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6 DECADES AFTER V-E DAY, VETS RECALL HORRORS OF NAZI CAMPS

THE POWS OF WWII

SIXTY YEARS AGO TODAY, the Nazis surrendered to the Allies, ending the war in Europe. Ecstatic celebrations erupted from Times Square in New York to Trafalgar Square in London.

But no one was happier to know that V-E Day — Victory in Europe — had finally arrived than the 95,000 American troops who had been taken prisoner by Germans and liberated in the days and weeks leading up to May 5, 1945.

Among them are the men who make up the Brooklyn Key Chapter of the American Ex-Prisoners of War. Many are now grandfathers and even great-grandfathers who volunteer at their VA hospital in Bay Ridge.

But they also meet as a support network, to share the hellish experiences they were told would best be forgotten but would forever haunt them.

One ex-POW, Jerry Quinci, 82, vividly recalls the day he was liberated from a German POW camp three weeks before V-E Day.

"A tank smashed through the barbed wire fence," he said. "I looked up and the guard houses were vacant. Then I saw a big star on the tank and I knew it was one of ours."

For such ex-POWs, V-E Day remains a special day, a bitter-sweet reminder of a terrible time coming finally to an end. These are the stories of some of New York's brave ex-POWs.

Harold Radish, 80, remembers the awful dread he felt while being surrounded by German troops for three days in February 1945.

The young man who hailed from Brownsville, Brooklyn, was especially fearful because he knew the Nazis were keen on singling out Jewish-American G.I.s like himself. So before surrendering, Radish and the other Jewish members of his division threw away their dog tags, marked with a letter "H" — for Hebrew.

"The other guys who weren't Jewish threw theirs away in sympathy," he recalled.

Radish and the other soldiers were taken prisoner, marched to a train and shoved into boxcars where they spent a week before arriving at a POW camp. "It was cold," he said. "And guys were dying in the car."

At the camp, an SS interrogator asked him: "Radish. What kind of name is that?" Gripped with fear, he quickly came up with an answer: "It's English, like pepper," he lied.

In early April, Radish and the other prisoners began hearing on a contraband radio that the Germans were losing. The next

morning British soldiers came to liberate them.

Radish, who now lives in Douglaston, Queens, returned to his native New York aboard the West Point and was awed by the sight of the Statue of Liberty on the horizon. The ship docked and Radish called home. "You're alive!" his overjoyed mother cried on the other end of the line.

Everytime Sal Grasso looks at his feet — the left one missing three toes, the right one two — the 80-year-old from Bensonhurst is reminded of the agony he endured as a POW.

Grasso was with the Army's 106th Division and in the thick of the Battle of the Bulge when he was captured in December 1944. "We heard they weren't taking prisoners," Grasso remembered thinking.

He was packed into a freezing boxcar and when he stumbled out six days later, he took off his shoes and saw his feet were horribly swollen. "I busted the bubbles and all the water came out," he said. He spent most of his four months as a POW on his back, nearly starving and wondering whether he'd survive.

His family at home and his

girlfriend got a telegram saying he had been killed. A funeral Mass was said for him at Our Lady of Loreto on Elizabeth St. in Little Italy.

On April 12, soldiers arrived at his camp. "We thought it was the Americans," he said. It was actually the Russians, and they set the POWs free.

He doesn't really remember V-E day per se, only that he was too sick to party. His day of celebration came a month later when he was brought to a New York hospital — and his family and girlfriend came.

"They just greeted and kissed and hugged me," he said, his eyes glistening.

Last week, Ralph Mottola took his wife, Paula, to lunch at a Red Lobster in Brooklyn to mark the 60th anniversary of his liberation on May 3, 1945.

"Four hundred sixty-eight days," Mottola, 82, of Sheepshead Bay will tell you, he spent as a POW, surviving on little more than watery potato peel soup and an occasional chocolate bar from the Red Cross.

After being captured on Jan. 22, 1944, he was marched by minefields, and moved through prison camps and work farms.

"But we survived that," he said.

At 4:15 a.m. on May 3, Mottola and the other POWs who had spent the night in a barn were awakened by a door squeaking. "I saw the silhouette of an American soldier," he said, recognizing the shape of the helmet. "We're free!" he screamed.

Five days later, he and other soldiers heard V-E day had come. "We jumped up and down with elation," he said.

He remembers pulling up in a taxi at 37th St. in Brooklyn and his little niece excitedly yelling, "Uncle Ralph's home!"

He recalled a special moment. "One day it was raining cats and dogs," he said. "And I walked in the rain. You know why? Because I chose to. I was free to choose. I was elated."

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PHOTOS BY ANDREW HERSHBERGER

Harold Radish, 80, of Douglaston, Queens, holds letter government sent his family saying he (isset) was MIA.

Ralph Mottola, 82, of Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, held by the Nazis for 468 days, shows photo from his time in the service.

Sal Grasso, 80, of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, remembers being thrown into a freezing boxcar after capture in Battle of the Bulge.

BY MAKI BECKER
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

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