. We spoke to several people, at the Rathaus, at the post office, and on the streets. NO ONE was willing to even acknowledge that there had been a camp there. We drove around a little, but too much growth had wiped out any evidence of the camp."

Paul Kelly wrote in a letter: " In 1993 I along with another POW friend of mine from the 446th BG went back to England to visit our old airbase. We went to Otterbach, Germany, a few miles from Kaiserslautern, picked up our friend Klaus Vogel and went to St. Wendel to see if we could find out where the camp was located. I did not know until I received your letter that there were other camps in the area. Like you, we talked to several people but no one seemed to know anything about the camps. After searching we finally decided on the hill where the camp was located. The area is now a residential area with beautiful homes. Klaus did talk to a lady that lived on the hill and she told him that she thought that there had been a camp at the base of the hill in a wooded area. We explored the area and did find an old foundation that appeared to have been an old barracks, but it was not the camp. I feel certain that the residential area on top of the hill was the location of the camp, but I have no proof. I did not remember the landmarks that you mentioned in your questionnaire, but I did see them when I returned to St. Wendel, and we could have seen them from where the camp was located. I wish I could give you the location of the hill, but as I remember from my visit the hill was higher than the surrounding area. Perhaps you can pinpoint the location. As I recall the lady Klaus talked to owned a taxi company.

"I was not surprised that the people did not want to talk to Americans about the camp and told us that they did not know anything about them. But I am surprised that they told you, a resident of St. Wendel, that they know nothing of the camp. After all we did march from the train to the camp and then walked back to the train when the camp was evacuated."

It was very hard to convince the former prisoners of the fact that the citizens of St. Wendel don't hide any knowledge of the camp. They simply don't know anything about it. It was a Luftwaffe camp, and the soldiers who served there did not come from from St. Wendel.

After the camp was evacuated on September 5, 1944, there was no one left locally who knew anything about it. Other than in the memories of the former guards who survived the war and about five hundred Americans who were imprisoned here for about five weeks, Stalag Luft 6 slipped into wartime anonymity.

These Americans were kept in Stalag Luft 6:

	name	Number	residence (current)
John H.	Anderson		Mexico Beach, 753?
John D.	Bacon	4198	Auburn, MI
John H.	Beattie		Broomal, Pennsylvania
Winston W.	Burroughs		Waldorf, Maryland
Robert L.	Cash		Dallas, Texas
Martin C.	Chavez	4155	Albuquerque, NM
Ray E.	Cook		Marianna, FL
D.D.	Dorfmeir	4054	
A.E.	Dowell	4049	
Larry E.	Doyle	4053	Carmichael, California

J.J.	Dunphy		deceased
P.W.	Duran	4051	
Francis E.	Dyer	4055	deceased
O.W.	Elsrod	4062	
Leeland T.	Engelhorn		San Diego, CA
E.J.	Enghauser	4217	
John K.	Eschbach	4216	Tyrone, Pennsylvania
H.G.	Feldkamp	4019	deceased
E.L.	Ferris	4057	
Jack R.	Fetteroff	4195	Ardmore, Pennsylvania
Jack D.	Fisher	4395	Fairfield, Texas
M.G.	Flores	4059	
Cecil O.	Glover		Chatham, New Jersey
Karl	Haeuser		Cayucos, California
Earl	Hansen		deceased
John P.	Harper		West Point, Virginia
Charles W.	Hartney		Wichita Falls, Texas
Otha B.	Huckaby		Austin, Texas
John P.	Hunter		River Head, New York
J.L.	Kavanaugh	4226	
James A.	Kelley		Richmond, Virginia
Paul L.	Kelly		Twin Falls, Indiana
L.A.	Knotle	4017	
Geo W.	Light		Girard, Ohio
Walter J.	Luke		Castroville, California
Buck S.	Martin		Unionville, Connecticut
James D.	Myers		Logansport, Indiana
Chester	Natanek	4245	deceased
Leon J.	Peraga		Glastonbury, Connecticut
Winfried	Riemer		Brillion, Wisconsin
F.L.	Spinoza	4188	
John R.	Vuchetich		South Park Falls, Wisconsin