

American POWs in Nazi Concentration Camps

Michael Smith

While researching information about the Holocaust, I stumbled upon something that I did not know, something that may bring the horrific tragedies and atrocities committed at the Nazi concentration camps a little closer to home for all Americans. We know that when the United States entered the war in Europe, many brave young Americans were captured and imprisoned. For Jewish soldiers, the telltale “H” (for “Hebrew”) on their dog tags, placed them at a special risk, allowing the Nazis to single them out for mistreatment.

After the *Battle of the Bulge* (Dec 1944-Jan 1945), more than 4,000 Americans were imprisoned at Stalag IX-B. One cold morning, the commandant had prisoners assembled in a field and ordered all the Jewish prisoners to take one-step forward. Word had already spread among the prisoners and no one stepped forward. The prisoners were given until the following morning to identify themselves as Jews.

Ultimately, 130 Jewish POWs came forward. They, along with an additional 50 non-Jewish NCOs, were segregated and placed in a special barracks to await a special detail. The Americans had no idea what lay in store for them but they were certain that whatever it was it would not be good. The group left Stalag IX-B on February 8, loaded like cattle in a boxcar and arrived at Berga five days later.

The conditions in Stalag IX-B were considered the worst of any POW camp, but when the Americans arrived at Berga they found themselves wishing they were back at Stalag IX-B. Berga was the construction site for an underground armament factory and the Americans soon learned that their purpose for imprisonment was simply to serve as slave laborers. Each day, the men walked two miles through the snow to a mountainside to work in the mineshafts.

One prisoner recalled that men were dying at an alarming rate. They worked 12 hours daily with no day of rest; their only nutrition was as a loaf of bread that several prisoners had to share. It became easy to recognize who was near death. Each morning they would find men dead in their bunks, many of whom had worked the previous day in the tunnels. Death was all around them.



American medics treat an emaciated soldier, Pvt. Alvin L. Abrams of Philadelphia, one of 63 American POWs who survived a death march from the Berga concentration camp and was liberated by soldiers of the 357th Infantry Regiment. Copyright: Public Domain

As the end of the war drew closer, the prisoners were ordered to evacuate the barracks and begin a death march towards Bavaria but with no real destination in mind. The prisoners walked for endless days often 10-12 hours at a time, starved, beaten, and prodded. The death march was designed to both hide the evidence from the Allies and bring about a death of Jews from so called natural causes.

For the American prisoners from Berga, liberation final arrived on April 23, 1945 near the town of Cham, 250 miles to the south of Berga. In the morning hours as they wondered out of barns, the Americans found themselves greeted by the sound of

tanks. The 28th Infantry Division, part of the 11th Armored Division and Patton's Third Army had arrived. Horrified by what they saw, the Americans immediately began to aid their fellow soldiers.

After the war, the two Berga commanders -- Erwin Metz and his superior, Hauptmann Ludwig Merz -- were tried for war crimes and initially sentenced to die by hanging. The U.S.

government commuted their death sentences in 1948, and both men were eventually set free in the 1950s. Perhaps it is easy for some to forget the past and move on. It is certainly an admirable trait to forgive others but we must never lose sight of the past nor forget what humanity is capable for doing.