

A letter from Lt. HORACE RUSSELL HANSEN, O-1325088

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APO #102
c/o Postmaster, N.Y., N.Y.

Germany
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Dear Folks and Friends,

The Ninth Army rat chase has finally paused for a breather. We have set up our headquarters in the officers' quarters of a Luftwaffe airdrome and have settled down for the nearest approach to normal administration in three weeks.

The moment my truck pulled in here 3 days ago, the Colonel told me about a recent atrocity that had been discovered the day before. We went there immediately and got the shock of our lives. Security has been lifted on the details of this one, so I'm going to tell you about it to show what kind of enemy we are fighting over here.

The place was Gardelegen, a good sized town just north of Magdeberg near the Elbe river. On the outskirts of the town we found the large barn standing alone in an open field. The scene looked peaceful, farmers were plowing the fields and the sun was shining. We saw a little smoke drifting lazily from one of the big doors as we parked the command car and walked toward it. We saw the bodies and smelled the strong stench of burned flesh at the same time.

The barn is about 100 feet long and 50 feet wide, made of brick with a tile roof. There are two large, sliding doors on each of the long sides. The entire floor was covered with bodies, piled up thickest at the four doors. Just outside of the barn were grave ditches 5 feet wide, 6 feet deep and from 15 to 60 feet long. More bodies were in these ditches, some only partly covered.

Eleven hundred prisoners of war had been locked in this barn and burned to death by the Germans. They had buried about 700 of them when our swift advance overtook them with their crime still exposed.

We found two of the few who had escaped, a Hungarian Lieutenant and a Russian Private. Here is the story they told us and how we confirmed it.

Selected prisoners of war had been gathered from several concentration camps and herded together on a train. There were 2,000 of them, mostly Russians and Poles with some French, Hungarians, Greeks and Italians. Their destination was Hannover. For what purpose, they were not sure, but they surmised that they would be put on the line with rifles to fight the Allies with guns at their backs, or would be made to dig defenses. The train was bombed by American planes and stopped. The prisoners were then formed on the highway and marched toward the west. From the point they started, it was 21 kilometers (13 miles) to Gardelegen. In this comparatively short distance, 800 men dropped from exhaustion. The rations of 6 potatoes per day per man had left them so weak that the physical effort of mere walking was too great. As soon as a man dropped he was shot in the head and left lying. (We drove over this road and saw bodies lying alongside it for the whole distance, all shot in the head. At one place there were 65; in another 25).

At Gardelegen, the 1100 survivors of this death march were driven into a large stable in the town. There they heard the news of our capturing Hannover, and noted extreme agitation among the German guards. The next day they were marched to this barn 3 kilometers away. (One prisoner managed to conceal himself in the stable and stayed behind).

When they were herded into the barn, they noticed that the entire floor was filled with straw, 2 to 3 feet deep, soaked with gasoline and oil. The pyre was ready.

Machine guns, a few yards away outside, were trained on the four doors to prevent escape. All the men were locked in the barn except a number who were kept outside to dig ditches. By the time that was completed it was dusk.

The Hungarian Lieutenant said that with all the men securely in the barn, a door was opened slightly and an S.S. trooper, a sergeant, came in. "He had a sly smile on his face. He stood there for a minute looking at all of us, still smiling; then he struck some matches and threw them into the straw in different places. Some flames started. He looked at them for a moment, then he went to the doorway and gave a last look, still smiling. Then he stepped outside and slid the door shut. As soon as he left several men rolled on the flames and in a few moments they put them out. The men were silent. In a little while the sergeant opened the door again and looked in. He wasn't smiling. He left the doorway and in a few minutes a phosphorus grenade was thrown inside and exploded. Soon flames started everywhere. Men rushed to the doors and tried to open them. They wouldn't open, so we tried to knock them down. Then the machine guns fired into the doors and the men were killed in heaps. They fired incendiary bullets."

The Hungarian Lieutenant went on to tell about the "indescribable noise". The men were on fire and screaming and moaning. More grenades, phosphorus and fragmentation, were thrown in. A rocket grenade tore a hole in the brick wall, and more hand grenades were thrown thru the hole. With all those explosions and the screaming, there was the cracking of machine guns. The men went mad, climbing rafters and falling down, fighting to get into the corners, clawing at the heavy doors and under them with their bare hands.

Finally, the Lieutenant and two others managed to dig a shallow trench under a door and crawled away in the darkness.

The Russian Private had squeezed out by pulling inward on the sliding door enough to let him out on one side at the floor. He had crawled about 15 feet away from the building when a group of Germans rushed toward the door for another "attack" with hand grenades. He feigned death, they stepped on him, and later he crawled away.

The crime occurred on Friday, 13th April, was discovered Sunday, and we arrived on Monday. We took pictures and noted the mute evidence carefully. We saw the hole made by the rocket grenade, the piles of expended cartridges where the machineguns stood, ten pools of blood with caps beside them just outside a door, the freshly turned earth of the ditches and the grotesque mess in the barn. As I was taking pictures with my camera, my warrant officer said, "I'll bet the people back home will never believe this. They'll think these things are dummies." I took several closeups of one body in particular that told more agony than words could describe. Standing on the outside, all that could be seen was a painful face and an arm protruding at the bottom of the heavy door. On the inside most of the body was burned away.

I have seen dead G.I.'s and Krauts all the way from the beach. In some places like the hedgerows in Normandy and the forests in Germany all the bodies could not be readily found for burial and the heavy stench of decaying flesh made us take short breaths and smoke a lot of cigarettes. That never nauseated me. But this thing made me ill, and I can still smell that place whenever I recall it. I can't quit thinking about these men being burned alive.

On Wednesday, we went back to the scene again. The Signal Corps was taking more pictures and our Graves Registration crews were exhuming all the bodies that had been buried in the ditches in order to identify them. Our Division Chief of Staff, Col. Lynch, had ordered the Burgomaster of Gardelegen to furnish able-bodied German civilians for the work of internment. They arrived in truck loads. When they were assembled together, Col. Lynch climbed up on a jeep and with the aid of an inter-

preter made a strong speech. He told the whole story in detail and when he finished he pointed to the barn and said, "Now get in there and see what your fellow men have done. Stay in there twenty minutes, then come back here." The German civilians hung their heads and slowly walked toward the barn. I think they were certain they were going to be shot in reprisal, there were so many angry G.I.'s muttering all around them. They paused at the doorway and looked at the heap of bodies (I took a picture of that and hope I caught their phlegmatic appearance) then went inside. Everyone was silent. One old man vomited, then fainted. Later they were put to work on the graves.

As the exhuming was going on we saw that many bore a code number, tattooed on the forearm or stamped on a metal plate. We don't have the code, but some day the records will be found and they will be identified.

Later an order from General Eisenhower arrived. It required that the bodies be buried in an existing cemetery or a new one specifically set aside. Each individual grave is to be dug by one German and still another German is required to care for one grave and to provide for its perpetual care, by designating successors.

Hundreds of German male civilians are working there now, making a fitting Allied war memorial. They detest the humiliation and ignominy in being made to do this work, and continually complain about it. There was a terrific squawk when we ordered 50 odd stars of David made along with the white crosses.

There are Russians and Poles, recently freed, helping to supervise the work. They take these complaints as an excuse to maul the Germans, and it takes vigilance to prevent reprisal atrocities. But this chain of command is highly effective in getting the work done.

Meanwhile the investigation is continuing. We checked the Germans who live all around this barn. Not one heard or saw a thing; yet the Pole who escaped the final March by hiding in the stable in Gardelegen, 3 kilometers away, heard all the explosions and noise distinctly over a long time that night.

All the Germans around there dummed up completely. They were not talking for the same reason that a captured accomplice does not squeal on the one who is still loose.

Their attitude is plain and it reminds me again about all the drivel that is pouring out of the states on what to do with Germany. There are too many who still insist that Nazism is simply a cancer -- remove it and the race is essentially decent and peaceful. Baloney!

Their myth of the super-race predates Hitler by many generations. And, rule by force is an inbred family tenet, the traditional and only way to raise the kids and command their respect. It goes down the line, and you can see the big ones swat the little ones, even on the street, every day over here. The civilian men bow, literally -- and with a click of the heels, before any superior authority. My German-raised interpreters tell me there is nothing Hitlerian about all this; it is simply the way of life over here.

Hitler capitalized on these myths and habits as easily as Bismarck and the Kaiser had done before him. The notion about misled "good Germans" is pure bunk. We have found nazi regalia and Hitler panegyric in almost every home. We have arrested as war criminals former solid, peaceful citizens like farmers, a grocery store owner, a bank clerk, a cobbler, and the like -- "good Germans", who with the added authority of a Brown Shirt or a work overseer, plundered the underwear off foreign subjects and beat the last breath out of their slaves. The "good" women smugly shopped for silk stockings and other finery they knew was stolen from Paris and Brussels.

The military elite with their Heidelberg scars and affected brutal faces have always been held in awe and reverence.

Almost every German over here was a Nazi, a supporter, a fellow traveller, or at least an acceptor. As proof of that, there has never been a resistance movement worthy of the name. And don't go for that Gestapo-forced-us soap. We've learned about that too. It ferreted the seditious fringe just like our own F.B.I. You don't scare 65 million people into the kind of thing we have been fighting.

These people have not been "horribly awakened too late" and they are anything but repentant. Right now they cannot bear their flattened ego and humiliation. They hate us like gall and they dream of revenge for the terrible bombings. Given half a chance some day and they will raise up another Hitler and start in on us first, with a good dose of V-bombs.

It is hard to understand as you see these people, civilians and prisoners alike, how they can envision themselves as a super-race, and why they persist in warlike demeanor. For the most part the men are short and stocky, the women fat and dumpy. As a mass they are unimpressive. We consider their homes old-fashioned, with modern facilities like plumbing, wiring and central heating far behind ours. Their art is garish and heavy. Their work-a-day life is methodical and uninteresting. Some of their social habits are outright obnoxious. But these hardjawed people possess a tenacity to exert their will and a fiendish capacity to be brutal like nothing in this world.

We are talking a lot over here about the San Francisco conference, and we are glad to see it happen at a time when the anguish of millions of slaves and the human bakeries like Gardelegen are fresh in people's minds.

April 21, 1945

Time for writing letters is getting scarcer and I'm going to wind this up with a few highlights of the last week or so. It was a fast, dizzy time and we saw so much that the best I can do is to tell it in sketches.

Past the Rhine, the country was still quite flat, with a lot of rivers and canals. All former bridges had been blown and it was difficult to stay on the routes that had pontoon bridges. I made one long trip in my jeep out of convoy and without my German phrase book. I had stayed behind on a warcrime investigation and was trying to catch up with my outfit.

It took me 10 hours to travel 125 miles. There had been no time to put up guide signs and I didn't see as much as a Company of Infantry the whole way. I simply had to use my hands and draw diagrams. All the German I knew was "Wo ist strasse nach --," and of course the civilians knew nothing about location of pontoon bridges, so I just guessed, turned around at the water, and guessed again.

The small towns in that stretch were lucky. They had been by-passed or just taken without a fight. Only a few had been defended and they were leveled by bombing. Afterward, I learned from the armored boys that the speed of our advance scared the Krauts so much that it took little persuasion to make them come out with their hands up. If it looked like a town would resist these boys would pause in a nearby woods, grab a few farmers and send them to the town with the message to hang out the white flags or the town would be leveled by planes in a few minutes. It worked in many cases. Sometimes they simply had the interpreter call on the telephone. I like that one -- capturing a town and a few hundred Krauts over long distance.

There are roads and roads in Germany and on all of them liberated slaves and prisoners were walking or riding bicycles, horse-drawn wagons, and occasionally a bus or truck. Most of them were walking and most of them were Russians with the "Ost"

(East) slave emblem still sewed on the breast pocket of a big "S.V." painted on the back. The Poles had a "P" sewed on the breast pocket and nothing else. The French never had a distinctive brand of any kind, but now they were the most prominent, if fewest in number. They had homemade tricolor armbands and flags, and painted the colors on their vehicles. As always, everywhere, they were the most vivacious.

All the fields were alive with people planting crops, many of which seemed to be potatoes. There were mostly women, children and old men toiling on fields that looked too big for them to handle. No tractors were working because there was no gasoline, but there were a lot of horses (there should be) and a few oxen. I saw one big group of liberated slaves watching the women working in the field, while resting and eating a lunch. Last spring and several springs before they were drudging in these fields, and I'll bet it did their hearts good to see the masters get their hands dirty.

The damage from bombing in the big industrial cities is ghastly. I saw Munster passing thru and stayed in Hannover 4 days. Like the civilians all say, "Alles ist Kaput". I could say that the factories and railyards are a twisted mess and the big buildings are all gutted, but that would be only a beginning. All water and power is out. Most of the main streets are filled high with rubble. In the centers of these cities, what isn't blown away is burned out. Buildings and houses away from the center are cracked, tile roofs are shaken off and windows blown out. Thousands of people are still buried in the tremendous heaps, those who are alive stand in queues all day for a pot of water from a pump, a little coal, or something to eat. Everything smells musty and rotten. Medical care is scarce and there are a lot of cases of stomach ulcers from the nervous tension, and flurries of typhus.

The people in these large cities invariably tell us they are glad we finally came -- and they mean it. Our coming means the end of the bombings. To these people nothing in the world matters now -- only to end at last the horrible hell of the air raids.

I don't mean that they welcomed us. The bombings had made them docile and jumpy, and they were scared stiff. They hung out white flags and hid themselves. After a few days of watching our men play ball in the streets, or just standing around with hands in their pockets, they cautiously ventured out of doors. Our men act utterly oblivious of the presence of civilians, which suits them fine, and soon all the civilians are out acting the same way toward us. When you stay in one place for a few days, see the same people all the time, with never an exchange of any kind, it creates a peculiar, unnatural atmosphere. This sort of thing over and over again makes us all want to get home more than ever.

At Recklinghausen, we took over a huge modern building that was the district headquarters of the Gestapo. In the current custom they fled in such a hurry there was no time for destroying records. I went thru the whole building with an interpreter looking over the records. There was no evidence of warcrimes, simply a registration of all civilians and "foreign workers" in the district, and the same type of criminal records, photographs, finger prints, histories, modus operandi files, etc., that our own police departments keep. It was a beautiful, efficient setup. There was a large conference room there that we used for a courtroom.

In Minden we took over an officers' candidate school. It had no heat, water lights or windows but it made a good headquarters. We had an uneasy time there for a few days. There was a by-passed group of enthusiastic Krauts in the woods just across the river.

As we proceeded on the Hannover, the terrain changed to rolling ground and high ranges of hills. With the leaves coming out, it was elegant scenery. This is a

very old part of Germany and there are a lot of big castles in the hills, old frame and plaster houses, cobblestone streets and arched stone guard-towers at the entrance to some of the towns.

In Hannover, we put up in a new, modern university building on the edge of the city. It was the only building in a big group that had not been hit, but as usual, it too was minus windows and facilities. There was a large sculptored head of Hitler in the entryway which the boys could not remove from the granite pedestal, so they painted the face chocolate-brown, with big white lips like a minstrel character and put a dunce cap on top. In the center of Hannover, on Adolph Hitler Strasse where the rubble was highest, the boys had put up a sign. "Give me five years and you will not recognize Germany - signed, Adolph Hitler."

We saw several large concentration camps, especially around the Ruhr. They look much alike, a lot of low, box-like barracks buildings, surrounded by high double-barbed-wire fences. Sanitary facilities are poor in most of them but we consider them good enough for some of our installations and displaced persons centers. A few of them were a lot better than that tarpaper monstrosity I trained at in Mississippi. If that place is a prisoner stockade now, I'll bet the Krauts are screaming their heads off.

The last push up to our present position was a nightmare. The spearhead we were following was throwing Krauts to the sides like the backwash of a boat. Almost all of them surrendered, went into hiding, or changed clothes and melted into the civilian scene. Extensive mopping up and screening is going on to net these in. The ones who gave us real trouble were the mutts who thought they were still fighting a battle.

They shelled and sniped at us on the roads, ambushed and raided day and night. On one trip our convoy got off the route somehow at night, so we tried a road going north. An armored car on outpost warned us some Kraut tanks were coming so we turned tail south and ran into a road block. We turned around, tried a country road to the East again and went a little way when a high velocity gun spat on the road ahead. We stopped, an armored car took after the gun, and we continued on and finally made it without getting hit. It was a windy, cold night, but I was never warmer.

When we arrived here at the airdrome, there was a pocket ahead of us and an armored task force behind us. The task force came from the north, was driving south and trying to find a soft spot to permit them to get to Berlin, according to prisoners. They had about 40 tanks, 25 armored cars and 800 men, and when in our rear for a while they held securely several patches of woods. They sent out fast reconnaissance patrols day and night. The road to Gardelegen was cut off just a few hours after I returned on it. Another time a lone tank was feeling around the woods on the edge of the airport. Our headquarters group was no match for armor and we had several tense days here. We went to bed late, slept with clothes and boots on and got up before dawn every morning. Finally the force was boxed in and finished off with dive bombing, and the pocket ahead of us was whittled away.

When we set up headquarters here a group of liberated Russians came and wanted guns, to fight the Krauts. That was nothing new, they all want to fight, but these men were persistent. They knew where there were some Russian uniforms at a nearby concentration camp, so our headquarters commandant said to go get them. They came back later dressed in officers uniforms and looked pretty natty and very proud. So he let them have some Mausers and put them on guard duty at the airdrome -- there are about 20 fighters and one jet plane undamaged in the hangers. They would rather have fought the Krauts but they were happy to be on the "in" again, especially when we told them we would be seeing their army very soon. Incidentally, they practically went nuts when they saw 3 Russian fighter planes flying low over here yesterday.

The airdrome is cleverly camouflaged. There are no runways, just a large, firm, grassy field, with the hangars out of sight in the tall pines on the edges. I've looked over the whole installation. It is a tremendous place, with five buildings and efficient equipment. It has formidable perimeter defenses but we took it without a struggle. The place was never bombed and apparently cannot be seen from the air. The Krauts just took off and left us the swellest headquarters I have seen yet.

I have a big office with all the trimmings, a nice room with bath, a balcony overlooking the pines and pansy beds, a luxurious bed, a davenport and lamps. I hate to let you down but there is no running water, heat or light. But I have a little coal stove, carry my water from a nearby emergency pump and have plenty of candles. I even read in bed one night. If I didn't have so much work this would be wonderful.

Yesterday I went to the nearby concentration camp, now being used for Kraut prisoners, a displaced persons center and a collecting point for our freed G.I.'s. The Kraut prisoners all insist that as soon as we meet the Russians there will be a colossal battle between us and that both sides will be annihilated. The German army in the mean time would go into redoubts, reorganize and eventually emerge the victor. Goebbels again, always handy with another phony hope.

We talked with some of our G.I.'s. They were too worn out to look happy or do anything but rest. Some of them had been prisoners for as long as 10 months, had walked from Normandy to Poland, then all the way back here. They had to keep moving ahead of our westward advance last September and October, and when they got to Poland had to move fast ahead of the Russian winter drive. The last few weeks had been the worst. They marched from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., with only one meal at night -- black bread and weak ersatz coffee.

They have high praise for the furious fighting of the Russians. They didn't see the battlefield but they felt the impact in the German rear and it was terrifying, they said. They saw Russian planes flying in all kinds of weather, continually raking the roads. Some just came from Berlin and said that the Russians were demolishing houses and buildings with point blank gunfire, even after capturing the district.

We are waiting anxiously for the Russians, who are expected momentarily. We have been oriented on the secret flare signals, and special last-minute markings for their tanks and planes. All the units around here have hung up banners over the streets in Russian and English, saying "Welcome to the fighting men of Russia", "Welcome, Comrade Ivan", etc. The German civilians are quaking in their boots. We all have our cameras loaded.

This is the most pleasant waiting in the Army I have done. The sunny spring in this pine country is beautiful. Blossoms are popping out all around and the tender grass feels like a luxurious carpet. This is the best weather we have had on the continent yet. Nice enough so that I am going to invite the first Ivan I see to have tea with me out on the terrace under the big umbrella.

Auf Wiedersehen,

H.R.H.

P.S.

Something funny just happened that is worth telling. Some cub pilots, who are having a good, easy time scouting for contact with the Russians, are in a playful mood. They saw a big white goose flying lickety split down the road about four feet off the ground and were amazed to see how fast it was. They talked it over and decided to give the goose a thrill, another pilot added a rooster and a turkey to the experiment. They just told me what happened.

Two of them took the 3 birds in a Cub to a height of 4000 feet. First they threw the goose out. He made a straight nose dive for 2000 feet, then suddenly came out of it and landed safely. Next, the turkey. He plummeted down like a lump of lead and they couldn't see what happened to him. Then the white rooster. He went down head over tail, but came out of it close to the ground.

When they landed and looked for the birds they found two of them in the farmyard from whence they took them, still with the identification rag on the leg. The goose was groggy, continually shaking his head and teetering uncertainly. The rooster was back with the flock strutting around as if nothing had happened. One of the pilots said, "I'll bet those hens don't believe a word of it."

P.S.'s

Dutch Strout. - Cedric Adams' advice is pretty good. I'm glad it stirred you up anyway. Keep it up.

John McConneloug - Thanks for the news. Have no notions such as you suggest, but ~~will~~ will write the letters and straighten it out.

Louie K. - Come on over. I could use a Kraut prosecutor. Did the C.A.Conv. end up with headaches and check stubs as usual?

Lt. Johnny Frank - Thanks, and congratulations on the promotion. I'm in a T/O now and mine is finally in.

Lt. Al Rathert - Imagine being transferred to a nasty old place like L.A. I'd like to see you there.

Bill Desmond - What I'm wondering is how you would know it if Gene did get home by curfew hour.

George Feller - It seems like all our friends are resigning from something. Who's sore at who this time?

Auntie Ardith - Nice to hear from you and Helene. I can't imagine Jackie being old enough to be in the Navy. My best wishes to him and to Bob, Joy and Donna.

Swing Shift Kazella - There wasn't too much realism in that description of England.

Lou Lerman - Thanks. That's two cigars I owe you.

Lt. Highberg. The girls in Brussels were a let down after Paris.

Bea and Burt - How's Beri, Bette or Bernadette? I'll think of more later.

Fred Eiden - Thanks for all the news. Last of 4 letters 12/29. This is a sorry way to catch up I admit, but I hope you keep them coming.

Helen Decker - Well, how's the firebug? Seems that all my friends are moving to Cal. You must know Helen Olson (Keith Newhouse's cousin). 949 Capp St., and Leona (Larry Hazen's wife) 564 12th Ave., both in S.F. too.

Helen and Homer - Letters from both of you the same day. Helen it looks like you had better get in the ANC and get assigned to Homer.

Lt. Gordon Hazen - Have your card and letter from Alaska. Got a bang out of your descriptions, especially of the willywas. Last letter from Larry about a month ago. He was just back from that trip where the ship ran on a reef. It will be a great day when we meet again.

Old Fashioned Powell - When did you change your name from Rumless--and what have you been doing between games and clubbing in N.O.?

Art Tanem - My homing moles tell me that you have acquired an even gentler disposition and a beaming countenance, Ray--and that Gen is more chipper than ever. Looks like you have something there. I like the name, Sandra Rae.
