

BEHIND THE BARBED WIRE



EDITOR'S NOTE—This is the first of a series of three articles by Lt. Leo W. Fisher, United States Army, on his experiences as a prisoner of war after his capture in Tunisia on May 14, 1943.

By LEO W. FISHER

Written Exclusively for the Central Press and This Newspaper.

"STOP THE PRESS! Stop the press! The Gestapo are coming through! Stop the press, the Gestapo are on the prowl!" We were sitting in the "editorial" room at Oflag 64, in Schubin, Poland, when this warning was sounded through the camp. With disgusted resignation, our editor, Lt. Jesse Frank Diggs, of Linthicum Heights, Md., dropped his pencil and the press was stopped.

We had been prisoners of war for more than a year and such searches were not unusual. The extraordinary thing about this visit was that the Gestapo were coming by daylight. They usually dropped in like burglars in the small dark hours of a frozen dawn.

Hurriedly we searched the room for anything which the Nazis might consider "verboten" or forbidden. Several small bars of chocolate and two packages of cigarets were on a table. These were quickly hidden beneath a loose plank in the floor.

We had been working on the monthly edition of the Oflag 64 Item, our camp paper. Lieutenant Diggs had once been city editor on the Washington Post, so, of course, he was our managing editor here. Under his editorship we also produced a daily news sheet called the Daily Bulletin. News for this was translated from German newspapers and communiques by Lt. Seymore Bolten of New York City and illustrated by Lt. Ken Goddard of Worcester, Mass.

We put the American twist on such news for the benefit of the prisoners in our camp. The Item was our "local" paper. It carried nothing but camp news slanted toward recording the camp history for the future.

Both the Bulletin and the Item were but small affairs but a great combination of talent had worked to produce them. Larry Allen, a wire service war correspondent had first begun to print such bulletins when he was a prisoner of war in Bari, Italy.

Write Bryan of the Atlanta, Ga., Journal was also to work with this paper when a few months later he was to become a prisoner of war. After the repatriation of Allen, the Bulletin had no editor so Lieutenant Diggs added this work to that of producing the Item.

Our staff was willing but supplies were weak and censorship by the Germans rigid and ridiculous. This search by the Gestapo was a sample of the sort of thing we hated most.

Tiny World of Freedom

The editorial room was a vain-glorious title for such a place as we worked in. It was slightly larger and a great deal colder than the average horse stall.

In it, however, we escaped into a world of freedom that we could not know otherwise. It was play-work, but worthwhile, for it kept our minds in a state bordering on normalcy as well as producing a worthy news service.

For hours at a time we forgot the jungle of barbed wires that surrounded us and the bestial machine guns that waited hungrily for an attempted escape. That is, we could forget until something like the Gestapo dropped in to rub salt in our wounds.

Out in the hall we could hear the echos of violent voices shouting. Even when discussing the weather it seemed necessary for the true Nazi to shout. Since ego cannot be seen, it must be heard. I looked across at our "chief" and he smiled, "Here they come," he said. "Smell 'em?" I nodded my head as the door was flung open.

"Achtung!" yelled the German corporal of the guard.

"Ach, heck!" said Frank, but in deference to military courtesy, we stood up and waited.

There was a dramatic pause, and then with the pompous dignity of the only rooster in a harem of hens, the German oberst (colonel) strode into the room.

The colonel swished his gloves as though brushing distasteful things out of his way. He sniffed as though there was a skunk in the room . . . as in truth there was! Then he growled something out of the corner of his mouth.

Instantly the room was filled with steel helmets, rifles with bayonets fixed and the sweaty smell of nervous, insolent soldiers. Like ferrets they poked inquisitive noses into every rack and corner. They tapped the walls and went carefully through the waste paper.

One of the Gestapo in civilian



GI "PUBLISHERS"—Editors of the Bulletin and Item: Front row, from left: Lts. Feldman, Long and Bolten. Rear row: Capt. Rossbach, Allen.

Nearly Everybody Reads THE ITEM

The Oflag 64 Item

Covers Oflag 64 Like the Dew

"One ITEM is Worth 10,000 Pictures"

No. 9

Altburgund, Germany — July 1, 1944

Price: 50 Pfg

Fourth To Bring Carnival and Horse Races to Oflag

OFLAG NEWS - IN BRIEF -

One for Burbank...

John Jones was duly appointed gardener of Mess 82. He went forth and tilled the soil and sowed the seeds. radishes onions lettuce etc. then, his toil ended, he rested. Time passed. The seeds germinated and young tender plants sprang forth and Mess 32 now has a bumper crop of petunias and nasturtiums!

They Gussed It...

Luckiest prognosticators in camp last month were Fred Mitchell and Hugh Hogan, the big invasion date operators. East December, each predicted the invasion would occur in

Pretty Clouds, Aren't They?



"Boy Meets Girl" 3-Act Play Ends Fiesta

The 168th Anniversary of American Independence will be commemorated here on July 4th with all-star games, baskings, music, an outdoor carnival and a new three-act play.

The program: Appel, with the band, followed by breakfast.

At 9:30, an All-Star Softball Game with ditto Basketball at 10:45.

In the afternoon, under the direction of F. G. Mitchell and Don Wafal, a monster fair and carnival, featuring beer, beaucoup games of chance and an Honest-to-Gawd race meet with horses drawn from each room. (For details on entries, entrance fees, etc., see the sports bulletin board.)

THE OFLAG 64 ITEM—This little newspaper, part of its page one being reproduced above, was the product of American war correspondents and ex-newspaperman soldiers held captive by Germans.

clothes came over to where Frank was standing. With his nose within inches of Frank's face he shouted, "You will not smoke ven der oberst ist in der room. Understand, you?"

Frank inhaled carefully then dropped the cigaret to the floor and with slow, deliberate care, crushed it with his heel. The Nazi licked his lips hungrily as he saw the long stub ground to bits. "You are a journalist?" he snapped. "Yes," replied Frank.

"Ah, Ja, von day a great story you will write! You are indeed fortunate to be in Germany at such a time ven history all about you ist being made. Ist it not so?"

Frank snorted. The Nazi continued.

"Ja, it will be a great story. A GREAT story ven Germany puts down her oppressors!" He grabbed some loose sheets of copy from the table, "Und vhat ist dis?" he asked.

Against an Account

"It is the lay-out and copy for our next edition of the camp paper. We call it the Item."

"Vy do you call it der Item? Does not dat vord mean small or little?"

"It can mean that," replied Frank, "but it can also mean a SUM entered AGAINST AN ACCOUNT . . . a sort of record to be kept lest we forget how we have lived here . . ."

The Nazi did not understand. Characteristically he shrugged his shoulders as though all the world were stupid except himself. "How ist der paper printed?" he asked.

"We send the copy down to the village after it has been censored about 100 times. The local printer does the work. This will probably be the last he can do for us. Berlin is commandeering his press. Apparently some 'mechanical difficulty' has happened to the Berlin press!"

The Nazi missed the implication and continued: "Very nice does Germany treat her prisoners, ist it not so?"

Frank ignored the question and turned as the little colonel crowed happily. One of his men had discovered the chocolate and cigarets.

He turned to us and bellowed, "It ist forbidden for a prisoner to have more than two packages of cigarets and one bar of chocolate in his possession! We must, of course, confiscate the surplus you have here!" With hateful smug satisfaction he pocketed the "booty."

The room looked as though a cyclone had spent a drunken weekend there when the Gestapo were at last satisfied. The colonel snapped an order and the men left the room to stand at attention just outside the door. He then raised his arm in the hated salute and barked, "Heil, Hitler!" and stomped noisily down the hall.

The little room was quiet. We stared silently at the litter. Lt. Diggs lit another cigaret and sat down at his table.

The door burst open again and Lt. Carl Hansen of West Haven, Conn., bounced cheerfully into the room. He was one of our interpreters and he slid to a snappy salute before the "chief." "Did they find those two aircraft carriers in the closet?" he asked.

Frank laughed. "No," he replied, "they specialize in needles and haystacks. But they DID find your chocolate and MY cigarets!"

Hansen is a Yale graduate. He speaks fluent German and for the next few minutes the room was blue with a description of the Gestapo, including everything that a gentleman and a scholar could think of. We sat in stunned admiration and were proud of our "professor."

Lt. Frank Hancock of Princeton, W. Va., walked in on this scene waving some paper. "Here's my story on the camp gardens," he said. "Each man is to get the very real estate of a plot 10 by 20 feet. With these great rolling acres. . ."

"That's good," interrupted the chief. "Get your slaves to make a mint julep for all of us while you write it in not more than a 100 words."

He turned to a tall dark boy who was quietly working on a cartoon strip. "Have you got your art ready yet, Jim?" he asked.

"Listen, chief, I'm Lt. Jim Bickers, see? From old Chicago, and I'm NEVER late with my gags!"

The door opened and Lt. Larry Phelan of Montclair, N. J., came into the room.

"Hiya, chief!" he reported. "I've got the dope on the Friday fun fest. There'll be songs by the glee club as directed by Lt. Russell Ford of Fayetteville, N. C., also

the swoon croons of Lt. Frank Maxwell of Jersey City, N. J., also some music . . ."

Military Brains on K.P.

"O.K., Larry, write it up." The chief picked up a paper. It was the sports page for the Item as written by Lt. R. Cheatham of Abbeville, S. C. He performed some surgery with his red pencil on the paper and then reached for another. He read for a moment, then laughed. "This is pretty good, listen!" . . . He read:

"Representing \$42,000 annual worth of military brains, eight lieutenant colonels were on K.P. this week peeling so-called spuds. Lt. Col. John K. Waters of Washington, D. C., was voted the best all around skinner. At an interview, Col. Waters said, 'Home was never like this!'"

"Yeah, we're just one big unhappy family!" said Phelan. "No high-brows, no low-brows, mere peelers of spuds are we!"

Suddenly the lead pipe in the hall was banged three times. We all jumped and looked at our watches—it was quarter to 10, just 15 minutes until lights out. The men began to file out of the room.

Lt. Diggs and I stopped at a door for a breath of fresh air. Sullen black clouds were rolling westward. A soft wet snow licked our faces like a friendly puppy. "I'm thinking about what that Nazi said this afternoon," said Frank. "He thinks that some day I will write a great story. I think he's right. It's going to be the greatest scoop since the world began. I can see the huge headlines now . . . 'EVALYN . . . I'M HOME!'"

AUTHOR'S NOTE—The following named persons used in this story have been reported released from the prison camps or have escaped and are either home or due to arrive home shortly: Lt. Col. J. K. Waters, Lt. J. F. Diggs, Lt. Frank Maxwell, Lt. Ken Goddard, Lt. Seymore Bolten and Wright Bryan.

How Lt. Fisher Became Prisoner

"I was a tank platoon commander with five tanks, (Shermans—33 tons)" says Lieutenant Fisher, "and we were fighting in Faid Pass in Tunisia. On Valentine's day, Feb. 14, 1943, the Germans began an attack. My tank—in fact my whole platoon was destroyed. I and three of my men were all that I know of that was left from my crew of 25 men. I was burned and had a compound fracture of both bones in the right leg.

"The German's aid men came along and picked me up, saying, 'For you, the war is finished! I think they are wrong! A few weeks later the Germans turned me over to the Italians for treatment . . . which, by the way, I am yet to get!

"I stayed in Italy until the capitulation and then the Germans moved me to Austria, first, then to Germany. Later I was sent to Czechoslovakia and from there to Poland where Oflag 64 was located . . . the camp mentioned in the stories.

"On Sept. 8 at 17 minutes past nine in the morning I was repatriated—that is the train left carrying us to Sassnitz where we took the train ferry to Trellesborg, Sweden. I was home by Sept. 18.

"Thus, a broken leg has kept me in the hospital a total of twenty-six months—but thank God, I STILL have a leg for the doctors to work on! I shall be all right, especially when at last, ALL my fellow prisoners are free and at home."