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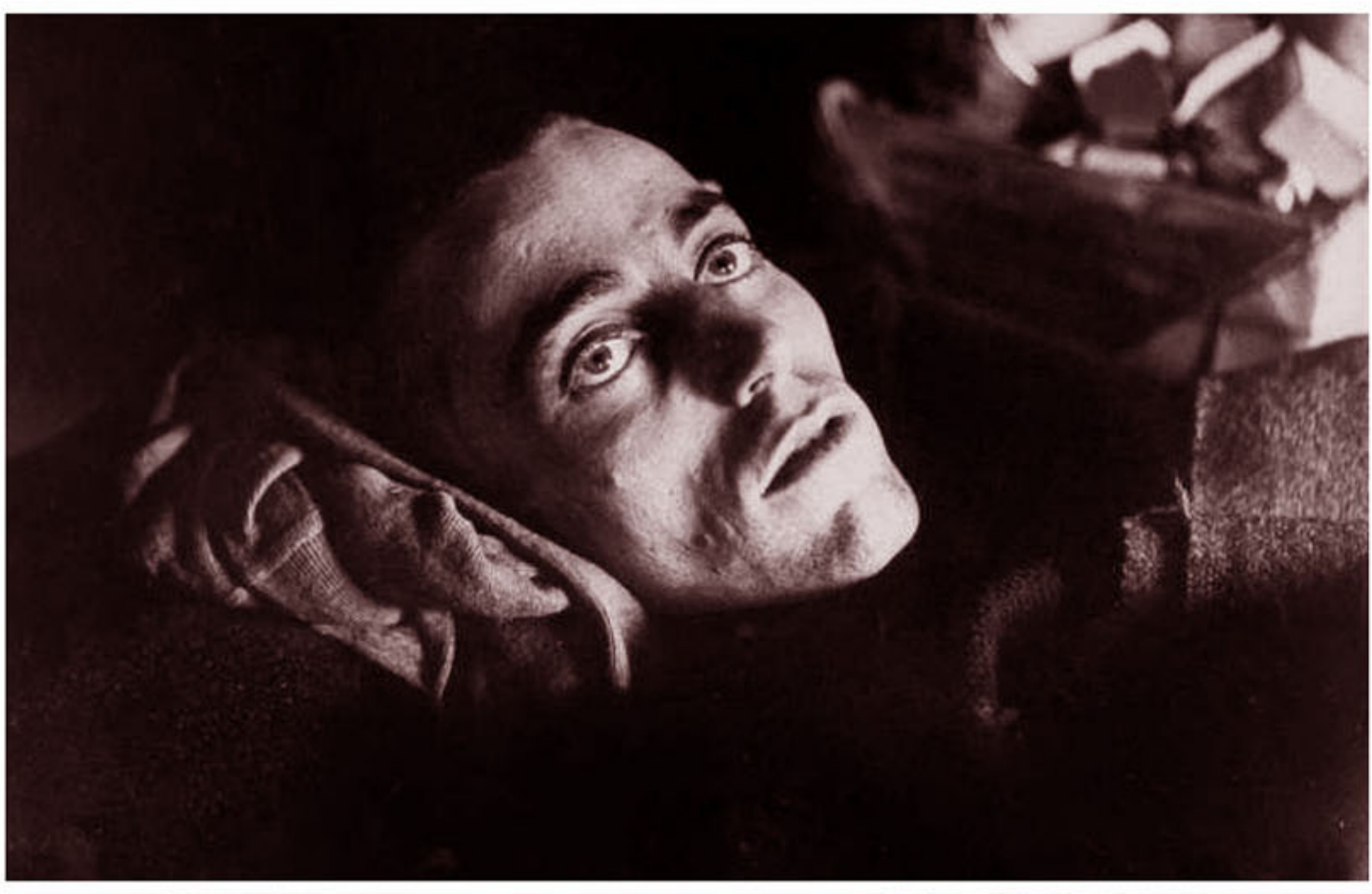
Remember Stalag 9B



How the Germans abide by the Geneva convention—these starved, ill-treated Americans were liberated from a camp near Limburg

At dawn on April 2, troops of the 106th Infantry Division of the American First Army rolled across the wooded hill country near Orb, Germany. Southeast of that village, they captured prison camp Stalag 9B Wegscheide. What they found there appalled even the toughest GI and seemed to demonstrate that in some cases at least the Germans had treated British and American prisoners of war as badly as any of the pitiful slave laborers.

The 6,500 prisoners—3,200 of them Americans—were crammed into a 400-foot-square barbed-wire compound. Enfeebled by a starvation diet, they could not even run out to greet the rescuers they rejoiced to see. The Americans lived in eighteen rotting wooden shacks—160 of them in one 40- by 60-foot hovel. They had no chairs, no beds, no bedding. They took turns sleeping because the cramped floor wasn't big enough for them all to lie down. The 160 shared one feebly dripping water tap and a single hole in the floor for a toilet. They had no soap or towels, and they were crawling with lice.

The Americans got tiny rations of watery soup, sometimes made of grass, ersatz bread, cheese, and a sickening coffee substitute. Medical officers said the daily diet provided less than 1,400 calories (2,500 are necessary for even a sedentary middle-aged man and 3,800 for an active young man of 18 to 20). One soldier captured in December had lost 60 pounds. About 100 prisoners, including 36 Americans, had died in four months.

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Stalag 9B

American medical officers held in the prison operated and treated disease, including 80 cases of pneumonia, with no drugs but a few sulfa pills, one needle-holder, one pair of forceps, one pair of scissors, and a spool of black cotton thread. A few cigarettes filtered through the German guards; one man paid $80 for three smokes. Only one shipment of Red Cross parcels arrived in four months, although the Red Cross sends enough to give every man a parcel a week.

Last week the liberated men watched C-47 transports dip down on the German landing strip where they waited. The planes were shuttling them to France, and in a few hours the Yanks would be recuperating far from Orb.

'What Justice Is There?' American survivors of Stalag 12, near Limburg, told a similar story of malnutrition and disease. German guards there sold prisoners tiny potatoes for 100 Belgian francs each and cigarettes for 250 francs each. At a labor camp at Gerolstein, a Yank sergeant said, five or six Americans died every day, and a Nazi guard clubbed and kicked men who fell from hunger and exhaustion. Seventy Americans and more than 450 British liberated at Grimmenthal described a "march of death" across Germany almost to the Russian front and back, during which more than 1,000 prisoners died.

One of 1,200 Americans liberated among 12,000 Allied prisoners near Kassel voiced the burning bitterness many Yanks feel toward Germans: What justice is there in feeding German prisoners in the United States butter, meat, and potatoes "while we over here got so weak we couldn't get out of our bunks on the liter a day of watery soup we received?"

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