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The Simple Faith of a Prisoner of War by Barrie

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Contributed by Barrie

People in story: [Cpl. Desmond Stephenson](#)

Location of story: [Arnhem, Sagen, Bad Orb, Stalag XI B](#)

Background to story: [Army](#)

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This story is based on a diary my father kept whilst a Prisoner of War in Germany. I have used extracts of his diary linked with my own recollections of his stories.

Why don't you pray? The voice nagged in my father's weary mind as he marched across Germany from East to West in February 1945. He was on the verge of death after a fourth night sleeping in several feet of snow.

Desmond Stephenson, Deb to his family, Stevos to his friends, was captured from hospital in Apeldoorn after being shot in the leg at Oosterbeek, Arnhem in September 1944. He was by this time a corporal in 250 Airborne Light Comp. Coy. R.A.S.C. He wrote a diary as a record of how his faith sustained him during those dark times.

"I went to the hospital to have my leg dressed. It wasn't too bad and I expected to come out again straight away, however I was kept in. This was about 3pm on Friday 23rd Sept 1943. There wasn't beds or even room to lay down on the floor as it was overcrowded and only a makeshift hospital, so that I had to sit on the stairs with dozens of others cases. Well for the rest of that day and night I sat and dozed where I was there was very little water and hardly any food we got ½ cup of tea and 2 biscuits twice in the day and I had ½ a ladle of M&V.

And so it was, sat there on the stairs the following day in the mid afternoon with mortars and shells bursting everywhere blowing in the windows and doors, that a voice seemed to say to me, "Why not call on the Lord and ask him to take care of you", and I did. I prayed to him for protection and guidance and immediately my shattered nerves were steadied and I was able to look at others and steady them without feeling the same. I had a new life and in the midst of all this noise and tumult I had a peace of mind unknown to me before. It was wonderful to have a joy unspeakable, and since then my Jesus has stood by me most wonderfully. I feel sure that he brought me through all this to prove to me his goodness and mercy which he has done up to the present moment of time."

He was held a prisoner of war at Stalag XI B, near Sagen on the Polish border. As the Russians advanced his captors forced a march to the west through the bitter February days. They were expected to sleep outside each night. I remember him telling me of how they dug a hole in the snow to make a bed. They tossed to see who would sleep in the middle. The others would probably freeze to death before morning. He knew that if he slept outside another night he too would die of cold.

"... on the march from Sagen, which eventually ended at Bad Orb 620 kilos away taking us 32 days, we had been on the road for 4 days. I had slept out in the open each night. This being early February it was extremely cold. Well after 4 days we were supposed to get on a train however this didn't materialise and we had to keep

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marching and so it was that on the afternoon of the fifth day I asked the Lord to find us cover for our heads that night and onwards if we still had to keep going and praise the Lord's name from then onwards we slept in barns or other buildings that would provide cover for us."

We in this account means the whole company. Hundreds of men slept undercover until the march ended twenty eight days later. He later became a church pastor and told this story as his "testimony". As a boy I found it compelling.

On the march they were provided with very little food. They would scavenge in the fields and eat whatever they could find in the gutter and dustbins along the way. They sometimes traded what few possessions they still had for meagre portions of food to keep them going. Dad prayed too.

"I had an army service watch which I had kept all along and I had intended keeping it altogether, but through conditions on the march from lack of food I contemplated selling it. So I asked God to overrule and the following morning one of the German sentries offered me 3 loaves of bread and 50 cigarettes for it and this was considered a fair price. Of course I accepted it and my pal and myself shared it buying bread and food with the fags and I'm sure that those there extra loaves kept us going and able to complete the march. Then about 4 days after we were having another rest day. We had been carrying some new potatoes for two or three days and had had no chance to cook them. It was getting towards evening and I wasn't feeling well when my pal said, if you take the spuds out and try to get them cooked I will make the bed. Well I had seen chaps hanging about all day trying the same thing so I prayed to the Lord that he would provide some means for me. So I put the spuds in a towel and went out of the barn and there was one of the girls from the farm talking to one of the sentries and I asked her in what little German I knew if she could cook them for me. Well she spoke to the sentry, she said it was alright. Within 25 minutes we had all the potatoes cooked and were able to sit in bed and eat them hot with a little salt. Believe me it was one of the best meals I had as a prisoner. These are only a few of the things which happened but it proves how good the Lord is to us if we will only put our trust in him and I hope my friend that after you have read this you will ponder these things in your mind."

When he finally returned home to Ambleside he weighed only seven stones. I never knew him weighing less than thirteen. It is hardly surprising that in his diary he had written fantasy menus of what he would eat when he arrived home. This is what he planned to eat BEFORE arriving home!

"On the first day of my leave, God willing, this is what I have arranged to do. Jack, Bill and myself, have arranged that if at all possible to get to one large station preferably in London and go into town to some restaurant and have a good luncheon. For this I can't set a menu as I do not know how things will be. However we intend to have a really good meal regardless of price. Should this meal take place in any other place than London or if I have to wait any length of time at Euston station I intend going to the YMCA there and have another meal which will consist of the following:

Sausage or bacon
Mash or chips
Bread butter and tea
Sweet: Fruit and custard
Or Trifle and custard
Cakes and tea

This is usually obtainable there or was six months ago. I then intend to buy 12 hot dogs. These consist of rolls split in half and a sausage put in with butter, and then buy some assorted cakes and biscuits all of which I will take on the train with me. It is then my intention to get a cup of tea and sandwiches at any station en route if at all possible."

I'll leave you to imagine what he hoped would be waiting for him to eat at home! In the

event he was hospitalised on return to the UK with suspected appendicitis. I assume his appetite was curtailed until a later date. Even as he wrote about his menus he was trusting God to provide.

"The main topic of all talk in Stalag is definitely food; each man discussing what he will eat and how he will prepare it; of things that he has and hasn't eaten and how his tastes have changed. Myself, I think, I would put most of my reunion with those at home, which, God willing, I pray will not be long, for I am sure that if he has kept me safe through these terrible days of prison life and then returns me to my loved ones, that he will provide sufficiently for my wants. However this being my firm belief I have prepared a menu on a separate piece of paper of one day's food. Whether or not I shall be able to eat it, I leave entirely in the hands of the Lord and pray that he will keep or rather restore my health and strength sufficiently to do so."

Deb Stephenson died of a heart attack on November 14th 1983. He was in Austria with group of young people from his church. A faithful servant who fulfilled every promise he had made during his war years and more. A true soldier of Christ.

I have turned part of this story into a short digital story. It is called Sleeping Under Cover http://www.digistories.co.uk/What_is.htm [About links](#).

Barrie Stephenson

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