



JOHN R. ELLIS
CPL – U.S. ARMY
WWII – P.O.W.

John R. Ellis enlisted in the U.S. Army on April 14, 1941 - in December 1941 World War II began and promised to change his life forever. He served basic training in Fort Meade, Maryland and then went on to field training in North and South Carolina before being transferred to Texas for field artillery training. After field artillery training he was assigned to the 805th Tank Destroyer Battalion and in February of 1942 was activated and sent to England for 2 months before shipping out to North Africa to engage the Germans. It was in Tunisia at the Battle of Kasserine Pass (February 1943) that John, along with many other members of his battalion were captured by the Germans. CPL Ellis was classified as being Missing In Action (MIA) until July of 1943 when his wife, Evelyn, was finally notified he was actually a Prisoner Of War (POW) being held in Germany.

STALAG IIIB and STALAG VIIA, among others, were two of the German concentration camps that housed Army CPL John R. Ellis of Mercer, PA. It was at STALAG VIIA that John met his life-long friend, Chester "Chet" Burger (a 2016 MMD500 Honoree). The interment was bleak and having another Mercer Countian proved to be a bit uplifting. There were American and Russian prisoners of war at STALAG VIIA and their camps were separated by only a fence, yet, the Russians were so much more hated by the Germans and received much harsher treatment. John spent 28 days in solitary confinement once for sharing his one slice of bread for the day with a Russian prisoner on the other side of that fence.

Over the 28 months he was interred as a POW, John traded packages that his wife, Evelyn, sent to him through the Red Cross for extra food, clothes and medical supplies so he could help the other American prisoners in the concentration camp. Many were sick and didn't have warm clothes, medicine or enough food. He kept requesting chocolate and cigarettes even though he

did not smoke or care for chocolate. John's wife later learned that these items were the "best items for trading" with the Germans for the supplies that were needed. Trading with the Germans was risky but necessary for survival. He was a true inspiration to other men in the camp with him and he tried to encourage them during his interment.....many of his actions will be remembered only by the men who were there – and – they are slowly passing on.

John Ellis befriended a German medic, Fritz, and traded 25 packs of cigarettes for a camera and rolls of film. John used this camera to chronicle life at the concentration camp from the viewpoint of a Prisoner Of War. He photographed other prisoners, the encampment, nearby battles and the German officers. Being caught with the camera would have meant a severe punishment. He kept the camera hidden inside the wall behind his bunk. His friend, Chet Burger, was his trusted "look out" in this activity and the German medic smuggled in film and got the film processed for him. John continued his involvement with the medic for years after returning home from the war. John Ellis and his wife sent care packages to Fritz and his family for over 15 years and then the communications suddenly and unexpectedly stopped coming.

John Ellis' brave acts of trading with the German medic and secretly photographing this aspect of the war enabled him to record a piece of history for many generations to come. Many of John's photographs have been published in books, articles and newspapers to show the people of America what the men serving our country endured while living in the concentration camps of Germany.

For his many brave acts during World War II, John received many commendations and the European African Middle Eastern Service Medal with a Bronze Star Service Medal.

John R. Ellis was the son of Mr. and Mrs. C. A. Ellis of Mercer. The Ellis family had 4 sons serving on foreign soil at one time during World War II – CPL. John R Ellis served in England and Tunisia before being captured; SGT Ira Ellis in England; PVT Clyde Ellis in France; and Pfc. James Ellis in England and France. He had 3 sisters who were diligent in taking over the 4 brothers' newspaper routes and holding their jobs for them until their return.

John married Evelyn Bear and they had 5 children – J. Bruce (Rose), Rebecca (Wayne) Pears, Paul (Doris), Elizabeth "Lib" (Paul) Morris, and Robert (Laurie). Mr. and Mrs. Ellis were life-long residents of Mercer.