

## THE GERMAN PRISONER

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Unless missing bridges or minefields held up the American advance units, the pecking order was that we were close behind them, often too close. It was not at all unusual for German soldiers to surrender to us having survived the tanks and infantry that swept over them. In France they were older, regular army guys, but as we moved into Germany they were younger, less well trained. Near the end of the war there were many as young as fifteen, green as grass, merely promoted Hitler Youth. We preferred the regulars, even those still mean and angry; we had no sympathy for them, no desire to feed them or provide shelter. Their choice was to keep fighting or stay alive, most opted to raise their arms hoping to be treated according the accepted rules of war. We treated them as enemy.



Small batches were merely searched and sent farther back to where Military Police would deal with them. But it became clearer that their leaders had made a big mistake and they wanted to be “captured” by us rather than the Russians. At that point German men and boys in uniform were to us a pain. What do you do when five or six hundred come marching dragging their rifles, white flags everywhere signaling defeat, officers leading the way to survival. We penned them up like sheep. Imagine a football field surrounded by eight-foot high barbed wire. Inside that were four separated barbed wire pens with a machine gun at each corner. We would march two hundred prisoners into each doing our best to separate officers from the enlisted and the feared SS from regular Whermacht. If we made a mistake we could depend upon the SS being killed by the regulars before dawn. To prevent problems any females were sent up the line that day.



Food was out of the question; water was a problem. Nearby villagers often came with what they could spare and it was then we were grateful for the separated double wall we had put around the complex; tossing food directly into a pen would be disastrous as prisoners without it for three days will kill for it. We held any food until the M. Ps arrived. Feeding them was a responsibility we did not want. If we had water we marched them by a point where we could pour a cupful in their helmet. Believe me, if any of them had in any way cheated they would have paid a price dealt by their countrymen.

The American soldiers would arrange deals with the prisoners, buying souvenirs with cigarettes or candy bars. It was an amazing collection these Germans had managed to hide on their person even though they had been searched for weapons. I too was duped

when one wise guy sold me a pen that had five colors of ink. As he turned that pen a different tiny barrel of ink pushed out with a different color. But when I showed my "magic" pen to a buddy there was only three barrels. That was the first time I realized these guys had a sense of humor, and were not a heck of a lot different than we. I still wonder what became of the thousands of German G. I s we temporarily controlled.

After the war I came to know many German ex-soldiers under different circumstances. Even with beer it took some time to settle our differences but gradually we accepted each other and began anew. We had done to each other what our leaders said was necessary. But I often wondered why we didn't just let the Generals slug it out...they had always talked a good fight.

I could have ended this article right here but my conscience will not allow it without a confession. I once shot a prisoner at the insistence of an officer. We were unloading a trainload of prisoners when one of them appeared to make a break. The officer in command was armed only with a pistol and told me to stop him. I hesitated and suffered his wrath before aiming my carbine at the soldier's buttocks and dropping him like a stone. I ran to him and discovered he was old enough to be my father. He pointed to a turnip on the railroad tracks, hunger had forced him to risk his life to get it. I have always regretted my part in that drama, the foolishness of it, and the memory of that man's fright and helplessness will not vacate my brain. He and I were fortunate I hit where I had aimed. He managed to limp straight to the offending officer and salute him. I did not.