

# 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 [Geneva Convention](#) 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).<sup>2</sup> According to another source, the Germans alone held 75,850 American prisoners of war by March 1945.<sup>3</sup>



POWs at Stalag 11B at Fallingbommel in Germany welcome their liberators, 1945 April 16  
([ww2today.com](http://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.

## 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 interscholastic battles on the football field, in track and on the basketball 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.

"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, Pennsylvania and Massachusetts.

### In Training Films

He even went "Hollywood," the army way. In California for five months he was used in training films and in one movie feature which was distributed to the public, "Strange As It Seems." Neither his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Edwin Wolden, 613 Sill street, nor his wife, the former Bonnie Heyer, have seen the film.

Going overseas July 13, 1944, Sgt. Wolden joined the 3rd Army in August while they were crossing the Moselle river. His division was the 95th Infantry.

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 blast. No sooner was he out of the hospital than he was captured by four Nazi tiger tank on Nov. 29.

St. Barbara had been the objective 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.

### In Many Prison Camps

Capture was followed by the routine of questioning at Limburg, 12A. As first the Americans got too close and then the Russians, Wolden was moved by truck, boxcar and on foot to Furstenburg 3B, Lukenwald 3A, Commando camp, and finally on April 1 he arrived at Altengrable, from which the American troops took the prisoners on May 3.

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



—Tribune Photo

S. SGT. RUSSELL WOLDEN

had been a prisoner since the Ethiopian campaign and he shared his Red Cross box with Wolden.

By the time he was liberated, he and the men with him were too weak from hunger to do more than to just lie where they were. Wolden lost 35 pounds during his

imprisonment, which he has since regained.

### Has Unit Citation

Wolden wears the combat-infantryman 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.

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

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# Stories of Nazi Prison Camps Accurate, Sgt. Thomas Says

By William Goodale Griswold

Men were so hungry that the favorite pastime of eight out of ten prisoners of war was the exchange of recipes," stated Sgt. Glenn Thomas, who was a prisoner of war in Germany from Dec. 31, 1944 until April 13, 1945. The recipes were frequently fantastic, but the men took them seriously and even wrote them down in notebooks. "It was a vicious circle," said Glenn. "They talked about food because they were hungry and were hungry because they talked about it." Thoughts of food were uppermost in the minds of the prisoners whether asleep or awake. Occasionally on the long marches from one prison camp to another, desperately hungry men raised being shot by German guards to steal a beet.

In the prison camps a day's rations consisted of warm water or weak tea at 5:30 a. m. and later in the day a butter-can full of soup, barley coffee which "wasn't too bad", a loaf of bread to be divided among eight or nine men, a pat of oleomargarine or cheese, and upon rare occasions a spoonful of jam. Glenn seldom took the warm water or tea unless he wanted to use it for shaving.

**Finds the Red Cross**

Men who had been prisoners of war for any great length of time could never have survived if it had not been for the International Red Cross, Glenn declared. Until the week he arrived in Stalag 8A the men there had been receiving one Red Cross parcel a week, but after that week no more boxes were received and the men had to subsist upon only their "cigarettes" gave them. Later in another camp only nine days before the men were liberated Red Cross parcels containing ten pounds of food in each box arrived. There was a box for every three men and Glenn said, "We really feasted." He has only the highest praise for the work of the Red Cross.

Cigarettes were the prime medium of exchange during the marches and in the camps, as money was valuable. One man was willing to give fifteen dollars for two cigarettes and one child like of bread. Glenn can still hear the familiar call "beet for cigarette" or "cigarette for beet" by another prisoner who wanted to complete the deal. The men bargained back and forth concerning the size of the beet, and the quality and size of the cigarette, whether "tailor-made," "rollings," or a "ferry" cigarette. The bargaining was done with all the seriousness and shrewdness of a Wall street transaction. The men smoked almost anything including tea leaves, Glenn said.

**"Treated Fine" at First**

Glenn and two other men were captured on Dec. 31, 1944 near Niederwiesenthal, Luxembourg. They had their defense line to meet at another rendezvous point, and were cut off before they could get back. They held out for two days and then were spotted by a German patrol to whom they surrendered. As long as there were only three of them, they were "treated fine." That night they were taken to a house where they were fed. The next morning they were taken to a neighboring town where they joined other prisoners. Then they began a march of 200 kilometers to Stalag IVB, a 10-kilometer distance from five-thirds of a mile.

**Marched 30 Miles in One Day**

There was very little food on the march, some of the men had lost their overcoats, and others had had their shoes taken from them, so frozen feet were not unusual. One day they marched 37 kilometers or nearly 30 miles and Glenn said he had only "two or three biscuits and a teaspoonful of honey" to eat. Once, he recounted, they suffered from Allied bombing and strafing. The day after Christmas when they were halted near a church to Glenn could hear the people singing "Silent Night" in German. "It sounds beautiful," he recalled. There were many incidents which, although they did not appear so at the time, now seem amusing to him. One of the guards had a suitcase which he made a prisoner carry. Once a butter-dish by was missing from this suitcase and the prisoners were searched. Later he thought another man was missing and threatened to shoot 25 prisoners unless it was returned. The incident was finally cleared up without blood.

**No Food or Water**

On Dec. 30 they reached Wirgitz where they stayed in a brick factory until Jan. 3. When they left the brick factory they boarded box cars, 50 men in each car. These box cars were smaller than ours and very unsanitary. A most of them had not been cleaned for being used to haul horses. That night, which they spent in the mill yard, they were given no food or water. In the morning they received bread and cheese, but had only the

water a few of the men had saved in their canteens. The doors and windows of the box car were nailed shut, but finally the men forced open a window wide enough to hang out a helmet and scoop up snow for drinking water. They rode until Jan. 6, detained, and marched into Stalag IV B, outside Muhlberg near the Elbe river.

When they arrived at this POW camp the British gave them tea, and Continued on page 4

By Order of the Court,  
R. V. Ahlstrom, Judge.  
Florlan D. Husa, Attorney.  
West Salem, Wis.  
Publish June 21-28, July 6.

**NOXIOUS WEED NOTICE**

Notice is hereby given to all persons owning, occupying or controlling any land in the Town of Bangor, Wis. to destroy all noxious weeds on or about their property, at such time, and in such manner as to effectively prevent them from bearing seed, or spreading to adjoining property, as required by Section 94.20 of the Wisconsin Statutes. The term noxious weeds as used herein shall include the following: Canadian Thistle, Marijuana, English Charlock or Wild Mustard, Goatweed, Quack or Quitch Grass, Field Dodder, Indian Mustard, Oxeye Daisy, Snapdragon and perennial Sow Thistle.

Dated this 15th day of June, 1945  
Albert Alchele, Clerk

### Thomas . . .

he also received a sort of cabbage soup, for which they had to find tin cans. Glenn mentioned how generous the British prisoners were in sharing their belongings with the Americans. At Stalag IV B they were registered, given POW numbers, searched, and that night were given billets where they slept on excelsior on the floor. "We were also deloused," Glenn recalled, "although we didn't need it then." On Jan. 10 he was given a card upon which to write home.

They entrained again on Jan. 12 and the next day arrived at Stalag VIII A near Corlitz. Glenn described the barracks here as two room buildings which ordinarily would house from 100 to 125 men in each room, but which had 375 prisoners of war in each room. There were stoves, he said, but no fuel. Later each man was given one blanket. The three-tiered bunks were eight or nine feet long and eight men slept across each bunk. Glenn said that when they arrived here "the Serbs donated cooked rice which was delicious." Eight thousand Allied prisoners, mostly Russians, were at Stalag VIII A at this time, and in Glenn's group which arrived from Stalag IV B there were 2750 prisoners.

**News Stories Accurate**

Glenn remarked that news stories he has read since his liberation have been very accurate in giving the facts concerning German treatment of prisoners of war. He stated that those articles are not propaganda but are

the truth as he knows it to be. The officers, non-commissioned officers, and privates were segregated, Glenn related, and only the privates were required to work. Many of the men spent the days reading books given them by the British. Glenn himself went on with his science study. Sometimes the men spent the day in bed trying to keep warm. The privates who worked outside the camp brought in bits of war news. On about Feb. 10 they heard of the Russian drive on Breslau, and as Gorliz was only 20 kilometers from the border and in direct line of attack, the prisoners expected to be liberated by the Russians. On Feb. 14, however, came the order to evacuate, and another march started, this time with 1600 men.

They walked until Mar. 26, for a distance of 500 kilometers. "At times it seemed impossible to take another step," Glenn said, "but somehow you did — then another and another. Nights they stayed either in barns or brick factories. They received bread once a day and at the farms where they stayed the farmer was expected to give them soup or steamed potatoes at night or barley coffee in the morning. "It was a rare occasion when we received both," Glenn related.

**Saw 216 Pounds Mean Dwindle To 90**

The men were extremely run down, suffering from malnutrition, the long walk, and lice. Those who dropped out were beaten by the guards with rifle butts, and those who stole food were shot. When they arrived at Braunschweig on Mar. 26 they were in such bad condition they couldn't work, and a British doctor declared the POW camp a hospital. By this time diphtheria was spreading. There were then 800 men, both British and American. Glenn saw a 215 pound man dwindle down to

80 pounds before he died. Glenn himself lost about 35 pounds but said he gained it back in seven weeks.

There were rumors that the Allies had crossed the Rhine, but the men were almost at the point of mutiny, until on April 2 the British doctor told them the Allies were only 50 kilometers away, and begged them to hold on. On April 4 the Red Cross parcels arrived, and medical supplies were sent from a nearby Stalag. On this same day, Glenn said, they could hear the German planes and tanks retreating.

**On April 9 some newly captured British paratroopers arrived at the camp and Glenn marvelled at how big and healthy they looked in comparison with those who had been prisoners for so long. These paratroopers brought with them recent news of the Pacific as well as the European war.**

**West To Places**

The prisoners had been alerted, ready to move out on half an hour's notice on April 8 because Braunschweig was to be defended. They were promised they would not be marched over 20 kilometers a day and would be marched into their own lines. "That night," Glenn said, "the fellows went to picnic." He said he had never been to a revival meeting but he imagined that must be what it would be like. The men were over-enthusiastic, he explained. They prayed, cried, spoke and sang.

They did not move out that night, however, or the next day, but on April 10 they left with 789 Americans and British. Some of their number had died and some were left behind because of severe illness. "The captain got us good rations — extra bread, crackers, meat and honey," Glenn said. That night they marched 24 kilometers. They could hear Braunschweig being bombed, Glenn mentioned that he noticed a change in the guards, who now appeared friendlier, as the war came closer to them. The third night they stayed in a barn near Horstingen. The people were friendly, he said, and gave them boiled potatoes. The sounds of the battle could be heard and they knew liberation was near. The Nazi guards left and the Polish guards who took over "seemed very happy and made light of it."

**Heard of Roosevelt's Death**

News of President Roosevelt's death reached them on April 12 but they didn't believe it. At noon of that day the announcement came that they would be liberated in an hour. The liberation was received with varied emotions.

The next day the liberated men were trucked to a German air corps garrison. The American reconnaissance outfit which freed them gave them their own K-rations and cooked them a meal out of confiscated German food. One of the men scooped a tin box of biscuits, butter, and peanut butter which seemed a very special treat.

On April 16 they were trucked to the Hildesheim airport and, on April 20 were flown to a RAMP camp between Le Havre and Dieppe. There they were processed, registered, deloused, each given a new uniform, and served G. I. meals as well as food at the Red Cross canteen.

For security reasons the details of

Glenn's return to the States cannot be revealed. He saw the lights of New York City on May 14, and the next morning disembarked. He was then sent to Camp Kikmer, N. J., and left from there the next day for Ft. Sheridan, Ill. He is now enjoying a 60-day furlough before reporting to Miami Beach, Fla., on July 24.

**Not Bitter**

Glenn is not bitter about his experiences and bears no resentment concerning the way he was treated in comparison to the way German prisoners of war are treated in this country. Instead he compares what he has come back to with what faces them upon their return to Germany, and he is deeply grateful.

## NOTICE

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**Sources & Notes:**

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

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

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