

“Somewhere in Germany:” The European Theater Through the Eyes of an American Soldier

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Abstract

Growing up, I knew very little about my maternal grandfather, Samuel R. Swavely. He died in 1981, long before I was born, so much of the information I knew of him was gleaned from the stories my family told me. A couple years ago, my great uncle discovered several letters written by Samuel when he was a soldier in Germany during World War II. These letters spurred my curiosity and after studying them along with several documents from his division, I was able to put together a narrative for his experience. What I discovered upon its completion was more than I ever expected. Not only was he involved in several battles in northwestern Europe, he assisted in the liberation of the Mittelbau-Dora Concentration Camp. While I was unable to meet him in person, studying my grandfather's letters and learning of his experience, in a way, allowed me to grow closer to him and I hope it contributes to further study of WWII.

The morning of April 11, 1945, began the same as most other mornings for the 104th Infantry Division, known as the Timberwolves. The weeks prior to April 11, however, consisted of constant advancement into the heart of central Germany. Despite the continued deterioration of the German War Machine, the 104th was greeted with consistent pockets of resistance in its march East, often by desperate and hungry German soldiers. With each town and village taken, the division gained momentum, particularly with the capture of Wehrmacht vehicles and other German machinery; however, the sight of each town's destroyed homes and desperately worn civilian population stayed the same. At this point in the war, the soldiers

of the 104th were well acquainted with the devastated state of the people and places they encountered, and most believed they had seen everything the war had to offer in terms of casualties. The 193-mile trek between the Rhine and Paderborn took only nine days and on the morning of April 11, the 104th was greeted with yet another unfamiliar German town.

Despite their previous experiences, the town known as Nordhausen, was different from the others they had encountered earlier. While it contained the usual crumbling buildings and exhausted civilian population, it was also home to one of the German War Machines greatest atrocities. In what the 104th later discovered to be the Mittelbau-

Dora Concentration Camp, they found 750 prisoners living among over 3,000 corpses, both in various stages of decay. The living were nearly indistinguishable from the dead as they were practically skeletal from malnutrition. Following the disbursement of the remaining Nazi forces in the town, the soldiers of the 104th set to evacuating the remaining living from the camp, providing food and medical attention, as well as burying the dead (Hoegh and Doyle, 1946, pp. 329). In the words of Sergeant Ragene Farris of the 329th medical battalion, "In a caravan of trucks we rushed into a job which proved unbelievable to an American; a job distasteful and sobering; one created by the fanatical inhuman Nazi machine. We found out the full meaning of the words 'Concentration Camp'" (Hoegh and Doyle, 1946, pp. 330).

It is undeniable that the tumultuous nature of the Second World War had a great influence on both the countries and the individuals involved. The war itself established an environment for great change in the lives of people around the world. Many considered the role of the United States to be key to the Allied victory and this sentiment, along with the desire to make a difference, inspired numerous young men and women to join in the war effort. Others were drafted and forcibly swept into the chaos of the conflict. In both cases, their lives were no longer their own, and they now found themselves a small part of a larger narrative in United States history: however, that is not to say that their stories are not important. There are many instances of individuals who, through their actions, changed the tides of battles. Even those who were not distinguished made an impact on those around them, and for the sake of this work, on those who came after them. Regardless of action or rank, soldiers who returned home at the end of WWII brought with them stories and experiences that, in some cases, were shared with friends and

family. These experiences helped to shape the way succeeding generations viewed the world and gave life to the history of WWII.

For those who did not, or could not, share their experiences with others, it is left to their surviving family, friends, and remaining possessions to tell their story. While historians can often glean information from objects that were collected or carried with soldiers during their time abroad, the individual's correspondence and other written information is by far the most popular method of gaining information. In the case of Pvt. Samuel R. Swavely, a member of the 104th Infantry Division of the U.S. Army during WWII, and the subject of this work, his correspondence is one of the few remaining artifacts that depict his experience. Much of the information regarding Samuel's experience can be gleaned from the letters that passed between himself and members of his immediate family. Although his account is not particularly one of great feats of heroism or epic adventures as often seen in news articles or popular culture, his correspondence allows a rare look into the world of an average infantry soldier deployed with the 104th. Not only does it include a personal narrative of the events of WWII, but it also portrays his direct feelings and provides a glimpse into the world as he saw it. In essence, his account serves as a case study for the average soldier drafted from a small town in the U.S. to a foreign country. As time continues its unrelenting march forward it becomes easy to view the WWII era as a faraway world, disconnected and unrelatable to the world that exists today. Personally, his narrative allows me to bring my grandfather's stories and pictures to life. His dialog adds a personal touch to both the European theater and the greater narrative of WWII. It allows readers to see past events from a human perspective, providing for a greater understanding of the time period and the events that took place in it

References

Leo A. Hoegh and Howard J. Doyle, ed., *Timberwolf Tracks: The History of the 104th Infantry Division 1942-1945*, Washington D.C.: Infantry Journal Press, 1946.

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