

Victory: Germany

AMERICAN SERGEANT

THERE WAS little rejoicing on V-E Day in Germany. The celebrations in New York and London were outside the GI's world. It was a sunny day, blue sky with puffy clouds, ideal for traveling. At least it would have been ideal had the 2½-ton supply trucks not stirred up a continual cloud in front of the fast moving command car.

Little more than a week before, the 65th Infantry Division had entered Regensburg—on a Sunday. Seven days later, the Division was firmly entrenched in the middle of Austria. Now the command car bounced up the Danube Valley, retracing the highways down which the trucks loaded with infantrymen had rolled a short time before.

The landscape was only occasionally scarred by debris from the scattered, but tough, rear guard action with which the Wehrmacht attempted to delay our advance into Austria. The only monuments to these bitter skirmishes, where men died up to the eve of victory, were the walls of buildings pockmarked with small-arms fire, or fields spotted with untenanted slit trenches. Now and then, an abandoned artillery position disfigured the landscape more spectacularly. The empty shell cases were piled like cordwood beside what had been a gun emplacement. Clover and mustard already had pushed up around the remnants of these installations, and had all but covered the ruts sunken into the soil by truck and gun tires.

In one field, the farmer and his family shoveled soil into the slit trenches and artillery emplacements. Then he stamped vigorously on the loose dirt, and pounded it with the flat of his spade, as though to repudiate indignantly the idea that *his* land could have been a battlefield. Beside the highway, German householders crawled over their roofs, replacing the tiled jigsaws which had been scattered like shrapnel by concussion. No, the infantry had not left many monuments behind. That was partly because the battle moved too swiftly for more than the occasional firing of a farmhouse or barn where SS troops briefly held out despite the protestations of property owners. And it was partly because of the nature of the infantryman's battle. His front line is carefully charted, blatantly headlined, while he fights. But after he passes through—after the grass grows high and the dead are buried—his deeds belong to the historian. The passing tourist can get no closer to the smell of cordite than the printed page, or the iron markers which (as at Gettysburg) tax his credulity with the announcement that the now peaceful sunlit field was once a life-or-death "objective."

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On V-E Day it was the Air Corps which provided the most imposing monuments to Mars. In the last stages of the battle for Germany the Air Corps had lost newspaper space to the infantryman. After all, only the infantryman could push the "front line" deeper and deeper into the Reich, to deprive Germany of the *lebensraum*, the men, and ultimately of the supplies with which to fight. But now, the shattered railroad yards and factories provided almost the only battlefield mementos, and thereby emphasized the extent to which Wehrmacht logistics had been disrupted by our strategical bombing. The revelation was doubly impressive because of the precise nature of the poundings. Naturally, buildings adjacent to a military target had been battered; but, for the most part, damage was isolated to areas of military production and transportation. Only a few days before, I had visited the once vast Messerschmidt plant in Regensburg with an intelligence officer of the 8th Air Force bomber command which had pounded it. The factory literally defied description because there was nothing there but shells of buildings, gaping holes where there had been concrete walls, twisted metal where there had been roofs, and green camouflage nets flapping in the breeze as mournfully as Spanish moss. It was almost impossible to believe that the aerial photograph of the gigantic fighter plane assembly lines, which had been taken in 1942, showed the same area which now lay completely desolate. It was as though an archeological expedition had uncovered the floor plan of some ancient city, and the photograph was the archeologist's hypothetical reconstruction. The major had come prepared to give a professional dissertation on the ruin. There was too little left to talk about. He could only point to a hospital adjacent to the factory, completely untouched by the explosives, and murmur over and over, "Wonderful job. So precise. A wonderful, wonderful job."

While we advanced southeast of Regensburg we had felt the same way. Every time we passed the grotesquely twisted tracks of a marshaling yard, the cars and their cargoes piled as crazily as a log-jam, we echoed that sentiment. "Wonderful, wonderful job." These patches of destruction served as milestones for our advance. More destruction, faster moving—it was as simple as that. But now, on V-E Day, even the shallow perspective afforded by the headline **WAR IS OVER** reoriented thinking. One no longer thought of "front lines," but of "reconstruction." And now the tragedy which the German people had brought upon themselves was painfully apparent. The wreckage stood for what it was. "It's wonderful" seemed all wrong: "it's futile" perhaps. A couple of weeks before V-E Day the Danube was spanned by seven magnificent bridges at Regensburg. Our aerial photos showed them. Today there are none. The Wehrmacht blew them, in order to retreat another day. It only serves to emphasize the tragedy to see what once existed, and

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then to see its ruins, or sometimes, the spot where it had been.

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In the end, the German soldier faced the greatest ignominy which any soldier can receive. His own people discredited and betrayed him. The people knew the war was lost. They knew too that fanatical resistance meant that *their* homes and *their* fields were lost too. Many an American soldier owes his life (though, from the long range point of view, not his gratitude) to the very people who heiled Hitler into power. They would stool-pigeon on those SS troops who remained behind our lines to carry out guerrilla warfare. In Bavaria and Austria the advancing "enemy" was greeted with cheers, and the wild, exultant waving of white surrender flags. The children had learned the "V" sign, and practiced it for K-ration chocolate. Austrians had a new surrender flag. The white bedroom sheet had been replaced for the red-and-white banner of an independent Austria. Almost symbolically, the "Austrian" colors had, in many instances, been hastily fashioned by sewing a white strip down the center of Hitler's flag so as to cover the swastika, and thereby cover the past—a past in which Austria, like Italy, had been offered a chance to contribute to its own freedom, and refused. GIs were perplexed. "Hell, what are we doing? Conquering these people, or liberating them?" they asked.

In the larger sense, perhaps Austria had been liberated, but it would take time and effort and sacrifice on the part of the Austrians to alter the verdict. Certainly those others, who, on V-E Day, watched American vehicles tear through the Danube Valley were not ready to call Austrians their friends. These were the Poles, and Belgians, and Russians, and French, and British even the Americans who, being driven before our advancing armies, had lived the last of their grim existence as prisoners and slave labor in the blue haze of a Danubian spring. The GI's wondered at the new uniforms. "What nationality are you? Rooskee, Checko . . .?" The grinning soldier had replied, "Me Yugoslav. Tee-to. And the GI tossed him a package of Chesterfields. The truck rolled on, and the dough began to think aloud, "Do you suppose he'd have waved at me if I hadn't had those cigarettes?" The question was a simple one, so obvious that everyone in the truck felt uncomfortable, and yet, more than once, perhaps they'd all asked it to themselves, if not about Chesterfields, then about C-rations, or (occasionally the very remote "lend-lease." They felt uncomfortable . . . well, because America is so wealthy so prodigal, so essentially friendly that pinching pennies is not a national characteristic. And because instinctively they realized that the Yugoslav's wave was something more than the outstretched hand of the beggar, or the automatic anxious waving of the Austrian kids who charmed

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homesick GIs into parting with chewing gum and chocolate. This being *able* to hand out things was part of the "abundant life" of a people who could work and live as they pleased. It was "democracy" to the Yugoslav peasant-soldier. The American soldier felt this deeply within himself, but he could not talk with the Yugoslav, nor the Yugoslav with him. GI and Yugoslav should have celebrated V-E Day together. But the intimacies of friendship were denied to both, and it was simply a matter of the unsatisfactory conclusion "he is on our team."

Then too, the American distrusts his generosity. Being far from the causes of the war and inadequately prepared to meet its ideological demands, he feels no great enmity towards the people he has conquered. He wants to "make friends," which, however beneficial to the peace of Europe from the larger perspective, serves no good end when his cordiality is directed at the impenitent. He finds himself so incapable of mustering that degree of hatred—aloofness at least—which is only fitting to the conqueror that he threatens the populace with, "Wait until the Ruskees get here."