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Splasher 6 Newsletter

THE LIBERATION OF MOOSBURG

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 Cindy Goodman, Editor

Editor's Note: Credit for story goes to Frank Murphy, for providing the airman's side of the story, and to Dave Kanzler for providing us with the official records of the 14th Armored Division. All 14th Armored Division accounts will be in italics.

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SOCIAL LINKS



It was late April 1945 at *Stalag VIIA* (officially *Stammlager VIIA*), a prisoner of war camp in Bavaria twenty-two miles northeast of Munich and a half-mile north of Moosburg, Germany. In a sprawling set of tightly spaced rows of drab, rundown, one-story military barracks built to accommodate 10,000 persons, the Germans had crowded together 110,000 prisoners of war: Americans, military personnel of every Allied European nationality (including 40,000 Russians), Indians, Australians, South Africans, Asians and South Americans

Since our arrival in Moosburg on February 2, 1945, the brutal central European winter now drawing to a close had kept us cooped up in our dirty, damp, dark, unheated, overcrowded barracks where over 400 men were assigned to buildings built to house 180. Outside the buildings large tents had been erected wherever there was enough space to set them up. Our cheerless barbed wire encircled world was comprised exclusively of austere, dilapidated buildings, grungy tents, mud, and clusters of gaunt, emaciated men in shoddy, worn out clothing occupying every inch of unused space they could find.

We had one cold-water spigot in each building; they were our only source of water for every purpose. The fortunate ones among us slept on triple-deck wooden bunks on gunnysack mattresses filled with excelsior and infested with fleas, lice, and bedbugs—the unlucky ones slept on floors, tables, or outside on the ground inside crowded tents.

We were all covered with insect bites and always hungry—there was never enough food. Our daily food ration consisted of two or three slices of heavy German black bread, which we believed was made from a combination of flour and sawdust, each morning, plain boiled potatoes or turnips, and a bowl of a vile, ill-tasting, watery soup made from dehydrated vegetables, which we called green-death, at midday; and one or two more slices of black bread in the evening.

We had no sanitary facilities inside our barracks; our latrines were unheated, unlit, unspeakably foul-smelling separate structures that were nothing more than large outhouses with a narrow passageway and a long row of bench seating against a back wall. The bench seating contained a series of about twenty holes, spaced about eighteen inches apart. Beneath the seating was a sickening, stinking, open slit trench. Every hole was continually in use and there were always long lines of men waiting their turn. Misery, diarrhea and dysentery were rampant. There was nothing to read and no room to walk. We could only sit and wait for the war to end.

Despite its worsening impact on our already overcrowded, appalling living conditions at *Stalag VIIA*, our spirits were lifted at the beginning of April 1945, by the arrival in Moosburg of droves of Allied prisoners from other prisoner of war camps all over Germany bringing with them news of the rapid advances of the Russian and American armies into Germany. These new prisoners were also full of new rumors. One such rumor had it that we would be moved further south in Germany near Hitler's Alpine retreat and used by the Germans as hostages in surrender negotiations. A newly captured American major told us he knew that arrangements were already in place for us to be taken home within seven days after the American army liberated us. This was wholly unimaginable to those of us who had not been home in two, three or, in some cases, four years. At the same time, we knew that the moment of our liberation was near.

On virtually every clear day in April 1945, we heard and saw American P-47 and P-51 fighter aircraft strafing targets in and around Moosburg. Every so often one of the American pilots on these missions would indicate his awareness of us by swooping low over the camp and wagging his wings. On April 9, 1945, we watched with pride and awe as more than 500 B-17 aircraft of the 3rd Air Division of the U. S. Eighth Air Force, escorted by 340 P-51 fighter aircraft, passed overhead just to the west of Moosburg on their way to bomb targets in the Munich area south of us. On many an early morning we saw German FW-190 fighters hedgehopping over the camp trying to avoid detection by highflying American fighter aircraft. On April 26 and 27, 1945, we swore that we could hear the thumping sound of distant artillery—not the sounds of bombs being dropped. On the afternoon of April 27 several kriegies claimed they had seen two or more American tanks, presumably an American armored patrol, reconnoitering on the crest a hill about a mile north of Moosburg. The tanks reportedly stayed a few minutes, then turned around and left.

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It is 0600, 29 April. The attack of Combat Command A is due to be resumed at this moment. The command post is located in Puttenhausen, Germany.

The 47th Tank Battalion is eight miles to the southeast where it halted operations at 2300 last night. Lt. Col. Bob Edward's 68th Armored Infantry Battalion is three miles north of the command post, having run into hard resistance late the preceding day and having been ordered to halt in Mainburg to avoid running into a known night ambush.

Soon now, reports should arrive that the battalions are moving, and the guns of Joseph J. Murtha's 500th Armored Field Artillery Battalion should be heard. At one minute before 0600 a strange group strode into the headquarters of Combat Command A, to meet Brig. Gen. C. H. Karlstad, Combat Commander. It consisted of a German Major, representing the commander of the Moosburg Allied Prisoner of War Camp, Col. Paul S. Goode of the United States Army and a Group Commander of the British Royal Air Force, the senior American and British Officers respectively, imprisoned in the Moosburg Camp; a Swiss Red Cross representative; and Col. Lann. The German Major brought a written proposal from his commander for the creation of a neutral zone surrounding Moosburg, all movement of Allied troops in the general vicinity of Moosburg to stop while representatives of the Allied and German Governments conferred on disposition of the Allied Prisoners of War in that vicinity.

The German proposals were rejected and the party was given until 0900 to return to Moosburg and to submit an unconditional surrender offer – or receive the American attack at that hour; a CCA staff officer was dispatched to General Smith.

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All through the night of April 28, 1945, we heard the sounds of trucks leaving the area. The Germans were pulling out the majority of our guard force and leaving only a skeleton unit behind.

Shortly after daybreak in the early morning of April 29, 1945, a group of American kriegies lolling near the main gate to *Stalag VIIA* watched intently as two German staff cars with red crosses painted on their sides drove up. To their surprise, out of one of the cars stepped two senior kriegies, U.S. Army Colonel Paul S. Goode and British RAF Group Captain Kellett. Addressing the astonished prisoners staring at him, Colonel Goode told them: "You guys better find a hole. The war is about to start."

There was an unmistakable air of expectancy among the kriegies at *Stalag VIIA* on the morning of the April 29, 1945. Clearly, something big was about to happen. Some of our few remaining German guards were deserting their posts and turning their weapons over to their former prisoners. A new rumor sweeping the camp was that regular German troops had been seen taking up defensive positions outside the wire.

The first shots rang out about 9:00 A.M. In the beginning there was only the sporadic rattling of small arms fire coming from somewhere in the woods just outside the fence. Within minutes, however, the noise from the incessant firing of hundreds of small arms and heavy automatic weapons was deafening. Kriegies were everywhere scrambling for cover or attempting to burrow into the hard ground like moles. Some were climbing on top of the buildings and guard towers to watch the excitement. I flattened myself as best I good on the ground next to my barracks. Bullets were ricocheting over the compound. Several kriegies were hit, none seriously.

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German SS troops moved outside the city and set up a defense perimeter. They opened the fight. By 1030 the SS were lying

dead in the fields and along the roads, gray-white faces and open mouths, twisted and staring sightlessly at the cold, blue sky above; and American medium tanks were roaring through the cobbled streets of the ancient city.

The 47th had split in two columns, one led by Maj. Kirchner and the other by Col. Lann; and Gen. Karlstad went into the city with the 47th. Gen. Karlstad picked up a German officer as guide, and with Lt. Joseph P. Luby and Lt. William J. Hodges took off for the prison camp proper.

General Smith arrived at the camp, and shortly thereafter an American flag was raised.

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Roughly an hour after it began the shooting abruptly stopped completely. The silence that followed was an almost deathly quiet, too quiet, strange and unnatural. It was short-lived. Within minutes we heard the unmistakable rumble and clanking of heavy armor approaching the camp from somewhere outside our perimeter fences. Suddenly, without fanfare or warning, three Sherman tanks of the American 14th Armored Infantry Division of the U.S. Third Army, came crashing through the fence near the front gate. Amid the shouting, screaming, and cheering of the newly freed prisoners, the tanks drove a short distance down the main street of *Stalag VIIA* and halted. Kriegies immediately swarmed all over them.

Feelings not expressed for long months and years were finally being freely released. Frantically trying to defend himself against being crushed by the mob of ragtag rabble climbing all over his tank, the besieged sergeant driver of one the 14th Armored Division Shermans declared that he had never seen such "a crazy bunch of ragged ass people."

The true end of our captivity came about 12:30 P.M. when the American flag, *Old Glory*, was seen being hoisted to the top of a church steeple in the town of Moosburg only a short distance away. As one, 8,000 American kriegies faced the church, came to attention and saluted, all with tears of pride in our country and pent up emotion trickling down our cheeks.

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Official estimates of the total Allied prisoners freed at Moosburg were 110,000, including an estimated 30,000 Americans, officers and men. Besides a series of seven prisoner of war camps, the Division captured a German garrison of 6000 men at Moosburg.

Once the sharp, pitched battle by the SS was over, the German defenses crumbled. The 600-man 47th Tank Battalion took 2,000 prisoners; the 600-man 94th Reconnaissance Squadron took 2,000 more. Division total for the day was set at 12,000.

Scenes of the wildest rejoicing accompanied the tanks as they crashed through the double 10-foot wire fences of the prison camps. There were Norwegians, Brazilians, French, Poles, Dutch, Greeks, Rumanians, Bulgars. There were Americans, Russians, Serbs, Italians, New Zealanders, South Africans, Australians, British, and Canadians – men from every nation fighting the Nazis. There were officers and men. Twenty-seven Russian Generals, sons of four American Generals. There were men and women in the prison camps – including three Russian woman doctors. There were men of every rank and every branch of service, there were war correspondents and radio men. Around the city were thousands of slave laborers, men and women.

All combined to give the 14th the most incredible welcome it ever received. The tanks were finally slowed to five miles an hour as they went through the camps – the press of men in front of them was so great. Men, some of them prisoners five years, some American Air Corps men prisoners two years, cried and shouted and patted the tanks.

"You damned bloody Yanks, I love you!" shouted a six-foot four Australian and threw his arms around a jeep driver.

A weary bearded American paratrooper climbed on a tank and kissed the tank commander. Tears streamed down his cheeks. The women had flowers, and they threw the flowers on the tanks and in the jeeps. Italians and Serbs, tired and drawn, jammed around the vehicles, eagerly thrusting out their hands to touch the liberators, weeping.

An American Air Corps lieutenant kissed a tank.

"God damn, do I love the ground forces," he said.

"This is the happiest day of my life!"

"You were a long time coming, but now you are here!"

There were no words to express the feelings of these men.

As the German guards were formed in columns of four and marched away, each man carrying two or three loaves of black bread, some of the tankers took the bread from them and tossed it over the fences to the Allied prisoners.

Tec/5 Floyd C. Mahoney of C-47 freed his own son, a lieutenant in the Air Corps.

In roaming the town, the 47th and the 68th uncovered almost a score of arsenals, loaded with German machine guns, pistols, rifles, panzerfausts, all sorts of small arms.

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At first, the new state of affairs at *StalagVIIA* brought little change. In the early afternoon of the day of our liberation a battery of American artillery set up in a field nearby and for several hours we could hear the ear-splitting muzzle explosions of 155m "Long Tom" guns firing on distant targets. Meanwhile liberated kriegies were pouring through the fences of the camp and roaming the Bavarian countryside around Moosburg "liberating" stocks of food, spirits, and souvenirs. Many of them went as far as Munich in their foraging.

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The tanks of S/Sgt Claude Newton, S/Sgt. William Summers, Lt. Hack and Lt. Boucher led the chase through the town; Moosberg was not all the battalion wanted. There was a bridge across the Isar; and this bridge was blown as Newton's tank moved into the first span.

By night, the Division was established along the Isar, and behind it were unbelievable scenes – miles long columns of German prisoners being marched to the rear, a light tank in front of the column and a light tank in the rear – each with its lights on full blast – and the fields with 2000 Germans in a bunch, being guarded under lights, while among them lay the burned out German vehicles caught in the fight that morning, the German dead lying in grotesque positions as Graves Registration Officers moved among them preparing for burial – all the bloody incredible litter of a battlefield just passed, under the bright lights of overwatching vehicles.

And through the streets roamed streams of Allied prisoners, newly freed and not quite sure what they wanted to do, but the wanted to do something.

They broke into liquor – schnapps and champagne and cognac and wine – in cellars and kitchens and wine shops and warehouses.

They got into food – chickens and pigs and lambs and geese, potatoes and eggs and ham and bread – in pantries and kitchens and living rooms and stores.

They found clothes – shoes and pants and shirts and coats – in closets and trunks and windows and suitcases.

Ex-PWs and ex-slave laborers, ex-concentration camp inmates, soldiers and civilians, men and women, young and old, from every nation in Europe, drunk or sober, crying or laughing, they roamed the streets that night and reeled along the sidewalks, singing, shouting, kissing, wearing tall silk hats gotten from God knows where, carrying stoves, geese, pictures, cross-bows, and sabers.

Through that seething jam the American Army was trying to move back more German prisoners of war, columns four men wide and half a mile long.

British ex-prisoners of war rode bicycles through the towns – freed prisoners took most of the bicycles and motorcycles and autos with which Germany was so well supplied. Slave laborers, men and women stood by every road, making a "V" with their fingers and grinning and throwing flowers.

"Endlich frei, endlich frei," said one, a private first class of the French army introduced himself and gravely said:

"It is very fine that our governments understand each other, and our generals and ministers, but I would like to tell all the American privates first class that I am eternally indebted to them and eternally grateful."

And –

Up through the mad bacchanalia the combat troops were trying to move, tanks and endless lines of silent infantrymen from the 68th Armored Infantry Battalion, faces set and hardly seeing the weaving scene about them, eyes straight ahead and with trick men have how are going into combat of catching their lower lip and holding it caught between their teeth.

--X--X--X--X--X--X--

On April 30, 1945, American support troops appeared at *Stalag VIIA* and began distributing K-rations and ten in one rations to the Allied POWs of all nationalities. On May 1, 1945 a grim-faced Gen. George S. Patton, Jr., commander of the U.S. Third Army, paid us a visit at *Stalag VIIA*. He was dressed in a crisp, neat, fresh uniform and wearing his legendary wide black leather belt with a huge silver buckle to which were attached his famous paired set of ivory-handled six-guns. Maj. Gen. James A. Van Fleet, III Corps Commander, and Maj. Gen. Albert C. Smith, commander of the 14th Armored Infantry Division, accompanied General Patton. As he walked briskly through the camp General Patton occasionally stopped and exchanged a few brief words with small groups of American prisoners. When he came upon my group the General paused, looked at us, shook his head in disgust at the sight of the thin, unkempt scarecrows standing before him and said in a low voice, "I'm going to kill these sons of bitches for this."

The dying nation dissolved into a snarling, giggling montage of human shapes, like a color fantasy on a movie screen where the eye is not able to see nor to understand, but only to snatch at endlessly shifting swirling jumbles of shapes of the wildest human emotions, and joy is translated into a dissolving cone of orange fading quickly into red and black and green and ravage.

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