Newspapers by ancestry

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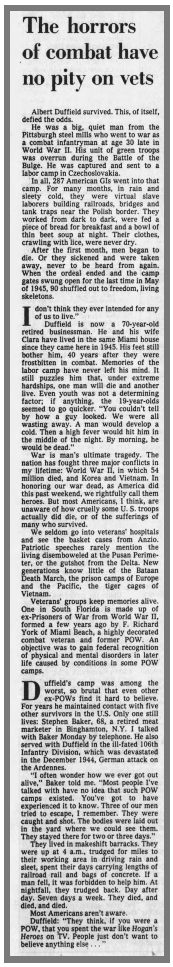

The horrors of combat have no pity on vets

Albert Duffield survived. This, of itself, defied the odds.

He was a big, quiet man from the Pittsburgh steel mills who went to war as a combat infantryman at age 30 late in World War II. His unit of green troops was overrun during the Battle of the Bulge. He was captured and sent to a labor camp in Czechoslovakia.

In all, 287 American GIs went into that camp. For many months, in rain and sleety cold, they were virtual slave laborers building railroads, bridges and tank traps near the Polish border. They worked from dark to dark, were fed a piece of bread for breakfast and a bowl of thin beet soup at night. Their clothes, crawling with lice, were never dry.

After the first month, men began to die. Or they sickened and were taken away, never to be heard from again. When the ordeal ended and the camp gates swung open for the last time in May of 1945, 90 shuffled out to freedom, living skeletons.

"I don't think they ever intended for any of us to live."

Duffield is now a 70-year-old retired businessman. He and his wife Clara have lived in the same Miami house since they came here in 1945. His feet still bother him, 40 years after they were frostbitten in combat. Memories of the labor camp have never left his mind. It still puzzles him that, under extreme hardships, one man will die and another live. Even youth was not a determining factor; if anything, the 19-year-olds seemed to go quicker. "You couldn't tell by how a guy looked. We were all wasting away. A man would develop a cold. Then a high fever would hit him in the middle of the night. By morning, he would be dead."

War is man's ultimate tragedy. The nation has fought three major conflicts in my lifetime: World War II, in which 54 million died, and Korea and Vietnam. In honoring our war dead, as America did this past weekend, we rightfully call them heroes. But most Americans, I think, are unaware of how cruelly some U.S. troops actually did die, or of the sufferings of many who survived.

We seldom go into veterans' hospitals and see the basket cases from Anzio. Patriotic speeches rarely mention the living disemboweled at the Pusan Perimeter, or the gutshot from the Delta. New generations know little of the Bataan Death March, the prison camps of Europe and the Pacific, the tiger cages of Vietnam.

Veterans' groups keep memories alive. One in South Florida is made up of ex-Prisoners of War from World War II, formed a few years ago by F. Richard York of Miami Beach, a highly decorated combat veteran and former POW. An objective was to gain federal recognition of physical and mental disorders in later life caused by conditions in some POW camps.

Duffield's camp was among the worst, so brutal that even other ex-POWs find it hard to believe. For years he maintained contact with five other survivors in the U.S. Only one still lives: Stephen Baker, 68, a retired meat marketer in Binghamton, N.Y. I talked with Baker Monday by telephone. He also served with Duffield in the ill-fated 106th Infantry Division, which was devastated in the December 1944, German attack on the Ardennes.

"I often wonder how we ever got out alive," Baker told me. "Most people I've talked with have no idea that such POW camps existed. You've got to have experienced it to know. Three of our men tried to escape, I remember. They were caught and shot. The bodies were laid out in the yard where we could see them. They stayed there for two or three days."

They lived in makeshift barracks. They were up at 4 a.m., trudged for miles to their working area in driving rain and sleet, spent their days carrying lengths of railroad rail and bags of concrete. If a man fell, it was forbidden to help him. At nightfall, they trudged back. Day after day. Seven days a week. They died, and died, and died.

Most Americans aren't aware.

Duffield: "They think, if you were a POW, that you spent the war like Hogan's Heroes on TV. People just don't want to believe anything else . . ."

1984-11-13 Horrors of POW camps

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