Oldsmar veteran recalls World War II, plans POW reunion

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George Rosenthal, salutes a U.S. Army general moments after being awarded a Purple Heart in April 1945 in Naples, Italy, in a ceremony for soldiers liberated from Nazi prison camps.

OLDSMAR — George Rosenthal sits in his living room with his wife, leafing through handwritten pages detailing two years of his life — from April 1943, when he enlisted in the U.S. Army, until October 1945 when he sailed home from Italy.

"It was part of the atmosphere," he said of enlisting at age 18 to fight in World War II. "All my friends who were physically able were going."

In early 1944, the New York native landed at Anzio Beachhead in Italy, unprepared for what awaited him. The Allied forces had invaded Anzio, the site of one of the war's bloodiest battles and the place where Rosenthal was captured by German soldiers — "the most intense experience of my life," he recalled.

Nearly 70 years later, he and his wife, Arlene, live in the East Lake Woodlands community and are organizing a reunion of survivors of Oflag 64, a Nazi POW camp in Poland. It's this weekend at the Hilton St. Petersburg Bayfront. Hundreds of survivors attended earlier reunions, but now only six remain. Rosenthal, 86, is the youngest.

One incident looms large among Rosenthal's war memories, the first of many that he wants to convey to his six children and 13 grandchildren.

At Anzio Beach, his squad was surrounded by German soldiers. He and nine other squad members, at the instruction of their sergeant, ran for their lives through a clearing. Under a barrage of gunfire, the men were ambushed and told to put up their hands. Rosenthal was shot in his left hand.

"I kept thinking of the Bible," said Rosenthal, who is Jewish and carried a small Bible with Hebrew text in his back pocket. "Somehow I got the nerve to slowly lower my hand into the pocket and then drop the Bible into the sand."

In the semi-darkness, the young soldier discreetly buried the sacred book with his foot and was not caught.

The hand injury and a subsequent chest injury, wounds that earned him two Purple Hearts, necessitated quick medical care. Accompanied by a German guard, Rosenthal walked to a small medical facility and passed out.

He was later transported by boxcar, along with wounded German soldiers, to hospitals in Florence and then Venice. Rosenthal couldn't believe his good luck, especially having been a Jewish soldier in the company of Germans.

"No one ever looked at my dog tags or asked my religion," he said, "until I got to Venice."

In the hospital there, a German officer questioned his name, posted at the foot of his bed.

"Are you Jewish?" he asked.

"Yes," Rosenthal said nervously, but nothing more was said.

His memories of Venice, where he was sent to his first POW camp, are filled with images of suffering.

"It was a real hellhole," he said. "Hundreds of American soldiers arrived, many missing legs or in terrible physical condition."

Rosenthal was in pain and itching from lice. "Lice accumulated under the cast on my arm, but at 18 I thought I could put up with anything."

During 1944, he spent time in four more POW camps. He was packed into a truck or loaded onto straw in a boxcar going from camp to camp, including two in Germany: Stalag 11A and Stalag 2B. At the latter camp, he gathered cigarettes and traded them for food from Belgian soldiers.

When German soldiers realized he wasn't sturdy enough for hard labor, like working in coal mines, they deemed him of "limited service" and sent him to another camp — Oflag 64 — in Szubin, Poland.

He was in luck. This camp had been established for captured officers. Rosenthal was one of about 30 enlisted men working for 1,200 or so officers. He spent several months there, cleaning and mixing huge vats of soup in the kitchen.

A sequence of memories follows: Waking at 4 a.m. to begin a 10-day march through the snow to another camp in Poland, Oflag Z. Exhausted fellow soldiers dropped along the way. Some nights, the squad bedded down on hay in barns. They spent one stormy night in a one-room schoolhouse where Russian soldiers seeking Germans burst in.

The prisoners' German guard fled. The Russians loaded the freed prisoners onto boxcars headed to Odessa on the Black Sea. There, in March 1945, the 20-year-old Rosenthal and other surviving troops welcomed the sight of American naval vessels bringing their first real supplies.

Several days later, an English ship took the soldiers to Naples, Italy, where they boarded an American ship and headed home.

"I couldn't wait to see the Statue of Liberty when we got to New York," Rosenthal said, "but we docked in Boston instead."

The young private, who later opened his own retail shop in upstate New York, was still grateful.

"When we got off the ship," he said, "I kissed the ground."

George Rosenthal poses for a picture while aboard a U.S. Coast Guard-manned troop transport in the Atlantic while returning to the United States after being liberated from a Nazi prison camp.

(Photo submitted by George Rosenthal)