

Newsweek

February 12, 1945: p. 46

HE KNEW JOHNNY



Word from Stalag 7A: Relatives of American prisoners-of-war jam a New York meeting to hear soldiers back from prison camps

Through the iron gates of the Seventeenth Regiment Armory on Park Avenue the crowds streamed unendingly last Thursday evening. This was New York at its most cross-sectional: the rich and the poor, the chic and the down-at-heel the first- and the tenth-generation Americans. All bore the evidence of their right to admission: a badge supplied by the Red Cross, proving them next-of-kin to Americans held captive by the Nazis or Japs.

Within, the seating in the great hall recalled the floor arrangement of a national political convention: According to the absentee's whereabouts, his family representative sat in a section marked "Stalag XI B," "Dulag Luft," or "Oflag IX A/Z." To each visitor, the sponsors of the meeting—local Red Cross chapters and the Army Air Forces—presented a detailed map of the Reich showing camps and hospitals in which American prisoners of war and civilians were detained.

Thus organized, the audience turned eager eyes to the dozen uniformed men on the platform, ten of them Army airmen repatriated from Germany, the other two veterans of Corregidor who escaped from a torpedoed Jap transport. As the throng grew hushed, the soldiers—all holders of the Purple Heart—launched into a story they would repeat between now and April 4 to equally anxious groups in 30 other American cities: a story compounded of personal experience with the Axis, firsthand reports of prison-camp conditions, and advice on how POW families might help.

OldMagazineArticles.com

He Knew Johnny

Mothers besiege Cpl. Willard E. Hall for news of their boys

Voices From Captivity: The eyewitness accounts were a blend of wit and pathos:

- Sgt. Harold Sheahan, once a Brooklyn shipyard worker, was irked by the way the Nazi guards constantly heiled a picture of Hitler which hung over the camp piano. In retaliation he taught them what they innocently believed was a new American love song: "The Führer's Face."

- Gestapo attempts to ascertain the number of gunners on a B-24 brought this deadpan reply: "Fourteen gunners and two scorekeepers."

- Lt. William F. Higgins Jr., pilot of a B-17 which had three engines destroyed during a mission over Kiel, ordered his crew to bail out. Alone in the plane, he lost consciousness and woke two days later in a hospital. "I don't know yet, and probably never will, how I ever got out of that plane," Higgins confided, "but there's a Guy upstairs and He took care of it."

- On the watch for a chance to propagandize for the Allies, three newly captured soldiers managed to open their well-stocked emergency food parcels in the presence of goggle-eyed German civilians. Authorities hustled them out of sight.

- Capt. Ragnar Barhaug assured the meeting: "The Red Cross food parcels are the staff of life for all the boys."

- Confined for two and a half years in the Philippines, T/3 Donald I. McPherson had a prize recipe: python meat fried in brushless shaving cream.

- The Japs commented to their captives on the small number of Americans on Bataan. The conquerors had expected to find at least 10,000. From the group of prisoners rose a weak little voice: "Just wait till you do run up against 10,000 Americans!"

He Knew Johnny

• The Filipinos are almost fanatically devoted to the Americans; their favorite song is "God Bless America." In one area where prisoners-of-war were working, Filipino girls showed up every morning with jars of hot coffee for the men. The Japs allowed them through, but then beat them up brutally. The girls were back the next morning with more coffee.

"Did You Know Johnny?" After the anecdotes came a question-and-answer period. The queries flew thick and fast as anxious relatives rushed a traveling mike toted by William (Red) Barber, the baseball commentator. "Do our boys get the war news?" Yes—they have ways of knowing what's going on. "With the Russians overrunning the Reich, would the prisoners be moved? Should we keep sending packages?" Yes, the Red Cross would be able to trace any shifting prisoners; good things to send were baking pans and powder, spices, large towels, underwear, shaving stuff.

The evening's climax came when the twelve guests dispersed to the various sections to answer questions about specific camps and prisoners. Affably, but needing the protection of their two bodyguards apiece, they were mercilessly handled by people who shoved, pulled at their clothes, waved snapshots, and demanded above all: "Did you know Johnny?" (In a surprising number of instances they did.) The men were patient and helpful. Rescued at length by superior officers, they left grateful thousands behind them. One woman happily summed it up: "It was terrible the way we tugged at that poor kid's arm—but it was wonderful that he knew Johnny."

Newsweek