1945 June 18-24

Prisoner of War: Europe

In the broad trauma of war, everyone in a war zone has to deal with a special sub-category of trauma--that of being captured by the enemy.

The most crucial moment for a soldier is at the time of capture.¹ That instant determines whether the vulnerable individual is slain or taken captive. The difference between life and death is dependent on the attitude and control of the conqueror. One more pull of the trigger turns a potential POW into a KIA. Soldiers in the heat of battle, who are just trying to survive themselves, cannot always be condemned when adrenaline or bloodlust leads to actions that they would never commit in civilian life.

There is often a blurry continuum of guilt. On the low end, there are lives ended as an unavoidable circumstance of the situation. On the high end, there is the execution of wounded men or prisoners, as well as starvation, torture, and other brutality leading to death because of ideology or strategy. The latter we call war crimes.

The <u>Geneva Convention</u> sought to provide protection for noncombatants and prisoners. It was an attempt to provide rules for an inherently unruly human activity. In a perfect world, all combatants would follow the rules. No war, however, has ever come close to that ideal. World War II was no exception, and both sides were guilty of conduct that violated the rules of war. But for every instance of Allied soldiers committing heinous acts, Germany and Japan trumped those many times over.

Whether they were men who fell from the sky, were plucked from the oceans, or surrendered singly or en masse on land, the combatants of World War II had millions of opportunities to demonstrate their treatment of prisoners of war. Treatment varied greatly depending on a multitude of factors.

Determining the number of prisoners of war depends on the source and how the counting is done. John Ellis puts the number of American prisoners of war from the Army and Army Air Force at 120,000 (not including members of the Navy or Marines).² According to another source, the Germans alone held 75,850 American prisoners of war by March 1945.³



POWs at Stalag 11B at Fallingbostel in Germany welcome their liberators, 1945 April 16 (ww2today.com)

As the war with Germany ended in early 1945, prisoner of war camps were liberated. With Germany's surrender in early May, Allied prisoners of war started returning home by the thousands.

Every released man, and woman, had a story to tell about being a captive of the enemy. There were common themes, such as hunger, boredom, and yearning for home, but each had a unique experience as well.

This week will highlight the experiences of nine La Crosse County men, as related by them in local newspapers, just weeks after being freed.

- THE LA CROSSE TRIBUNE, SUNDAY MORNING, JUNE 24, 1945 ------3 Wolden, Captured By Nazi Tank Crews, Lost **35 Pounds While Confined In Several Prisons**

Before S. Sgt. Russell Wolden enlisted in the army for the big fight, he had fought his way through high school in interscho-latie herter. lastic battles on the football field, in track and on the basketball court.

Court. He was a letterman in all three sports and for two years he was selected as a member of the City All-Star football team. A 1938 graduate of Logan, he played amateur baseball in the city until he joined the La Crosse Black-hawks in 1941, as a catcher and infielder. infielder.

"See America first" would seem "See America first" would seem to be government training policy to judge from the servicemen's itineraries. And Sgt. Wolden's is no exception. Since he enlisted July 13, 1942, he has trained in Texas, Louisiana, California, Pen-nsylvania and Massachusetts.

In Training Films

He even went "Hollywood," the army way. In California for five months he was used in training months he was used in training films and in one movie 'feature which was distributed to the pub-lic, "Strange As It Seems." Neith-er his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Ed-win Wolden, 613 Sill street, nor his wife, the former Bonnie Hey-er, have seen the film. Going overseas July 13, 1944, Sgt. Wolden joined the 3rd Army in August while they were cross-ing the Moselle river. His divi-sion was the 95th Infantry. Not only did difficulties rain, but

Not only did difficulties rain, but they began to pour on Wolden after two months of combat. As the leader of one of the squads spearheading the attack on Metz, he was hit in the head by a black

spearheading the attack on Metz, he was hit in the head by a blast. No sooner was he out of the hos-pital than he was captured by four. Nazi tiger tank on Nov. 29. St. Barbara had been the ob-jective for the day. Wolden and two privates were separated from their unit in the town and were trapped in a basement by the four tanks. four tanks.

In Many Prison Camps

Capture was followed by the routine of questioning at Lim-burg, 12A. As first the Americans got too close and then the Rus-sians, Wolden was moved by truck, boxcar and on foot to Fur-terphine 2B. Linbound 2A. Comstenburg 3B, Lukenwald 3A, Commando camp, and finally on April 1 he arrived at Altengrable, from

Among his most unusual com-panions while in the Limburg camp was an Indian with hair to his bross. They unusual to his knees. They were in the same compound and met on a walk they took to get exercise. The Indian

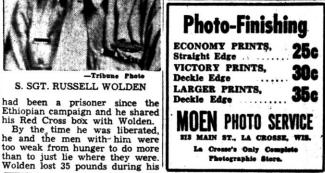


imprisonment, which he has since regained.

Has Unit Citation

Wolden wears the combat -inwhile while we are the combat me fantryman medal, a presidential unit citation for the Metz battle, the purple heart, good conduct ribbon and the ribbon for the European theater of operations with stars for Germany and France

France. He began his 60-day furlough at home on June 16, and is to re-port at Miami, Fla., on Aug. 18. His brother Sidney is with the 53rd Military Police in Lyon. France, while Lester is stationed at Los Vagas, Nev.



(La Crosse Tribune, 1945 June 24, page 3)

Stories of Nazi Prison Camps Accurate, Sgt. Thomas Says

By Order of the Court R. V. Ahlstrom ian D. Hussa, Attorney, Wis. 21-28, July 6. rt Alchele

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distance of 900 kilomet it seemed impossible to step," Glem said, "but did — then another Nights they sayed eil or brick factories. They once a day and at the they stayed the farmer to give them soup or site at night or barley coffee ing. "It was a rare occa received both, Glem ne Thomas . . . w 215 Pot and those

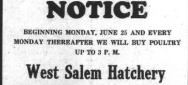
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Jan. 12 and Stalag VIII scribed the n buildings

the truth as he knows it to be. The officers, non - commission officers, non -

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saw a 215 pound m For



WEST SALEM, WIS.

(The Nonpareil Journal, West Salem, Wisconsin, 1945 June 21, page 1)



(La Crosse Tribune, 1945 June 24, page 7)

PITZNER'S CLEANERS

ATTENTION!

other car.

"Insure! It's a Good Policy

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Sources & Notes:

¹ Jonathan F. Vance, ed. *Encyclopedia of Prisoners of War and Internment* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2000), 342.

² John Ellis, *World War II: A Statistical Survey: The Essential Facts and Figures for All the Combatants* (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 254.

³ Summary of the Second World War and Its Consequences: An Alphabetical Reference Book (Chicago: F. E. Compton & Company, 1946), 96.