

Reunion



It was a happy moment when liberated AAF men greeted recon troops outside the hospital.

It was like old home week when these troops found some wounded Americans awaiting them in a German hospital.

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WITH THE THIRD ARMY IN GERMANY—Ten miles north of Frankfurt there was a hospital for wounded soldiers, German and Allied alike. The hospital stood in a clearing of woods and the night before the Americans arrived the Allied wounded hobbled on crutches to the windows or strained themselves up from their pillows to look out. They could hear the artillery fire of the battle for Frankfurt and they wondered when the Americans would come. Many of the German doctors had cleared out but a few doctors, nurses and orderlies remained.

By morning on the 29th there was no longer any artillery fire and it was hard for the wounded to remain in their beds. Those who could manage it donned their old uniforms, the khaki pants, the flying jackets, the flier's wings. Some had been prisoners for months, others for years. There were men who had been burned, legless men, men whose wounds made them pale.

Those who were not bedfast ventured out for walks around the hospital. The others smoked their Red Cross cigarettes nervously, and waited.

Inside Frankfurt, the Fifth Division paused for a break on March 29, after fighting 31 days and crossing five rivers since its last jump-off. From Frankfurt the division was sending Capt. Donald E. Robinson's recon troops out of Frankfurt into the countryside. No one knew what was out there, but word had come back there were wounded Allied fliers in the vicinity, some of them Americans.

Going along the road with the recon troops we could tell who were our Allies by the way they looked at us. The Germans, swept along by the rush of our advance, looked straight ahead. The displaced persons looked straight at us, ready to cheer or salute if we so much as caught their eye. Five Russians insisted on shaking hands with Capt. Robinson once when the column was halted. Ten Frenchmen waved a tricolor flag made of rags.

Once the column stopped suddenly and there was tension in the air. German soldiers had been seen on the roads and the word was being passed back. Some men got out of their jeeps and took positions in the ditches.

An ultimatum was sent ahead to the burgo-meister of the village where the Germans were seen. He was to round up whatever German soldiers there were and surrender them in the town square or we would shoot the place up. Then we rolled into town and the burgomeister rang a bell in the square summoning all the civilians. He read a document directing all soldiers to report immediately to the town hall. His hands were shaking, and his face was shiny with sweat.

The column moved on and everything looked calm in the little villages. We passed two Ukrainian women who told us they had been hidden in the woods for six days without eating. The men threw them some rations.

A GAIN word drifted down the line of more Germans ahead—a busload of them approaching a crossroads. The men behind the guns got set as the bus was flagged and came to a stop. It emptied quickly. A German up in front of the bus threw his burp gun into the air as if it were suddenly red hot. This was funny enough for a ripple of grim laughter to run down the column.

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Among the 21 Germans on the bus was a medical officer with a Heidelberg saber scar along his cheek, some 16-year-old kids, some Luftwaffe flak gunners and two nurses wearing red cross arm bands.

The medical officer perspired freely while explaining that he had been attempting to flee across country. Meanwhile, our soldiers removed five cases of cognac from the bus as a German girl passed us on the road followed by the local mailman. The mailman looked at his letters and obviously wanted us to know that he was strictly minding his own business.

Lt. Stanley Swiechewski of Wyandotte, Mich., whose lead platoon had grabbed the bus, looked over his catch a little grimly when he saw the Luftwaffe wings on the uniforms and heard that he had taken some flak gunners. He said something very loudly about how he would like to fix them so they would never be any good hereafter as future fathers. The German officer grinned painfully. The GIs, with the plain candor of soldiers, stared at the German nurses.

The woods around us were resounding with 50-caliber fire as the recon cars probed the area with bullets for more Germans. Down the road came a sedan and Capt. Robinson fired his pistol in front of it. It stopped and two civilians, badly shaken, got out.

"Tell them to keep that car off the road," said the captain to a soldier who spoke German "or they will really be shot up." The civilians were so grateful at not having been shot that they wanted to embrace everybody in sight. There were no customers.



Capt. Don Robinson of the Fifth Division recon troops distributes German guns to the patients.

It was late in the afternoon as we turned into more woods and heard a single rifle shot ring out. Down the column went the message: "Venison dinner tonight."

We rolled for a thousand yards through the woods, a full 10 miles ahead of our lines. It was very quiet until suddenly there was a loud scream. Simultaneously, we sighted the prison hospital and the men hobbling and crawling down the walks, calling to us as they came.

We got to them and they talked in loud, hoarse voices and what they had to say seemed never to finish. There was a captain with the scars of burns around his eyes, men with missing legs, a small Texan with the Air Forces insignia on his shirt, a Canadian from Toronto, a flyer from Larwick in the Shetland Islands.

The recon soldiers didn't know what to say. They were windburnt, healthy, cocky soldiers of a conquering army and the men they had found looked drawn and pale. But they got together with small talk over cigarettes and cognac while the German medics and Luftwaffe wounded looked silently on. No one paid any attention to them; this was an American old home week in the middle of Germany. A Yank with a bad leg added the final festive touch to the late afternoon when he pulled the air raid siren and its screams rang out into the still countryside.

Everybody wanted to go back with the recon troops to Frankfurt, but Capt. Robinson explained very patiently why they would have to wait until doctors and ambulances came the next day. While some celebrated the reunion in the hospital that night, others of the recon boys were out doing their job and had flushed more Germans bringing the total prisoner take to more than 100. Some of the wounded hobbled around making coffee and taking it out for the changing guard around the hospital.

In the morning the ambulances and the doctors and medics arrived. Those who could walk climbed into ambulances and the others were brought down on stretchers.

It was still very joyous but it was also very smooth and going right through channels. An officer read off the names of every man going by him to the ambulances. Now the men were American soldiers again and they were on a list and their names were being read off.

They were soldiers again; it was roll call.