Vignettes of a stalag...

Recalling a dismal winter

One winter we were in a stalag outside Kiefheidi, a village near the Polish border, and the weather, like the quarters, was less than charming.

In the barracks, each room housed 16 prisoners and was heated by a small coal stove. The daily ration of fuel was 16 bricks of coal, one per man.

During the day, when we could move about the compound and work up body heat, the fire was banked and kept barely alive.

In the long stretches of the night, when the cold settled in and movement about the room was severely restricted, we would rise stiffly from the floor mats from time to time and huddle in turn about the tiny stove, rubbing and beating to get the circulation going.

In the steel-gray days, when the sky seemed as low as our spirits, touch football and running, an ungainly and panting version of today's jogging,

helped to ward off the cold. Partly because of that winter, I suppose, I still can't look at a jogger pumping along in Adidas and a designer sweatsuit and Walkman earphones without instant revulsion.

One of the educated among us figured out, possibly by touching his hand to his scalp, that an enormous amount of body heat was lost by not wearing a hat. And suddenly, knit caps began appearing all over the compound.

An enterprising group was turning sweaters into headgear, filling orders through an unravelling and knitting operation. Depending on the design, two or three caps could be produced from a long-sleeved sweater. A deluxe model, with bill, earflaps and chin strap, went for 20 cigarettes plus the yarn.

Among many valuable lessons in that winter of despair, I learned that lice were far better able than I was to withstand the bitter cold. Once in a while, to break the monotony and with illusions of becoming lice-free, I washed my clothes and hung them outside to freeze-dry.

Once the clothes had frozen stiff, in a couple of hours or so, not a louse could be found anywhere, in the seams or snuggled in a cuff, not even a nit. I rejoiced in the thought that I would be sleeping and walking around in my clothes without company for a while.

Then, as soon as the clothes thawed and before I could even get them on again, there those little devils would be, scampering along the inseams, whetting their appetites. They went with me all the way into France and finally said goodbye when I headed for Le Havre; they might have gone on to Paris.

One of the lighter moments in that miserable winter came with the arrival of a bomber crew still wearing khakis and Florida suntans. The crew had ditched in the Atlantic when the plane developed engine trouble.

A German sub plucked them from the briny and they were deposited in our little compound, their plans for gamboling on Miami Beach gone terribly wrong.

The winter outside Kiefheidi eventually laid me low in an unexpected way. The final blow came during one of my futile attempts at delousing.

A surprise roll-call – one of the Germans' continuing efforts to discover contraband – caught me with my clothes frozen stiff. After I stood for an hour in ankle-deep slush without socks or pants, my feet turned Carolina Blue.

Chafed and toasted by the little coal stove, the feet still refused to function properly. Not even the lice would have anything to do with them. I

spent the rest of the war peeling my feet and stomping them for circulation.

Since then I have never taken winter weather seriously, especially not in North Carolina, although I still grouse about sleet from time to time, mainly to make conversation.

2/10/85