

BEHIND THE BARBED WIRE



GERMAN CIVILIANS . . . "moving into the daylight are calm, with the calmness of the sleepwalker."

EDITOR'S NOTE—This is the second 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.

By LEO W. FISHER

Written Exclusively for the Central Press and This Newspaper

SOMEWHERE DEEP INSIDE GERMANY it is a clear sparkling afternoon. The sun is warm; a bird sings of home to the prisoners of war who are playing soft ball inside the wire of the camp. The scene is peaceful as Sunday on the farm.

Suddenly the loudspeaker inside the camp crackles:

"Achtung! Achtung! Flugzeug ober Deutschland! Flugzeug ober Deutschland! . . ."

"Attention, Attention! Enemy aircraft over Germany! Enemy aircraft over Germany!"

The American prisoners cheer and halt their play to scan the skies, but as the alarm siren has not sounded they resume their game. The speaker roars again and almost immediately the siren on the Town Hall screams its worried wail.

At once, the civilians begin to pour into the mouth of the air raid shelter across the street. They hurry, but their haste is the orderly movement of trained routine.

Inevitable as Rain

They accept this as part of their lives as inevitable as rain. Inside the wire the prisoners are ordered to the basements of the prison buildings. They need no order for this action. They, like the German civilians, are familiar with the work of the Allied "luft-gansters" ("Air-gangsters," as the Nazis called our bomber crews.)

You have seen in the news-reels the God's eye view from the bombers looking DOWN on their targets, but, fortunately, you as an American in America have not as yet looked UP at an armada of death. It is an unforgettable sight!

No words are powerful enough to adequately describe the terrific detonation and the crushing concussion of a 4,000-pound blockbuster. Nothing but your own eyes could conceive the spectacle as whole buildings bulge, crack and slide in ruins into the streets!

Like some prehistoric monsters struck by lightning, giant locomotives rear into the air, burst like a heavy explosive shell and fall into ripped bits into a crater 40 feet across; to lie there snorting steam and buried in steam and dust.

You have seen one building burning? Then imagine whole blocks ablaze; boiling smoke twist-

ing convulsively; heavy red and orange shafts of flame darting skyward like dragon tongues?

Homes and churches, schools and stores are destroyed because somewhere in this inferno was a disguised war plant or railway station. Dante never dreamed of such chaos!

Down in the basement the prisoners are counting the alert signals as the siren whines into a scream.

A FIFTEEN Alert!

They stare at each other with wide eyes, for this signal means that the bombers are headed for THIS immediate area! They huddle around the small barred window and strain their eyes searching the skies. Unconsciously they adjust their breathing to that of the man next to them. It's easier to breathe that way. Tensely, they wait.

Someone whispers, "LISTEN!" From far away and high up, a faint rumbling roar can be heard growing louder and louder. The men smile weakly at each other, not quite sure whether to cheer or go over into a corner and be sick.

The motors are loud now. The strong, steady drumming can be felt through the earth and like electric shocks it communicates itself to their backbones.

Then in the bit of blue sky visible from the window there is a flash of silver; another and another; more and more! They try to count the planes but the window is small.

One fortress is out in front. That man knew his job. They call him Daniel Boone for he will blaze the trail with a smoke marker so that the planes in the other elements may drop their bombs on the correct targets.

Suddenly from this plane a long plummy trail of white parachutes downward in a slow puffy arc. It is the smoke marker all right. When the rest of the planes come up to this mark their bombs will drop like coins from a jackpot.

Steadily they come on. Now the first element reaches the white trail. The drone has become a roar. Eons pass by which bombardiers call "drop seconds."

Then the men in the basement hear the screaming whistle that is now familiar as the one on old Joe's peanut stand back home and like turtles they try to draw into themselves. They close their eyes hard. They make tight fists while urgent prayers go up to intercept the bombs.

The bombs hit! The series of explosions are choking; the men bounce like stones in a baby's rattle, lights flash on and off in their

heads . . . again and again the explosives rock their world. Will it never end?

Suddenly, silence! The quietest silence in the world. The motors have faded and the men wonder if this could be all for this time. One of them jumps to the window and just as quickly drops back to the floor for, like combers on a beach, the second wave comes thundering down the bomb-run.

Again the scream of a wounded wild-cat ends in a shattering explosion . . . again and again . . . dirt and plaster and bits of splintered glass trickle down on the men. . . .

For one hour and 40 minutes the men lie there sweating and waiting for death from home. By the grace of God and the accuracy of the bomb-sights, it does not come. The planes fade in the distance. Only small explosions and the roar of flames punctuate the quiet. The men stand up and stretch taut muscles. What a raid! WHAT a raid!

Half an hour later the "All Clear" is sounded and the basements are opened and the men pour out into the yard. Clouds of smoke blot the sun. The sky is polka-dotted with black balls of exploded ack-ack and down in the west a long dirty smear of smoke streaks downward to the ground. Someone's last flight!

Guards Are Stoical

The German guards are back on duty. Stoically they ignore the smoke and the fires in the city. They accept it as natural and unimportant. . . . "To give birth to VICTORY one must, of course, endure pain!"

The German civilians now are moving out into the daylight again. They are calm . . . the calmness of a sleep-walker. Their faces are white as they search through the smoke for what is left of that quiet world of two short hours ago.

They look at the Home Guard fighting the fires, they shake their heads and start in search of their homes. A few shake their fists at the prisoners behind the wire. The prisoners ignore them.

A few old people sit still on the curbs. On the corner a child stands in wonder at the transformation of his day. Some of the children cry . . . not many.

Trucks go by the prison camp with wounded on stretchers. Some of the bodies have sheets over them. Tonight the Berlin radio will announce:

"The American 'luft-gansters' made a nuisance raid. Damage and casualties were slight . . ."

TOMORROW—Soldier Actors.