

x-POW: 'They're coming to liberate you'

Ex-POW: 'They're coming to liberate you'
Chuck Haga, Star Tribune

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Don Hartley scans his Prior Lake garden for emerging rhubarb and sniffs the spring air, calculating when he can plant spinach. Soon he'll begin to untangle tomato cages.

Already, 2,000 half-inch seedlings inside his house promise an early bounty of greens. By summer's end, he'll have taken another 5,000 pounds of food to area food shelves, just as he has every year for 20 years.

What does it mean to be a prisoner of war?

For Hartley, 83, it meant starving for five months in German prison camps during World War II. It meant being the man in charge of ladling out watery cabbage soup to other prisoners and having to take some back with a spoon if he didn't make it stretch to every waiting tin cup. It meant dreaming of candy and hot oatmeal, waiting for liberation and knowing that his life, if spared, would have to mean something. When he retired in 1984, he found his meaning in the half-acre garden, in raising food that might spare some people from knowing what he knows about the course of emaciation.

He prays that these new American POWs, captured by Iraqi forces on Sunday and Monday, will not be held nearly so long.

"The first days are hard," he said. "They're going to wonder how this happened. They're going to wonder what the treatment is going to be.

They're probably imagining the worst." If he could talk with them, he would urge them to banish negative thoughts. "Keep telling yourself, 'I am going to get out alive. I am going to see my relatives again.' Walk the straight-and-narrow and do what you're told.

Bide your time, and believe they're coming to liberate you. Because they are."

Taken in the Bulge

Hartley was 25, a first lieutenant with the Army's 106th Division, when his unit was overrun and captured in Belgium on Dec. 21, 1944. It was the Battle of the Bulge, Germany's last great offensive.

He was loaded with other prisoners into a boxcar and shipped east to a camp in Poland. Along the way, on Christmas Day, Allied planes strafed the train, killing or wounding many American POWs.

When Russian troops came from the east, Hartley and 1,500 other prisoners were moved back into Germany. Fewer than half survived the forced march.

Hartley was a prisoner until the war in Europe ended in May 1945. Memories of his captivity "don't pop up much during the day now," he said, "but they do in dreams."

The first memories that came rushing back as he watched televised reports of the POWs in Iraq were of his mother, sobbing as she embraced him when he returned to little Bingham Lake in southwestern Minnesota.

"I was sorry for the kinfolk of these people," he said, "especially the mothers. They're not going to have a peaceful moment.

"I thought about my mother a lot while I was a prisoner. She was a sensitive person, and I knew it would be hard on her. She knew at first just that I was missing, but she went to the local merchant to put a box of food together for me; I never did get it. She didn't learn until spring that I was alive, a prisoner."

He has the same advice for families of POWs as he does for soldiers held by the enemy. "Be positive," he said. "Pray and hope and wish for the best. That will be a lot less destructive on a person. You can just tear yourself apart otherwise."

'Hold heads high'

Raising food for the needy in Prior Lake and Minneapolis keeps him occupied 12 months a year, Hartley said. Over winter, he collects and prepares milk and juice cartons for seedlings, fixes tools and prepares basement growing spaces.

In the camps, he watched as prisoners' stomachs shriveled and fingernails became discolored. Gums drew away from teeth and eyes became gaunt. But no matter how long or difficult their ordeal, the American POWs in Iraq should hold dearly to their

pride, Hartley said. "When you come home, hold your heads high," he said. "That was one of the worst things I did; I was extremely hard on myself. I don't think any of the men who were taken prisoner didn't have some guilt feelings about it.

"But after a while, after I learned more about what had happened all around us, it was easier. 'You went there to fight, and you did fight,' I told myself, 'but you ran out of ammo, you ran out of food, somebody dropped the ball upstairs, and you were outnumbered.' "I certainly felt I could hold my head high. And the government must have thought I had something left. They called me back up for the Korean War."

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