

Sgt Barry Ziff
HQ BTRY, 550th AAA Bn
APO 230, c/o Postmaster
New York, N. Y.

GERMANY

THE NAZIS' LAST ACT

We bridged the Rhine and lead the Third Army spearhead across central Germany. It was one of those lightning thrusts that was typical of Patton's tactics: start rolling and let the follow-up troops mop up. Keep moving. Spearhead and then consolidate. And what we found was made to order for such tactics. It was the Reichswehr Autobahn - Hitler's six lane super-highway that circles and criss-crosses Germany.

Town after town was taken by surprise. Thousands of German troops were captured; warehouses taken intact; government bureaus and military headquarters found with few of their records destroyed. The enemy was in a rout and could only put up a delaying action here and there, which amounted to little more than a final tribute to the dying Fatherland. The German people said they had no idea that the American troops were that close.

In our sudden and unexpected appearance in the German towns and cities we were able to see what the Nazis were doing. We didn't like it. Then on April 7 we saw something that made us sure of it. We arrived at the concentration camp called Ohrdruf Staf Lager, and there we saw the shocking results of brutal Nazi atrocities that left us cold.

Hardly fifty yards inside the gate were 33 prisoners, Russians, Serbs, Poles and others, shot through the head and lying in the grotesque postures of those who die suddenly. That was bad, but there was more, much more, to see.

In the center of the camp was a crematorium with an oven large enough to cremate two bodies at a time. Inside a small wooden shed, in back of the crematorium, were about 45 naked bodies stacked five high, evidently held there for cremation. All had probably died of starvation as none of the corpses could have weighed more than seventy pounds. Their thighs were no thicker than their ankles and their hip bones stuck out three inches on either side of their stomachs. All bore welts, scars and bruises, evidence of continual beatings. In addition, they had body sores from both malnutritional diseases and vermin. They were dusted with lye and stacked so tightly that they occupied no more space than a half dozen sacks of potatoes.

If that were all that we saw it would be considered sufficiently atrocious. However, that was mild in comparison to what came next.

In the woods, about a mile from the concentration camp, were the remains of 3,200 prisoners who had been burned in a huge pyre. Several hundred twisted, fire-charred bodies were scattered around the area. Others were jammed in a huge open pit. Still others were only partially buried with arms and legs sticking out of the ground.

Back in the camp a mere handful of prisoners were still alive, although closer to death than life. Several of them shuffled over to us and launched

Sgt Barry Ziff

into an explanation of what had happened two days before we arrived. The guards had received word that the American spearhead was driving in their direction and ordered that the entire camp was to be exterminated. The prisoners told of how everyone who was able to walk was marched out to the woods and shot in groups, with the first group burning and being buried by the second group, the second group being disposed of by the third group, and so on until all had been killed.

The American forces, however, were approaching the vicinity more rapidly than the guards anticipated. Unable to bury all of the bodies and dispose of the evidence, the guards rushed back to camp, rounded up whomever they could find and shot them before taking off. The last group to be killed were the thirty-three victims we saw lying near the gate. There was still a handful alive whom the guards overlooked, human beings too weak and emaciated to leave the camp after the SS men ran away.

There was an anticlimax to the liberation of Ohrdruf Staf Lager. Members of the armored and infantry units that took the sector arranged with the Division Counter Intelligence Corps to take fifty of the leading citizens of the city of Ohrdruf on a sight-seeing tour of the camp. The C.I.C. checked the city's records, picked the required number of influential Nazi leaders, and they were taken to the camp. The GI's merely took them there in trucks, showed them the camp and then returned them to their homes. That night the Burgemeister of Ohrdruf, Albert Schneider, and his wife, impressed by what they had seen, hanged themselves.

General Eisenhower visited Ohrdruf Staf Lager and described it as the worst he had ever seen. At his invitation, ten Members of Parliament and a delegation from the United States flew over to see it for themselves. All agreed it was the most ghastly experience they could imagine.

Sgt Barry Ziff

The massacre at Ohrdruf Staf Lager, however, was only one of many that the Nazis carried out in the face of the advancing American and Russian forces.

On Friday, April 13, the Germans herded one thousand political and war prisoners into a large barn near Gardelagen, sprayed the straw with gasoline, and then set the building on fire with flares and incendiary bullets. The screaming victims tried to escape through the four large doors, but each was covered from the outside by machine gun fire. As the burning prisoners tried to get out they were mowed down until the stacks of bodies sealed in the rest of them.

Seven of the prisoners escaped by lying on the floor among the dead, and although badly burned, they lay there for two days before trying to leave. On Saturday morning, explained one of the escaped Polish prisoners, SS troopers opened the barn doors and asked who needed medical aid. When several of them moved or answered, the Germans shot them.

More than 300 charred and smoking bodies lay on the floor of the barn when the American troops arrived. Seven hundred others were piled in nearby trenches which civilians had been ordered to dig.

The one thousand prisoners had only been in Gardelagen about two weeks, after having been marched there from the Eastern front. As soon as the Germans received news of the rapidly approaching American troops, they hurriedly marched the prisoners from their barracks in town to the barn for the massacre. The wounded were driven there in trucks.

And then there was the notorious Buchenwald concentration camp near Weimer where between 500 and 600 prisoners were killed each week. As in all of the other first class concentration camps, Buchenwald had a large crematorium, which inspired the camp's slogan: "You come in through the gate, but you go out through the chimney."

Sgt Barry Ziff

The prisoners were starved, forced to perform hard labor, and beaten continually. One of the head SS guards, called "The Beast of Buchenwald" by the prisoners was said to have personally killed over a hundred of the prisoners by whipping or clubbing them to death. They worked in a factory six days a week making flying bombs and had Sundays "off", but that's the day they dreaded. On Sundays the guards carried on a sadistic program in which many of them were killed. One of their milder sports was to make their victims carry human waste from the latrines in their bare hands, with the guards clubbing those who slackened. Informants verify that the "Beast" personally killed several of them each Sunday during the course of such activities.

Prior to 1937, the "Beast" had been Himmler's gardener, having gained that position as recognition for his work in organizing underground SS activities in Austria. He learned much from his close contacts with the chief of the SS, and later graduated to his notorious post at Buchenwald.

At the present time the "Beast of Buchenwald" is in U.S. Army hands, having been captured soon after the camp was liberated. Since then another interesting item came to light. In Weimer, near the Buchenwald camp, were found lampshades, bookbinders and other ornaments made from the skin of some of the prisoners who died at Buchenwald.

American troops found a piece of skin from a man's chest on which was tattooed the figure of a nude woman. It was mounted on a board and covered with cellophane, making it a novel wall decoration. Residents of the town said that the skin ornaments were a fad started by the wife of the prison commandant.

The atrocities so far mentioned were merely a few of the more recent ones that American troops uncovered during their drive across Germany. However, each

Sgt Barry Ziff

day brings more of these crimes to light, and each seems more ghastly than the last.

One might wonder why the Nazis massacred the thousands of prisoners near the end of the war, when they knew full well that they would have to pay for their crimes. The answer, as captives revealed, is that they were attempting to destroy all of the evidence of their brutalities, both living and dead. In several instances they had exhumed thousands of victims from their burial trenches and burned them. But they didn't expect the Allied advances to be so rapid and so did not have time to complete their enormous program of human extermination.

Not all of their barbarous treatment was limited to the inmates of concentration camps, however. The war prisoners were also familiar with SS terrorism.

On April 19 our division liberated 139 POW's near the city of Werdeau. Eighty of them were Americans captured during the German counter-attack in Belgium last December, and fifty-nine were British soldiers taken at Dunkirk, Africa and Italy several years ago. The first thing we noticed was the difference in the appearance of the Americans as contrasted to the British captives. It would logically be assumed that the Americans would be in better physical condition since they had only been prisoners for five months, while some of the British had been held for four years. On the contrary, just the reverse was true. The Yanks were gaunt and weak and were wearing an odd assortment of GI and German clothes. The British, on the other hand, were in a healthier condition and had complete uniforms, including overcoats and garrison caps.

Here's what one of the released Yanks, a medic from Wilmington, N. C., said about it:

05664

"The Germans really hate the Americans and they made sure we knew it. They didn't exactly like the British or French, but they don't hate them like they hate us. They kept telling us that if we damned Americans hadn't entered the war

Sgt Barry Ziff

they would have won it long ago. After every big air raid, they took it out on us. We worked twelve hours a day in the factories and then half the night fixing the railroads that our bombers shellacked. We kept hoping our air force would do such a good job on the railroads that there wouldn't be anything left to fix."

Hard work was only a small part of what the American prisoners had to endure. They were fed black bread and turnip soup six days a week. On Sundays they were given a "treat" - beet soup with a slice of boloney. Under the penalty of death the boys had to steal enough to keep alive. Occasionally a French doctor at a nearby hospital would smuggle a loaf of bread or a few potatoes to the medic, and he in turn would sneak it back to some of the boys.

"When we were taken prisoners back in Belgium last December", the medic continued, "I was in a group of 1700. They took us on a 'Death March', just like the Japs did to the boys they captured at Corregidor a couple of years ago. The SS boys were in charge of us, and they marched 120 miles in six days without food or water. At night we were taken off the road and slept in a field. It was the middle of winter, remember, and a lot of the boys didn't have their over-shoes or overcoats on when they were captured. But that didn't make a lot of difference because those SS bastards took it away from some of the rest of us, along with the Hitler Youth kids who helped guard us at night."

"Every village we marched through the people came out and spit at us, called us vile names and threw garbage at us. Some of the boys were so hungry they picked up pieces of garbage and ate it. One GI died a violent death within twelve hours from something he ate off the street. A lot of the fellows collapsed along the way from fatigue, hunger and the cold. The SS hauled them away and I don't know what happened to them. When we got to our destination, 250 of the boys had to have their feet amputated because of gangrene."

THE NAZIS' LAST ACT

Sgt Barry Ziff

His story correlated perfectly with the ones told by other American prisoners liberated from dozens of other camps. All of them received the same vile treatment from both their SS guards and from the German people themselves. These were the same people who hung white flags from their windows when we captured their towns. They were the same ones who greeted us with smiling faces and said they were glad to see the Americans come. They were the same ones who offered to do our laundry and wondered why the Americans weren't allowed to fraternize with them.

They were also the same people who tore their Hitler pictures off the walls, and in its place hung crucifixes and religious paintings, intended to create a peaceful impression on the Americans. In many of the houses that we took over for a night, we found half-burned Nazi flags, uniforms and photographs in the stoves.

The residents of an apartment house in Bad Schwalbach, which we took over for our temporary CP, unanimously told us they had been waiting for the Americans to arrive. An inspection of the building disclosed two/^{German} officers' uniforms, different sizes, in one of the closets, eight cases of looted French champagne in the basement, and a large assortment of SS and Wehrmacht insignia and equipment throughout the house.

In another house we occupied, the residents were also "glad" to see us enter their town. In the cellar, under the potatoes, was enough ammunition to blow the house sky high. We encountered so many other incidents of the same type that we have long since learned what to expect, and have rarely been disappointed.

The Germans are loud in their denunciation of the crimes that were committed. They claim that their Hitler would never have allowed such things to happen. They say that no one was allowed to go near a concentration camp, and that they had no idea of what transpired behind the barbed wire fences. But they couldn't have helped but see the prisoners slaving on the super-highway, working in the woods, doing

Sgt Barry Ziff

THE NAZIS' LAST ACT

backbreaking work that ordinarily horses or machines would do. Yet they deny it all.

The Burgemeisters from a number of towns and cities have committed suicide when their towns were taken, rather than stand trial for their crimes. Many other political figures have disappeared. The Nazi party has sent an estimated 200,000 party members out of the country to carry on an underground in all parts of the world after the defeat of Germany. Thousands of other officials - those who were considered important to the home front morale and those not important enough to smuggle out - have also escaped at the last moment by donning army uniforms and getting themselves captured along with the regular troops. Several were recently discovered in American PW stables. Although their false identification papers seemed in order, the interrogators detected an assortment of expensive knick-knacks in their pockets which soldiers usually don't carry. Under further questioning they broke down and confessed.

It is not impossible to assume that many of them got through undetected and are now in PW camps in France, England and the United States.

The Nazi's knew that the end of the war would be the end for them. In their last weeks of power they went to any extremes, both in revenge for their defeat, and in an attempt to destroy the evidence of their hideous crimes.

They are now prepared to carry on their operations underground after the war. Recently captured documents lay bare a plan for sabotage and destruction which they expect to continue following their defeat. Guerilla warfare is only one phase of their plan. But it is far more elaborate than that. It includes the organization they hope to build up in foreign countries, safe from the scrutinizing eyes of the occupying troops.

05664

Sgt Barry Ziff

THE NAZIS' LAST ACT

The period after the end of the war - they don't call it peace - will be one in which they intend to spend preparing for their next world conquest. It might come in another twenty or thirty years, if they are able to follow their plan. The need now is for a drastic enforcement to prevent the Nazis from ever reorganizing in Germany under a pseudonym.

Germany has cast the die now and can never hope for any sort of a peace that would leave a vestige of its former political organization.

#

Hq Btry. 550th AAA Bn
APO 230, c/o Postmaster
New York, N. Y.

05664