

Memories of a POW

by Charles A. Slavens

as told to Thomas P. Slavens

In 1942 we left the United States and landed in Northern Ireland where we first heard rumors that we would participate in an invasion of North Africa. We spent approximately nine months in Northern Ireland before being shipped to Scotland for amphibious training.

After we left Scotland we were at sea for approximately six weeks before making the initial invasion of North Africa near Algiers. General Clark had done a fine job in preparing a safe landing for us, and we had little resistance at the point at which we entered Africa.

I was with the Medical Corps working on detached service in a hospital while we prepared a task force to attempt to cope with the forces of German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, who was pushing from the south and east toward Tunis. Our task force consisted of approximately three thousand men. As part of Company C of the 109th Medical Battalion, we were involved in attempting to cut Rommel off from the African coast.

The largest gun that our troops had was a seventy-five millimeter, while the Germans had eighty-eights mounted on their Mark IV tanks. On February 14, 1943, in a valley called Faid Pass, Rommel's troops appeared over the brink of the mountains in the desert. This combat was probably the first our troops had seen, and they were startled to see the tanks coming

over the crests instead of through the pass. Our troops began firing when the German tanks were well out of range; Rommel simply sat back.

Then Rommel pulled his tanks to a point where he was able to spot all of our artillery and to accurately assess our strength. With such an army poised against our task force, we had no chance. They knocked out all our artillery while keeping out of our range. Then the German infantry simply started moving with the German armor; they were so confident that their men rode on the sides of the tanks to where we were. They had the benefit of a great deal of air power and, in a few hours, they were able to beat our troops decisively. We were not equipped in any way to deal with such an onslaught.

Being an unarmed medic, I had dug a fox-hole as had a friend. I told my friend that we should shout back and forth to each other to learn if either of us was in danger. His father was a funeral director in Altoona, Pennsylvania, and he had sent his son a cigarette case on which was an advertisement for his funeral home in Altoona and his telephone number. With all the firing going on, I was smoking a good deal and kept looking at that advertising for the funeral home. Finally, I threw the cigarette case away because I feared that I might be using such services before I wanted them.

Suddenly I called to my friend and he did not answer; I thought that I should go find out what

had happened to him. I started to crawl from my foxhole to go to see if I could help my friend. He had spotted some Germans and had not answered my call because he was afraid of being captured by them. When I came to his hole, I found myself looking into the barrel of an eighty-eight millimeter gun not more than twenty-five feet away. A German soldier came over to where I was and said in perfect English, "Hands up! For you the war is over." Then he proceeded to search me to make sure that I had no weapons even though I was wearing an armband with a red cross indicating that I was a medic. We did not even have side arms.

They started rounding up the American soldiers in the area; they numbered about three thousand. My company was captured intact because we were not armed and our commanding officer thought that we should not resist or try to escape lest there be many casualties. After our capture they marched us to a village where we slept in sheds and shanties. The next morning they started moving us towards Sfax. We walked all day without water or food. The first drink that I had was along a road where some water was standing in a ditch. The water was filled with worms and one had to brush them aside in order to get a drink. When in need of food or water, however, the animal instinct becomes more prominent and I was glad to get water even if it was wormy.

We marched all that day and at night we slept on the ground with only our clothes for bedding. Although the desert was hot during the day, it was extremely cold at night for anyone lying on the sand. We tried to dig holes in the ground to escape the desert wind. Groups of three or four men would lie next to each other to share body warmth. Although the arrangement was fairly warm, it was also quite uncomfortable.

The next morning we started walking again and marched until about three o'clock in the afternoon. We were frightened because we had

heard of mass killing of prisoners. Then, suddenly, they lined us up four abreast in something resembling a gravel pit with our backs to a wall. The Germans set up two machine guns across the road from this embankment. We thought they were going to shoot us and bulldoze dirt over the tops of our bodies and bury us there. We had heard a good deal of propaganda before we were captured about what would happen to us if we were taken prisoner. In actuality, they gave us a can of sardines and a little chunk of bread apiece. It was our first food since being captured.

Then they marched us for several miles. Because we were the first Americans who had been captured, Rommel came along in a jeep to see us. He said nothing, but being in the area he wanted to see his first American prisoners.

Then they marched us until we came to a penned-in area in the desert where we slept. In the middle of the night, however, trucks came, picked us up, and took us to Sfax. During this time, we had received no food except for the sardines and bread. From Sfax they transported us in about four days to Tunis, where we received our first warm food. It consisted of something resembling black-eyed peas. We had no utensils. If one happened to have an empty can, the peas or beans were served in that. I had such a can and received my first warm food in that container. When I started to eat the vegetables, I looked into the can and saw that the peas or beans were wormy. They had not thoroughly boiled the peas or beans and the worms were still wiggling. We waited until dark to eat our first warm meal after being captured so that we might not see the worms.

At this time, they began separating us. I was taken by air from Tunis to southern Italy, where, with about one hundred fifty other men, I stayed for approximately six months. At this point, the Geneva convention did not seem to apply to us. We were furnished no Red Cross parcels; we lived on German

rations, and we were subjected to forced labor. A great deal of ammunition had been hauled to this area by rail by the Germans, and in the mountainous terrain it was unloaded and stored.

In violation of the Geneva convention, they forced us to load any ammunition which was then flown or shipped to Africa from southern Italy for use against our fellow Americans. Knowing that this was not permitted by the Geneva convention we decided to strike.

They usually would force us to go out at four o'clock in the morning and we would load ammunition all day. They would then bring us back before dark for our one meal of the day. When we told them that we were not going to load any more ammunition, they laughed and said, "That's fine. We'll cut off your water and food until you decide to load the trucks."

We stayed out until nearly four o'clock in the morning. After one has been without food or water for twenty-four hours, however, one tends to become cooperative. We, therefore, loaded their trucks and they took us in and gave us a small can of soup and a small slice of bread. Such were our rations in those days. Occasionally we would get what was called 'butter', which was said to be a coal or petroleum product.

Once I was loading ammunition in piles about the size of a two-car garage when the Americans or the British strafed the valley. During the strafing I was concerned that they were going to hit the ammunition and cause a chain reaction which would have blown up the whole valley. I thought that if I were going to die I would just as soon go in great fashion. I lay down by the largest pile of ammunition and thought that that was the way to go! Fortunately, they did not set off a single pile of ammunition.

At that camp there were twenty-eight men for each five-man tent. We slept in our clothes and we soon became extremely lousy. It did not do any good to take a bath or try to delouse

because of the crowded conditions. With so many men in a tent of that size, one got rid of the lice one day only to get them back in bed that night from the other men. We became inured to lice during the six months that we were in that camp. There was much dysentery but there were few attempts to escape. A few fellows tried to break out but they really had nowhere to go.

When the Americans hit Sicily, the Germans had no knowledge of where they would land. They knew that an attempt to invade the mainland would soon be made. Thus they roused us in the middle of one night and after marching us for the remainder of that night, they loaded us onto an old boxcar which then started to pull out of the station. We were almost immediately attacked by American planes. The pilots had no way of knowing we were on the train. The concussion from the bombs blew the doors off the car. Hearing more bombs coming, I surmised that they were going to hit in my vicinity and I dove between the railroad track and the platform and got my head down for protection. When the dust cleared, I placed my one hand on the body of a German guard who only moments before had been standing upright on the platform but whose throat had been cut by a piece of shrapnel. I put my other hand on an American soldier who had had his leg blown off with shrapnel. I put a tourniquet on his leg and gave him a shot of morphine which I had acquired. I also gave him a cigarette and then I ran to higher ground. On the way, I encountered an Italian merchant whose little store had been demolished. Knowing that I was an American, he shot his finger in the air and shouted, "Roosevelt, Roosevelt, the great liberator!"

After the bombing attack they rounded us up and brought us back to the train. About half of the train had been destroyed. They, therefore, put eighty men in a car in which there had only been forty previously. It was so crowded no

one could sit down, and there were no toilet facilities. No water was available until we arrived at a small camp near Naples, where we got some Red Cross parcels. Prior to that, we had received only one Red Cross parcel.

We were shipped on to northern Italy, and from there they shipped us to Stalag IIB near Hammerstein, Germany. This camp was the first prisoner of war camp in which I was incarcerated. There we started receiving Red Cross parcels regularly. This camp had no American doctors, although I had had some schooling at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, as a surgical technician. It contained approximately five thousand prisoners of war who slept on straw in bunk beds. There were no sheets and we had only our clothes to cover our backs. Some of our fellow prisoners had unfortunately traded their shoes and other items of clothing to the Italians for such trivial items as figs when they were in southern Italy where it was warm. American money was also of little value. I had seen men pay as much as \$150 for a handful of figs.

I was put in charge of the medical barracks in the camp. We normally had about three hundred men who were incapable of being sent on work jobs which meant we ran a sick call of about three hundred a day in the camp. I had seven men working under my supervision. With the little knowledge I had, I sorted out the most serious cases who were then seen by a German doctor. I would take them from our compound to the first aid station, where there was a German doctor who spoke perfect English. He would tell me how to treat the sick ones. If they were quite sick, the camp had a hospital to which they could be sent. Although my job was a seven-day-a-week experience, the work I did there helped me to cope emotionally with prison life. Also, I received better treatment from the German doctor and from the prisoners than did some of the men incarcerated.

Not all experiences were pleasant, however. One day a German officer entered the sick barracks with its three hundred men suffering from such maladies as malaria and gunshot wounds. It was my responsibility to call the men to the attention when an officer entered, but I did not believe that it was necessary to call men who were in bed to attention. When I did not call them to attention, the German officer asked who was in charge. Then he asked me why I had not called them to attention. My German was slight and I replied, "Nichts verstehen," or "I do not understand." At that, he drew his pistol and I heard it click. I knew that he was ready to shoot, and he continued in German, saying "I'll make you understand." I called the sick men to attention!

In December 1944 there was a rumor to the effect that some of our men would be permitted to go back to the United States on a prisoner exchange. The German doctor with whom I was working told me that he was going to get my name on the list. By this time we had an American doctor in camp. He believed that because of the work I was doing with him, which was similar to what I had previously done with the German doctor, I should be taken off the list for possible repatriation. The American doctor believed that I could do more good by staying in Germany. I believed, however, that if there was any chance that I could get out of the prisoner of war camp and go home I wanted to avail myself of that opportunity.

In the camp near Hammerstein, many Russian prisoners and civilians were reported to have died of typhus. An officer at the camp once described to me how thousands of Russians had died from typhus, which was spread by lice and was recognizable because of the listlessness of its sufferers. In the final stages of the disease, those people who died from it deteriorated to the point that they could not move about. The officer said that they had other Russians load the bodies like cordwood

onto hayracks and drive the vehicles to a dumping spot which they used as a burial ground. He said the German guards would occasionally see what was supposed to be a corpse squirm and would reach down to stab that person to put him out of his misery. We also heard that the shower room in which we were occasionally allowed to bathe had been used to kill some of the inmates and political prisoners. They were told that they were going to get a shower and then gassed.

Some other experiences were amusing, however. I had a delightful time once with a Belgian prisoner. We were separated from the other nationalities according to the rules of the Geneva convention, which were partially adhered to in the prisoner of war camps. The Belgian fellow was an interpreter between the Germans and the Americans; this job allowed him to go into the town of Hammerstein, where the basic medium of exchange had become cigarettes. These coffin nails were used to buy such things as radio parts or various items of food from the guards and from the other prisoners who went outside the camp. The Belgian knew that my glasses had been taken from me when I was captured for the gold in the frames. They had also taken our watches and rings. He arranged for a doctor's appointment for me in Hammerstein, knowing that the physician would not be there at that time. We were accompanied to town by a German guard. When we arrived and the physician was not there, the guard wanted to take us back to the camp. The interpreter, however, suggested that the German might not want to go back and walk guard for the remainder of the day. He asked why we did not take the day off with the understanding that the guard could do what he wanted and that we would meet him at the station that evening and take the train back to the camp together. After accepting some cigarettes, the guard allowed us to leave for a pleasant day. The Belgian interpreter had

connections in Hammerstein. We went to a hotel where he bribed a German who wanted to know where I came from. I said "Iowa," but he did not know where that was. I told him that Iowa was near Chicago, and he decided that I must be a gangster.

We traded some coffee for a couple of bottles of wine and went to a pub that was run by two German frauleins and spent the remainder of the day there. Several German soldiers were in the pub. I was dressed in an English uniform, but many people in the tavern had on English uniforms. Even some of the Germans wore them and thus I was not too conspicuous. The Belgian was also wearing an English uniform which, incidentally, was much warmer than an American uniform. The Germans could not figure out, however, how we got wine when they could not get it and therefore had to drink beer. We spent the major part of the day there. We had brought some canned meat and some butter or margarine as well as coffee and cigarettes for the girls who ran the bar and they agreed to fix us a meal. We had dinner with them. This was my only "free" day while I was a prisoner. We then went back to the station and met the guard as we had agreed and took the train back. Nothing was ever said about the glasses!

After the American doctor took over in the camp, I continued to believe what the German doctor had told me about my name being on a list for repatriation or exchange. The American doctor did not want me to go home and said that the Germans were probably lying to me. He also said that if I left it would be difficult to know exactly where they would be taking me. Finally the day came when they called out the names of approximately three hundred of us who were to be exchanged. These men included the seriously wounded in addition to some of us who were medics and who, according to the Geneva convention, should not have been taken prisoner at all.

They took us from Stalag IIB near Hammerstein to Fürstenwalde near the Oder River. We stayed as prisoners there, and I relinquished my job as a medic in anticipation of coming home. While in the camp there we were next to the Russian and the Italian compounds but segregated from them.

The Americans were kept in the compound whereas the Italians were allowed to leave for work. They were taken out each morning and brought back in the evening. While they were out, they were in a position to buy eggs, potatoes, and chickens, and smuggle them back into the camp. The only way we could get to them was to cut holes in the wire fence separating us and then enter their compound to make exchanges for their produce. I did this a few times and was caught once. A German guard was going to put me in solitary but on the way to confinement a friend (who spoke German fluently) and I talked to him and offered him cigarettes for leniency. He agreed to return us to our compound if we promised that we would not attempt to escape again. Such promises did not mean much!

In this camp I had the opportunity to help one of our soldiers who had been shot during the invasion of Normandy. As a result of a gunshot wound in the head, he had had an eye destroyed. One of the medics knew that I had performed medical services in Hammerstein and informed the Russian doctor who was to perform surgery on the hapless young man of the fact. The Russian asked if I would prepare the fellow for an operation. My experience in civilian life as a barber was somewhat helpful in this regard. I was able to shave him and clean the wound in preparation for surgery. I learned through my wartime experiences that the German and Russian doctors were good at practicing their discipline in field situations because they seldom if ever performed under the sterile conditions which American doctors expected. The operation was a success and the boy recovered.

It was approximately three months before I was notified that I would be among the able-bodied who would be exchanged. In the meantime, I had come to think that perhaps the American doctor had been right. To this day I do not know how they selected the seventy-five of us who were repatriated, because there were more medics than that in this group. Neither do I know the conditions which formed the basis for the exchange. Yet, seventy-five able-bodied Americans were put on a train one day in February 1945 for exchange. By this time American forces had progressed to a point not too far from Frankfurt-am-Main.

They took us by rail coach from Fürstenwalde and virtually hitchhiked us across Germany because so many railroad tracks had been blown up. Our car would be hooked on to a train for a while. Then they would unhook us and another train come along and pick us up. It was several days before they got us to the Swiss border.

I do not know how far we traveled in Germany to get to Switzerland because they would take us first one direction and then another. On this trip I saw some of the forced laborers, mostly Jewish, who were working along the railroad tracks in starved condition. Their arms and legs were hardly any larger than broomsticks. These people were political prisoners, but, even in their emaciated state, they were often in shackles and chains.

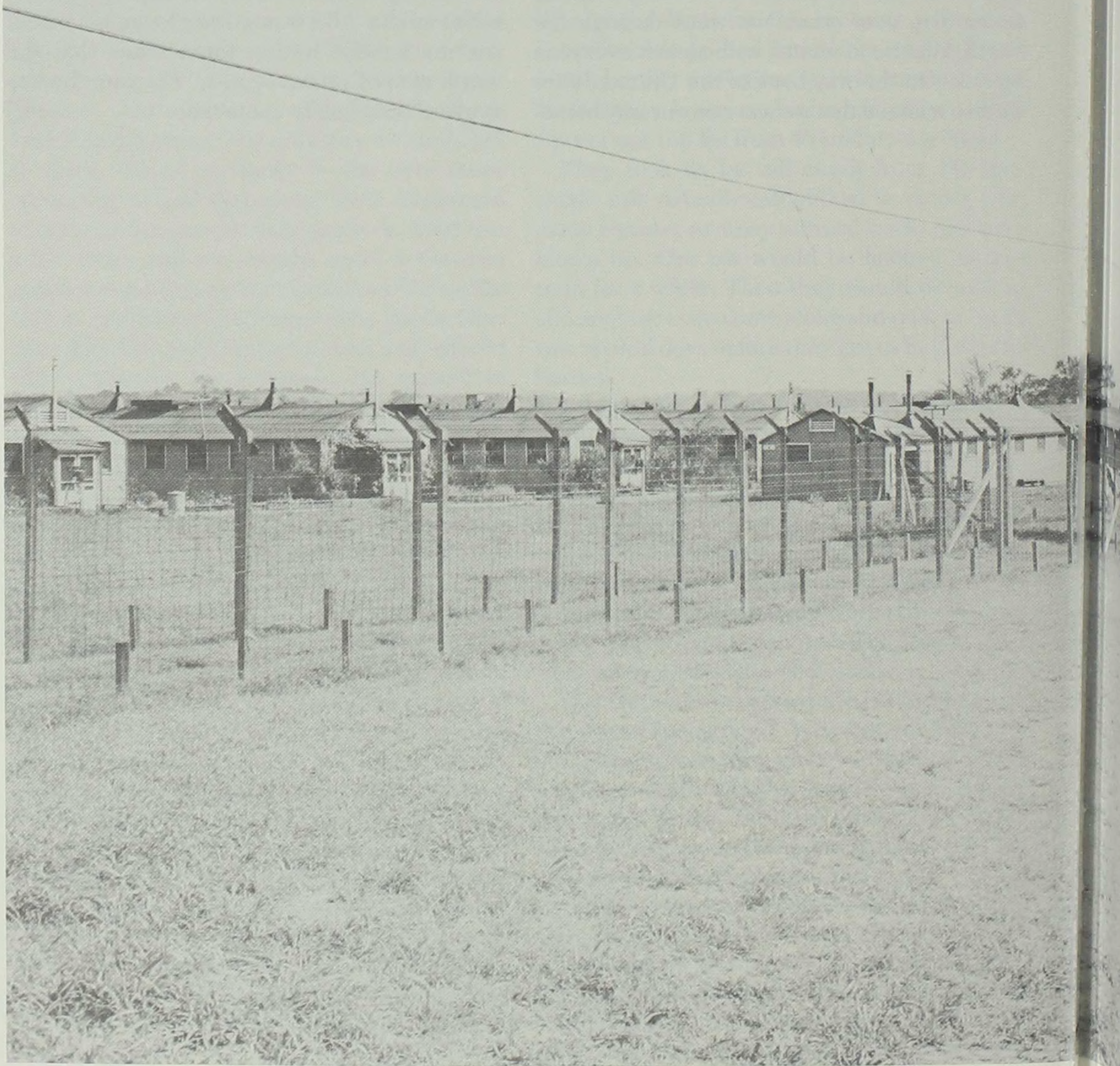
The Germans became quite cordial to us on this trip to Switzerland. We stopped, in fact, at one place where they gave us two Red Cross parcels as well as baths. I slept under sheets that night. It was the first time I had seen a sheet for two years. It was immediately prior to our arrival at the Swiss border.

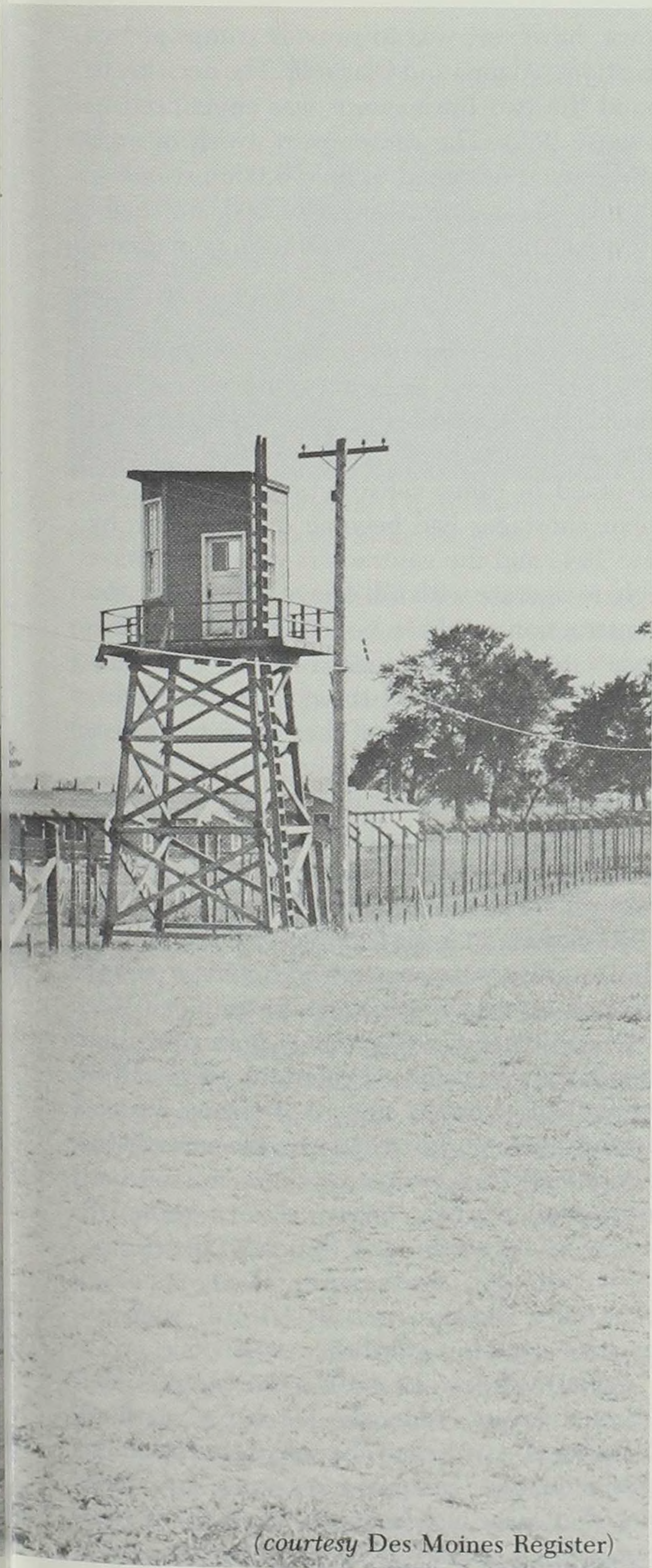
When we arrived in Switzerland, the Germans turned us over to Swiss soldiers and we proceeded by train across Switzerland. We went to Berne and then to the southern part of France. There the Swiss turned us over to American soldiers who took us to Marseilles.

From there we were brought by hospital ship back to the United States. During the journey we received deluxe treatment with full meals. We received steaks and ice cream as well as other delicacies which we had not heard of or seen for a long time. It took us quite a long time to come back but it was a pleasant trip as it was through the southern Atlantic with smooth sailing all the way. This trip was in sharp contrast to our trip over when we went through the North Atlantic in winter with almost everyone seasick. On the way back to the United States we also realized that we were on our way home.

We anchored in Charleston, South Carolina, and were kept there four days for interrogation and briefing as to what we could say and do when we reached our homes. At this time there were still many prisoners in camps in Germany and we were limited in what we could say. We were not allowed, for instance, to make any speeches or to talk to the press. I did not want to make speeches or talk with representatives of the media. All I wanted was to get home and see my family, letting them know that the words of my German captor, "For you, the war is over," had finally come true. □

Some Thoughts on Prisoners of War in Iowa,
1943 to 1946





(courtesy Des Moines Register)

*O*ccasionally the editor of this journal in conversation or correspondence with members of the State Historical Society or other interested Iowans is reminded of areas of Iowa history which have been overlooked in recent years. Late last year, following a conversation with Ruth Watkins of Clarinda about Iowa during the Second World War, I found in this office a fifty-five page typescript of newspaper articles from the Clarinda Herald-Journal about the prisoner of war camp which was located near Clarinda. The articles dealt with the camp and the impact which it had on the town and the area and had been collected three years ago by Betty Malvern Ankeny.

After looking through the typescript, I realized that memories of the Second World War on the home front are memories of a time fast slipping into the distant past. It is often hard to realize that the war ended thirty-nine years ago this year. Or to put it another way, it is difficult to admit that we have an increasing number of high school and even college students whose parents cannot remember that war at all. But those people who do remember Iowa in the years between 1941 and 1945 talk most often, it seems to me, of rationing with its stamps and stickers and books, of shortages of such "essentials" as cigarettes and liquor, of a thirty-five mile per hour speed limit, of scrap drives and bond rallies and V-mail and a paucity of good baseball players in the major leagues. But in two towns in Iowa, Algona and Clarinda, there must be a number of people who can remember Iowa's only prisoner of war camps.

Since talking with Ruth Watkins and reading through the Clarinda newspaper accounts, I have talked with a few of my colleagues and read some more newspapers and I have come to the conclusion that some serious historical work should be done on Iowa's prisoner of war camps. And perhaps a small introduction to the subject from this desk might spur someone to do just that. I hope so.

* * *

*I*n the first years of the Second World War, the United States was not faced with any serious problem concerning prisoners of war. In the course of a series of disastrous setbacks