

LOOK OUT BELOW!

By REV. (ET. COL.) FRANCIS L. SAMPSON

To bring you up to date — Father Sampson, chaplain of the 101st Division, U.S. Army paratroop corps, chuted into Normandy on D-Day and later into Holland where he was captured by a Nazi patrol and marched to a prisoner of war camp.

Life Behind Barbed Wire

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Stag IIA, we soon discovered, was a camp for enlisted men only, and we officers had been sent there by mistake.

The German commandant of the camp told us that we would remain for two or three days and then would be marched to the officers' camp about two hundred kilometers away.

Sergeant Harley Lucas, the American "Man of Confidence" (the title given to the soldier that the prisoners selected to represent them to the German authorities), came to Captain Cecil B. Hawes, the doctor in our group, and to me to ask whether we would be willing to stay at this Stag since there were between five and six thousand Americans in the camp without a doctor or chaplain.

We were glad to accept, but the Germans were unwilling that any officer remain in an enlisted men's camp. Of course, the Geneva Convention Articles (which the Nazis pretended to observe) clearly prescribe that prisoners of war shall have the services of their own doctors and chaplains if such are available.

The authorities of the camp could not see it that way.

Sergeant Lucas, this resourceful Man of Confidence, had recourse to other means to bring about the desired end. He contacted the Serbian doctor, who had been of tremendous help to the American sick and wounded. The doctor examined Doctor Hawes first and saw that he had an infected throat from frostbite and could walk no farther; this was a fact, as the German commandant could see.

The Serb then examined me and diagnosed a case of double pneumonia; this was not a fact. Tired and weak as I was, however, I found it quite easy to act the part of the patient. After the other officers had been marched out of the camp three days later, I made a quick recovery.

Despite certain misgivings of the German authorities, I was permitted to remain at the camp until the end of the war. The commandant even obliged me by granting an "ausweis" (pass) and freedom of all the various compounds within the camp.

The Man of Confidence not only represented the prisoners' complaints to the German authorities but likewise acted as the commander of the prisoners and provided good order and discipline within the American compound.

Sergeant Lucas handled this difficult task with as much devotion, tact, and efficiency, I believe, as any commissioned officer could have done. It was not an easy job, for men in confinement have a tendency to grow surly and hypercritical of everything their own chosen leader tries to do in their behalf. He was extremely fortunate in his selection of men to help him in the command of the thousands of Americans in the camp.

His "barracks chiefs" and other men given authority by him had a way of getting things done without seeming to throw their weight around. They managed to obtain the maximum cooperation with a minimum of friction. I have seen many officers in the army do far worse.

Two American doctors who

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tea (made from tree bark, I think) which the men used for shaving water, for they could not get soap. Four days a week each man received a couple of potatoes.

The soup was invariably either cabbage (with worms) or rotten turnips (with worms) or a combination of the two (with a double ration of worms).

The men were, of course, very thin, and many of them became sick and died, usually from amoebic dysentery. Fortunately for all of us, Red Cross parcels came through after we were there a short time.

One of the first things I wanted to do was contact the priests in the camp. There were six French priests, two Dutch priests, and one Italian and one Polish priest. Each of them greeted me with sincere warmth. The Italian priest died very shortly after my arrival, and I was given his Mass equipment.

Many of the French and Poles worked downtown in Neubrandenburg. For this they were compensated in reichsmarks, and with this money they bribed the guards to get wine and hosts from the local German priest.

The French had also made a very devotional and artistic chapel out of one of their barracks. Scrounging for materials was quite an art in itself.

All the French priests had been enlisted men in the French army, as France allows no clergyman's immunity from enlisted service. Since they were enlisted men, they had to do manual labor for the Germans, such as repair roads, work on bomb shelters, and so forth.

The oldest among them was a very wonderful man with the charm and kindness of a St. Francis de Sales. His thick hair was long and white, as was his neatly trimmed beard. The Germans seemed to respect him, and he was given freedom to visit all the compounds in the camp. The rest of us priests considered ourselves his curates. I received tremendous help from his kindly advice and priestly example.

We spent many enjoyable evenings together. Though no one was permitted to go out of the barracks after eight p.m., I would frequently sneak out to visit M. Yabe in his barracks. We would talk most of the night using a goulash of his bad English, my worse French, our questionable Latin, and pidgin German.

Our desperate efforts to express ourselves so delighted the old priest one night that he let out a loud laugh. A guard passing came to the window and turned his flashlight on us. The old priest reassured him.

A shipment of boxes labeled "Red Cross" and addressed to American Prisoners of War arrived at the camp one day. The men grouped about these huge cartons thinking that at last food had arrived. Work and amusements as they were, they anticipated a real treat of good American food.

Their pathetic feelings were beyond imagination when the cartons were opened only to reveal their useless contents: football shoulder-pads, badminton racquets, and numerous other items for which we had neither the space nor the energy to waste in their use. Decks of cards, cribbage boards, dominoes, and checker sets, however, salvaged some of the Red Cross honor in this instance and helped the men to pass the dragging hours of prison life.

The disappointing shipment of athletic equipment was followed a week later by the arrival of Red Cross food parcels. The prestige of the Red Cross soared to unprecedented heights.

From then on these parcels came in steady shipments, and morale got a big shot in the arm every time they were delivered.

Each box contained three small cans of pressed meat, a can of salmon or tuna fish, a can of cheese, a can of powdered milk, two bars of real chocolate, a box of sugar squares, a can of soluble coffee, a box of raisins, a box of crackers, a can of oleo or butter, vitamin tab-



Troops in monolithic barb tudge through snow and wooded areas to bring supplies to last-own during "Battle of the Bulge." Father Sampson, at that time, was behind barbed wire in a Nazi prisoner of war camp.

lets, toilet paper, and most precious of all (especially for their bartering value) five packages of cigarettes. Each man was issued a parcel a week, and we shared our parcels with the British in the camp, allotting them one parcel per man each week.

We figured we could ride through the rest of the war O.K. now through our food parcels we became the aristocracy of the camp. Even the Germans were not eating as well as we were in some respects. Our men continued to lose weight despite the parcels but generally their health and energy improved.

Because our coffee, chocolate and cigarettes were especially desired by the Germans, bartering and trading became the most intriguing and profitable occupation in the American compound.

German guards could scarcely restrain their enthusiasm for American cigarettes, and since the demand was so great for their part for our injuries which we now had in some abundance, it became expedient that we set up our own OPA price scale to prevent an inflation and a cheapening of our own goods.

To maintain our cigarettes and coffee and chocolate at the highest possible worth we computed and posted our trade value in this manner:

- For 1 two-lb. loaf of bread, give no more than 10 cigarettes or 1/2 chocolate bar.
- For 1 two-lb. sack of flour, give no more than 15 cigarettes.
- For 1 doz. eggs, give no more than 25 cigarette or 1 chocolate bar.
- For 1 good chicken, give no more than 1 small can of soluble coffee.
- For 12 large onions, give no

wielded his mighty cigarette to his own advantage.

Since there were no Five Food Laws within the camp, the GI never scrupled to mislabel or misrepresent his article. One night I heard a terrific wrangle going on outside the little room the men had built for me for privacy of confessions. I went out to see what it was all about.

A German guard had come into the barracks and produced a fine hen from under his "great coat" (this is a huge garment guards wear that hangs all the way to the ground to keep them warm on cold nights) and he wanted one of our small cans of soluble coffee and fifteen cigarettes in exchange for his hen.

The American felt he could do better. (Usually three or four Americans would buy something like this together and would pick the sharpest fellow to do the trading.) This particular American bargled and argued with the guard for nearly an hour until the exasperated German finally agreed to trade his hen for the coffee and to forget the cigarettes.

The matter having been settled, the articles were exchanged. The American felt the chicken critically, mulling that he was being cheated for two men. He wanted one of our small cans of soluble coffee and fifteen cigarettes in exchange for his hen.

About fifteen minutes later the German came back, angry, fuming, and spouting German much faster than my untrained ear could follow. I got an interpreter to ask him what the matter was.

It seemed that the can of coffee he had received for his hen turned out to be in reality just a can of sand with a sprinkling of coffee on top. Realizing the impossibility of locating the swindler, the German had to content himself with a few anti-Semite invectives against all Americans.

The religious program for the American and British compounds was progressing well. We set aside one corner of a barracks for a chapel sanctuary and employed the very considerable artistic talent in the camp to make this corner as beautiful and as devotional as our limited tools and materials permitted.

We were able to bribe the guards for the lumber necessary to build an altar. Several

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scarlet blankets were obtained by the same means. The altar was built on a platform with three steps leading to it. The blankets were cut to make an antependium and a backdrop for the crucifix, which was carved out of a block of wood by an Italian prisoner.

By our usual means, a bribe again, we obtained from a German guard paper and a complete set of pastel crayons. With these the Serbian artist did a magnificent job on the Stations of the Cross. With a half-dozen chocolate bars we got two more scarlet blankets with which we covered the crude Communion rail.

The material left over was sufficient to make into a canopy for the altar. A Jewish soldier working in a group at the railroad yards found time at night to paint a beautiful Madonna and a picture of St. Joseph for the sides of the altar. A German guard who became interested in the project obtained wiring material, and a socket was placed behind the canopy. The candles were fake, made from shaving soap sticks stuck together.

When the light was turned on, the effect was so satisfying that I doubt whether any priest ever looked upon his church with greater pleasure and joy than did I upon our humble prison sanctuary. It became a spiritual oasis for our homesick men as they visualized something of their home church in our crude improvisations.

Many a young man during our long days, weeks, and months of imprisonment found relief there in a quiet prayer. Many found there a fulfillment of our Lord's promise, "Come unto Me... and I will refresh you."

In my small room adjoining our little chapel I was able to have the privacy necessary for confessions and consultations. Each day most of the Catholics attended Mass, although I was forced to limit Communions to

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Sunday only because of the difficulty of obtaining hosts.

We had no large hosts at all. I used the small ones for Mass and quartered these on Sunday for communions. Twice a week I held a nondenominational service for the Protestant men. A soldier who had been in a Lutheran seminary also conducted Protestant services with dignity on Sundays. His sermons were well thought out, sincerely delivered, and very well received.

Religion was a constant subject of conversation, and many men with little or no religion in their background sought instructions. The credit for these conversions belongs to a number of Catholic men who not only knew their religion and could present it properly, but lived it as well. One young man in a nearby working camp instructed and baptized nine men although he had never been beyond the first year of high school himself.

When I discovered this and checked up on his converts, I found that the instructions had been thorough and his followers were solid Catholics.

The recently printed book "Look Out Below" is published with permission of the Catholic University of America Press, Washington. All photos illustrating this series in the Courier-Journal are official U.S. Army photos.

Next Week—Russian prisoners.

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