

OPENING PANDORA'S BOX TO HELL

By: Orazio J. Zappala

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The discovery of the horrors of German concentration camps in the spring of 1945 proved to be, for me, a shriveling experience. It was an affront to the senses, a crippling blow against entrenched civilized ideals of humanity, and a challenge to my religious belief in a compassionate God. Yet, I should have been better prepared for what lie ahead. I had been given several ominous forewarnings. So, for me, my individual voyage of discovery, to what depths Nazism could plunge, began in Africa.

In May 1943, when the Afrika Korps surrendered to the Allies in Tunisia, I had two primary experiences. A corporal in my platoon asked to speak to me in private. As Regimental Historian, I was busy filing reports, collecting supporting documents and maps, and writing up the recommendations for citations and medals. The corporal got my undivided attention when he asked for the use of my

Jeep. He had an aunt who had fled her home in Berlin, Germany, made her way to France, and when she found that the French were giving the Germans lists of Jews who were not French citizens, fled to Tunisia and was still there. I asked if he had sought the help of the American Red Cross representative. The corporal explained that unless the American Red Cross had a specific town or city in Tunisia (a country as large as New York State), the representative could not begin to know where to look. I understood why he needed a Jeep. When I pointed out he needed an unlimited pass, for without it, the military police would stop and turn him back, he broke down and cried. I went to my company commander and asked for and received five days leave for both of us. We concentrated our search among the northern coastal towns of Tunisia and on the fourth day, we found her. At that time, she had been reduced to selling her last piece of jewelry. We placed her in the care of the American Red Cross representative who, through the intercession of the Jewish Welfare Board in New York City, got her into the United States. She had told her stories of what had happened to Jews in Germany, but could offer no substantial proof. That was the first forewarning.

I talked to captured Italian soldiers in Tunisia, who had been in Africa several years. I heard of a German plan to eliminate inferior races and that special units were being organized to do this. Again, I got no specific details as to units, leaders, areas or places. What the Italians were very specific about was the number of complaints against the Germans, who had forced them to do manual labor (ditches, latrines, anti-tank traps, foxholes, dishwashing, etc.). German sergeants and corporals thought nothing of countermanding or ignoring orders

given by Italian officers. Passwords and countersigns were made up by the German command. Italian officers were given very little say in military planning. Our division commander, receiving a summary of these complaints, gave orders to keep Italian and German captured soldiers in separate POW camps.

In Sicily there were clues I did not properly assess. After landing in Gela and fighting our way up the middle of the island, we passed towns like Caltagirone and Paterno with wine running down the hilly streets. There were old established vineyards run over by German tanks, olive orchards blasted or chopped down, grain and legume fields set on fire, and wells polluted with carcasses of slaughtered cattle. From captured Germans came the same denial: "Our outfit did not do it. This is the work of special SS units."

When we broke through the Siegfried Line at Aachen, we soon reached the Eiffel Mountains. One of our most exhilarating and saddest experiences was overrunning a POW camp and liberating American soldiers who had been captured in Tunisia on Christmas Eve, 1942. Among these were soldiers from our own regiment. We could scarcely recognize these skeleton-like men who had been overworked and underfed for close to 21 months. Members of the Red Cross, who periodically appeared at the camp only saw these men at evening formation and never even attempted to question them on the treatment they were getting.

Another clue that I and others did not evaluate properly came when we penetrated deep into Germany and Austria. We captured many cities, but all the insane asylums had been emptied and the building put to other uses. German

medics had been ordered to put to death all mentally and physically handicapped people by lethal injection.

When I later reviewed all these clues, the pattern for inhuman behavior was clear. Pressuring the French to turn over countless thousands of Jewish refugees to the Nazis without benefit of trials was a blatant disregard of the rule of law. Treatment of Italian soldiers at the hands of Germans made clear another transgression: disregard of established rules of military courtesy governing military conduct. In Sicily, Germans went far out of their way to ruin the economic livelihood of unresisting towns that lie in the path of the Germans' retreat towards Messina. This was a gross violation of the articles of the Geneva Convention. Liberated Allied prisoners from German camps were living proof of inhuman care and treatment and the failure of the Red Cross to report this. To put to death all mentally ill and physically handicapped citizens in Germany was prime proof of an abrupt break in civilized behavior. Yet I was unprepared for what I witnessed in German concentration camps, camps that were processing stations dealing in wholesale extermination.