

A FORMER POW'S RECOLLECTION OF D-DAY, 1944.....1

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Prisoners of war seize any opportunity to relieve the humdrum of prison life. So it was with us American POW's in Oflag 64 (Officers Camp) in Szubin, Poland, as the sixth of June 1944 (D-Day) neared.

How did we know beforehand that the invasion of Normandy was imminent? We didn't. We were simply making plans to observe a totally unrelated event: our first anniversary at Oflag 64.

I can't recall whose weird idea it was to observe our first anniversary at Szubin, but it appealed to all of us despite the fact that we would actually be celebrating our own incarceration! At least it would give us something to look forward to, something different to do.

First we would have to get the German Commandant's approval. Sometime in early May our senior American officer (Colonel Thomas D. Drake, now retired and living in San Diego, California) put the request in writing to the Commandant. After an appropriate interval of time calculated

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to show weighty consideration, the Commandant granted his approval. This, mind you, was about a month before June 6.

Committees were formed; planning moved into high gear. A full day of activities was quickly arranged as follows:

0600 - Reveille. Our own Oflag 64 Marching (In Place) Band would wake us with reveille call followed by a few spirited selections. (The band instruments had been made available to us through the good offices of the International YMCA.)

0630 - Morning Appell. (This was the German version for roll call. They would line us up twice daily to make sure we hadn't "flown the coop." Occasionally they would sneak in an unscheduled roll call just to keep tabs on us.)

0700 - Breakfast (for lack of a more suitable designation). Ersatz coffee (low-grade chicory) and a slice of black bread toasted over a tin-can stovelet to burn away its bitter taste.

0900 - Carnival Games. Blindman's bluff, horseshoes,

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roulette wheels and other games of chance, dart throwing, fortune telling, "hula dancers," and many other merry-making activities.

1200 - Dinner. We would hoard for this meal as we had for Thanksgiving and Christmas. We would have a "bash," as we called such rare treats in POW lingo. Through the remaining days before June sixth each of us would stint on the contents of his Red Cross food parcels. In that way we would save enough to stuff ourselves and appease the gnawings of hunger for a day.

1330 - Softball game between the all-stars of the "Big House" and the all-stars of the "Out Houses." (Our compound consisted of one large main building and several smaller ones.)

1600 - Concert. Our band would convert itself into an orchestra by adding some string instruments and finally give us the concert it had been rehearsing for months, including a schmaltzy version of "If I had the Wings of an Angel."

1700 - Evening Appell.

1800 - Supper. In name only! A bowl of watery

cabbage-rutabaga-potato soup would be the bill of fare. But who could rightly complain after the noonday bash?

1930 - Burlesque Show. It would be an all-male chorus featuring "Queenie," Oflag 64's incomparable female impersonator, played by Leo Farber, a six-foot, 210-pound former University of Dayton quarterback.

Enthusiasm grew as the days slipped by and our preparations neared completion. Of course if we thought about it, it did seem rather silly for us to be celebrating such an occasion --our first year in this particular Nazi prison! But then, we had waited endlessly for the invasion since the summer before, only to be disappointed time and again.

Our zeal was contagious; even our German guards watched the preparations with mounting interest. They were particularly intrigued by the construction of the various carnival games and the rehearsals for the burlesque routine.

When the fifth of June rolled around, we were ready. That night we turned in with the same sense of anticipation that a kid has the night before his birthday.

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Dawn broke clear the next morning to the loud and brassy blare of our band. We assembled for appell. The roll call began. Midway through it we sensed an air of excitement among the guards. The roll call was finished faster than usual. The German Duty Officer and his flunkies hurried out of the compound. Something was astir.

Soon the electrifying words were on everyone's lips: "The Invasion has started!"

Finally it had come to pass. During the heavy hours of morning, while we slept, the invasion force had crossed the English Channel and started to scale the walls of Fortress Europe all along the stormswept coast of Normandy.

The German Commandant, his staff, and the guards all scurried about like men possessed. Babel reigned among the Germans that forenoon at Oflag 64.

We couldn't fathom their reaction. They, like we, had been expecting the invasion in the West since the previous summer when the Allies landed in Italy. Their newspapers and magazines regularly speculated as to "when" and "where" the invasion would take place. Surprise we could understand, for we ourselves were surprised. But this outbreak of near panic had us baffled. It didn't fit the

Teutonic mold.

Then we discovered the reason for their strange behavior. One of the German officers slipped the information to our senior officer. It wasn't the invasion that had them so bestirred; rather, it was the suspicion that all of us POW's--isolated behind barbed wire and heavy guard in the middle of Poland, some 1,000 miles from the troop staging areas in England--had somehow known the exact date of the invasion a month earlier! The pretext that we would be observing our first anniversary at Oflag 64 had been nothing less than a diabolical trick.

So the Germans surmised. And who could blame them? Imagine anyone wanting to celebrate such a joyless event as being stuck away in a prisoner of war camp!

At first we thought to reassure them that it was pure coincidence. Another suggestion was offered by Henry Söderberg, representative of the International YMCA whom we had specially invited to be with us that day because of our great admiration and affection for him as a devoted friend. Henry, a Swedish citizen, pointed out that June 6 was also Sweden's "Day of the Flag" and that we might try

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somehow, because of his presence, to exploit that coincidence. (Today Söderberg is Director of IATA and Industry Association Affairs for Scandinavian Airlines System in Stockholm.)

In the end we decided not to dissuade the Germans of their suspicion. Instead, we let them stew in their own juice; we let them continue to think we had a super-secret means of contact with Supreme Headquarters Allied Forces Europe, and that Supreme Headquarters considered us important enough to be privy to the war's biggest secret.

We feigned a knowing attitude the more to confound them. Remarks were dropped, looks were exchanged, gestures were made--all designed to bedevil the hell out of our "hosts."

And bedeviled they were. In desperation the Commandant called his higher headquarters for advice and assistance. In only a matter of hours a squad of Gestapo goons swooped down upon us from distant Posen. They were experts in ferreting out things. They'd get to the bottom of this mystery.

They searched high and low and found nothing. They asked questions far and wide and learned nothing. They turned the camp upside down and inside out but failed to

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find a clue. Perplexed and disgusted , they departed, leaving the Commandant and his staff to ponder over the events of that historic day.

In the weeks and months that followed they never did reconcile themselves to the fact that it had been sheer coincidence. We in turn never disabused them of their doubt.

Twenty-five years later they're probably still wondering!

As a postscript to this story it might be of interest to note that throughout the intervening years the former POW's of Oflag 64 have maintained an association of sorts, due mainly to the efforts of John F. Slack of Gladwyne, Pennsylvania, and Frank Maxwell of Springfield, N.J. Biennial reunions are held and a periodic newsletter is published.

The most recent reunion was held last October in Washington, D.C. with one of the former German interpreters attending as a quasi-member! (The former German interpreter, Gottfried Dietze, is now Professor of Political Science at Johns Hopkins University. Through the friendship and assistance of a former POW, Tony Lumpkin of Mexico, Missouri, Dietze was able to come to the United States to further his

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education, receiving his Doctor of Philosophy degree from Princeton University and his Doctor of Juridical Science degree from the University of Virginia. Dr. Dietze is the author of several books, the latest of which is "America's Political Dilemma," published in 1968.)

As always, the biggest decision to be made at the reunion was the site of the next reunion. The choice was nostalgic and unanimous. The 1970 reunion will be held-- East-West conditions permitting--in Szubin, Poland! We may even invite the former German Commandant and his staff, if they are anywhere to be found, to join us in Szubin so that the record can be set straight once and for all about what took place--and why--at Oflag 64 on the sixth of June in 1944.

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