

Bob Reagan, Assistant Director of Communications, recently made a nostalgic journey into the southern part of France where exactly two decades ago, he parachuted from an Air Force B-17 shot down by enemy anti-aircraft fire.

Last September, Reagan attended a joint meeting of the Airline Electronic Engineers Committee in Brussels. Prior to the meeting, he and his son vacationed for three weeks throughout Europe. Three days of the tour were pleasantly spent visiting near Cognac with Gerard Castillon du Perron.

First Meeting Different

Not so on Reagan's first acquaintance with Perron twenty years ago. Then a technical sergeant — radio operator/gunner, Reagan was barely 18 years old. He was just out of training and on his first mission when anti-aircraft fire sent his plane catapulting earthward. Recalls Reagan, "There was a barrage of bullets, flak, and fire; then, I was out. I remember that my parachute fell behind the am-

came rushing up to Reagan. They led him to the kitchen where the Germans interrogated him for some three hours. From then on, Reagan, though somewhat apprehensive, was more curious than frightened.

Gestapo Meant Solitary

He was taken to Gestapo headquarters in Cognac, and after one night there, a midnight ride to Bordeaux, and four days and nights of solitary at Gestapo headquarters in Frankfort, Reagan and three boxcars of other prisoners made the six day ride to Krems, Austria.

Thus began 16 months as a prisoner of war in the Nazi's infamous Stalag 17. For "Kriegies" — shortened from the German "kriegesgefangener" meaning "war prisoner" — the period was spent in lice-infested barracks that leaked when it rained. Kriegies were fed poorly, and water was available only three times a day. Sometimes, food and/or water was withheld for days at a time as punishment for some infraction of German rules.

tries were located in adjoining areas, but the Germans tried to keep them apart from each other as much as possible. The Russians fared the worst. They did not have the advantage of an agency such as the Red Cross to provide them with supplemental food. And they weren't protected by such wartime agreements as benefited the Americans. However, although U. S. prisoners were not allowed to work under an agreement of the Geneva Convention, it turned out to be somewhat of a disadvantage. Those who worked on the farms sometimes were able to pilfer food.

It was not all bad, however, according to Reagan. It is true that the prisoners suffered from disease as well as from idleness and they certainly missed feminine company, but, otherwise, the boys found ways to spend their time. They organized a theater using, as in Shakespeare's day, male actors for all roles. They formed a softball team and constructed a boxing ring. And, of course, harrass-



Reagan's son, Bob, Jr., the Frenchman, Perron, and Reagan himself survey the spot where Reagan parachuted from his Air Force plane.

Reagan Recalls Kriegie Days

munition boxes when the plane was hit, so I had to jump with a spare chute that just happened to be on board. It was on upside down, too."

He landed "scared stiff" but unhurt, in an open field near Perron's estate. The Frenchman and three German soldiers

But the German soldiers were like babysitters compared to the storm troops and Gestapo that inspected the camp about once a week. "When they came around," recalls Reagan, "we kept quiet and out of sight."

Americans Had It Best

P. O. W.'s from other coun-

ing the enemy held a certain amount of intrigue. Escapes were always imminent, though none was successful. Morale was, in general, quite good.

Only a few were unable to withstand the strain. Occasionally, a man would be so burdened by imprisonment that he might run wildly across the warning wire and throw himself senselessly at the high, barbed fence. To do so was suicide, since the German guards were under orders to shoot without question anyone who trespassed over the wire.

4500 Americans Marched

It was in April, under threat of advancing Allied forces, that the Nazi's moved all able-bodied prisoners to Brannau in a 200 mile, 18 day march. Kriegies were fed only once in the 18 days. They foraged additional chickens, eggs, and potatoes along the way. The motley 4500 Americans spent less than two weeks in the rain-drenched woods of Brannau. What shelter they had, they built for themselves out of wood, bark strips, and foliage. The Allies liberated the prisoners on the 11th day, May 5, 1945.

Second Visit For Reagan

Reagan's September trip was

the second such visit to Cognac. Two years ago, he and his wife actually stayed with Perron, although this time the large house was already occupied by the Frenchman's relatives.

The two men, Reagan and Perron, have developed a friendship out of the wartime happening. Reagan, shortly after being liberated, testified in Perron's behalf when the latter was charged with turning the American flyer over to the Nazis. Though the charge was untrue — three Germans were on the spot when Reagan hit the ground — Perron was imprisoned and some of his property confiscated by political enemies.

It is still one of Reagan's greatest hopes that the Frenchman will be able to visit him here in America.

Would Repeat Experience

In thinking back over his war experiences, Reagan commented, "There's no doubt that it was an adventurous experience — especially for a young boy. I'd probably do it all over again if I knew it would turn out the same way. The worst part of all was that three of my crew didn't make it."



Ben Phelper

One hundred and thirty-six men had to share one tub of soup. The Germans sometimes warned Kriegies to watch for worms and small bugs which were unavoidably cooked with the chow.



After the march to Brannau, a soldier listens to news of Allied victories on a crystal set made from soap dishes and parts smuggled in by the French.

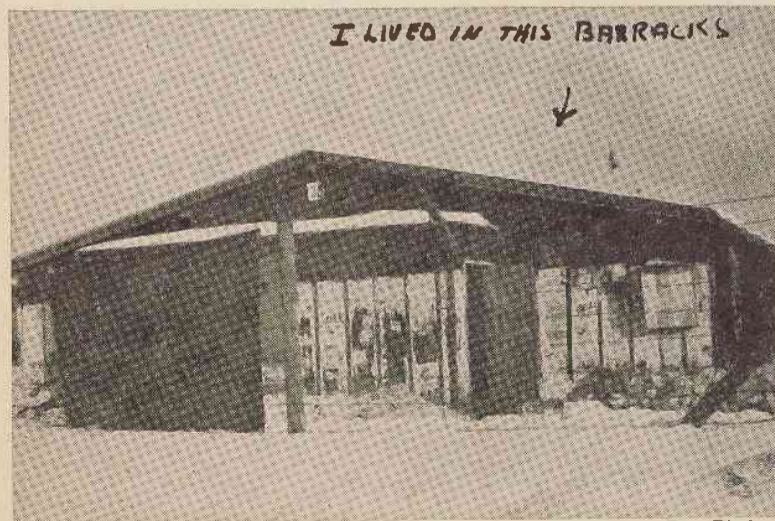


Ben Phelper

Two Kriegies carry back fruits of Red Cross "pay day." Sometimes, the Germans would puncture canned goods with a bayonet, but they had to let the Red Cross supplies through because of Geneva war agreements.



Only 11 days were spent in the makeshift campsite that took 18 days to reach. It rained 10 of those 11 days. The men managed to build shelters out of the wood and grass found in the area.



Ben Phelper

Reagan's barracks is an indication of living conditions. Tin cans and drains hung from barracks ceiling to catch the drips from a leaking roof. In the foreground is a blanket drying on the barbed fence.