

V-E Day

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chester, England, when Germany made its historic surrender May 8, 1945.

"Everybody was crazy. The streets were crowded and you couldn't move. I've never seen anything like it. The pubs were so crowded you couldn't get a drink," said Powers, whose wife, Jane, is a parishioner in Elmira's Eastside Catholic Parish.

Further south, Trevor Durrant was serving in Naples, Italy, as a sergeant and X-ray technician with the Army's 34th Field Hospital on that day.

"We were watching an outdoor movie at a horse-race track," said Durrant, 80. "They stopped the movie and the lieutenant said, 'Germany has surrendered.'"

"There are so many stories you could tell, but I'll never forget just knowing the war there (in Europe) was over and we were all safe and sound," said Durrant, a parishioner at Sacred Heart Cathedral.

Another Sacred Heart parishioner, Kay Wilkin, was a nurse in the Army's 19th General Hospital Unit and had been kept particularly busy by casualties from the Battle of the Bulge the previous December. She recalls having mixed emotions upon hearing of the Germans' surrender while she was stationed in Nancy, France.

"There was elation, but it was also tempered with sadness," said Wilkin, 74, recalling the multitude of American soldiers "who didn't come back." Of all major wars U.S. troops have fought, the most American casualties were suffered in World War II.

Father John S. Hayes served as chaplain and major for General George Patton's Third Army, which was fighting in Linz, Austria, on May 8. He also acknowledged that his fellow soldiers' reaction was not entirely festive.

"It was conditioned in the sense that we knew we might have to go to the Pacific," said Father Hayes, 80, who currently resides at the Sisters of St. Joseph Motherhouse in Pittsford.

Indeed, World War II did not come to a close until more than four months later, when the Japanese surrendered Sept. 2 following the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

And in Europe, there was still plenty of work to be done in the weeks follow-



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Ralph Bleier, parishioner at Rochester's Holy Cross Church, poses with his uniform. Bleier also serves as historian with the Catholic War Veterans of Monroe County.

ing V-E Day.

Ralph Bleier, 72, noted that German military and civilians alike were hoping to be taken into custody by U.S. military, fearing harsh treatment by the Russian military as retribution for Russians who perished during World War II at the hands of the Germans.

"The (German) soldiers were telling us, 'Why don't you go to (Russian-occupied) Berlin so we could surrender to you instead,'" said Bleier, a sergeant in the Army's 104th Infantry Division. He was stationed in Gutenberg, Germany, when V-E Day occurred.

Another vivid memory for Bleier was the horde of German civilians which Army troops were ordered to ignore.

"It was the saddest thing I ever saw — civilians all out in the street, following our convoy of trucks. We could see them for the longest time, still walking and crying — little ones, women, men. They knew the Russians were coming."

For many veterans, the suffering of European natives and



submitted photo

Ralph Bleier (far right) celebrated his birthday in Germany on April 13, 1945, less than a month before V-E Day.

their towns was as troubling a memory as the fighting itself.

Much of the carnage came from German chancellor Adolf Hitler's "final solution" — the extermination of millions to create an Aryan race.

Bleier, a parishioner at Rochester's Holy Cross Church, recalls the Army trucks which transported stacks of French, Dutch and Jewish corpses from the Noordhausen concentration camp.

"After we saw the trucks, we didn't want any part of that — no way," Bleier remarked.

Father Hayes' brother, Brian Fitzgerald Hayes, was a medic in the Army's 45th Division which liberated Dachau, another German concentration camp. Brian Hayes also visited the Berlin bunker where Hitler resided in the final days of his life before the chancellor committed suicide April 30, 1945.

Prior to Brian's death in 1974 at the age of 54, he shared many wartime stories with his son, Father John H. Hayes.

"I remember my father saying that when they opened the gates at Dachau and told the people 'You're free; you can go now,' they cried. The Germans had done the same thing and shot them, saying they were trying to escape," said Father John H. Hayes.

Father John S. Hayes said his brother Brian was among the first people outside of Germany to discover the tactics Hitler employed to kill Jews.

"It was monstrous, the evil of extermination that was practiced," said Father John S. Hayes.

Father John H. Hayes, pastor of Holy Cross Church in Dryden, Tompkins County, said he "always felt bad for my father. The war deeply affected him."

One subject Brian Hayes kept private, noted his son, was the multitude of dead bodies he discovered once inside the Dachau complex.

"That part he wouldn't talk about," said Father John H. Hayes.

Indeed, those who experienced World War II's atrocities often struggle to convey the extreme physical and emotional hardship of which they were all a part.

"Nobody realizes what war can bring to those cities and towns," Durrant said.

"Unless you see it first-hand, you can't really appreciate it," agreed Bleier.

"I have guys who come up to me today with stories (about the war) and burst out crying — and these are stable men," Durrant acknowledged.

"These are people who went through hell with you," Lodato said.

Yet a great deal of fonder memories also pervade these veterans' thoughts as they mark V-E Day's 50th anniversary.

Bleier, reflecting on the strong camaraderie he shared with his fellow soldiers, remarked, "It wasn't all blood and guts." A historian with the Catholic War Veterans of Monroe County, Bleier said he has attended and enjoyed several reunions over the years.

Wilkin, acknowledging the many Rochester-area doctors and nurses who served in the 19th General Hospital, called her cohorts "a great unit."

"I wouldn't have missed it for the world," concluded Father John S. Hayes.

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