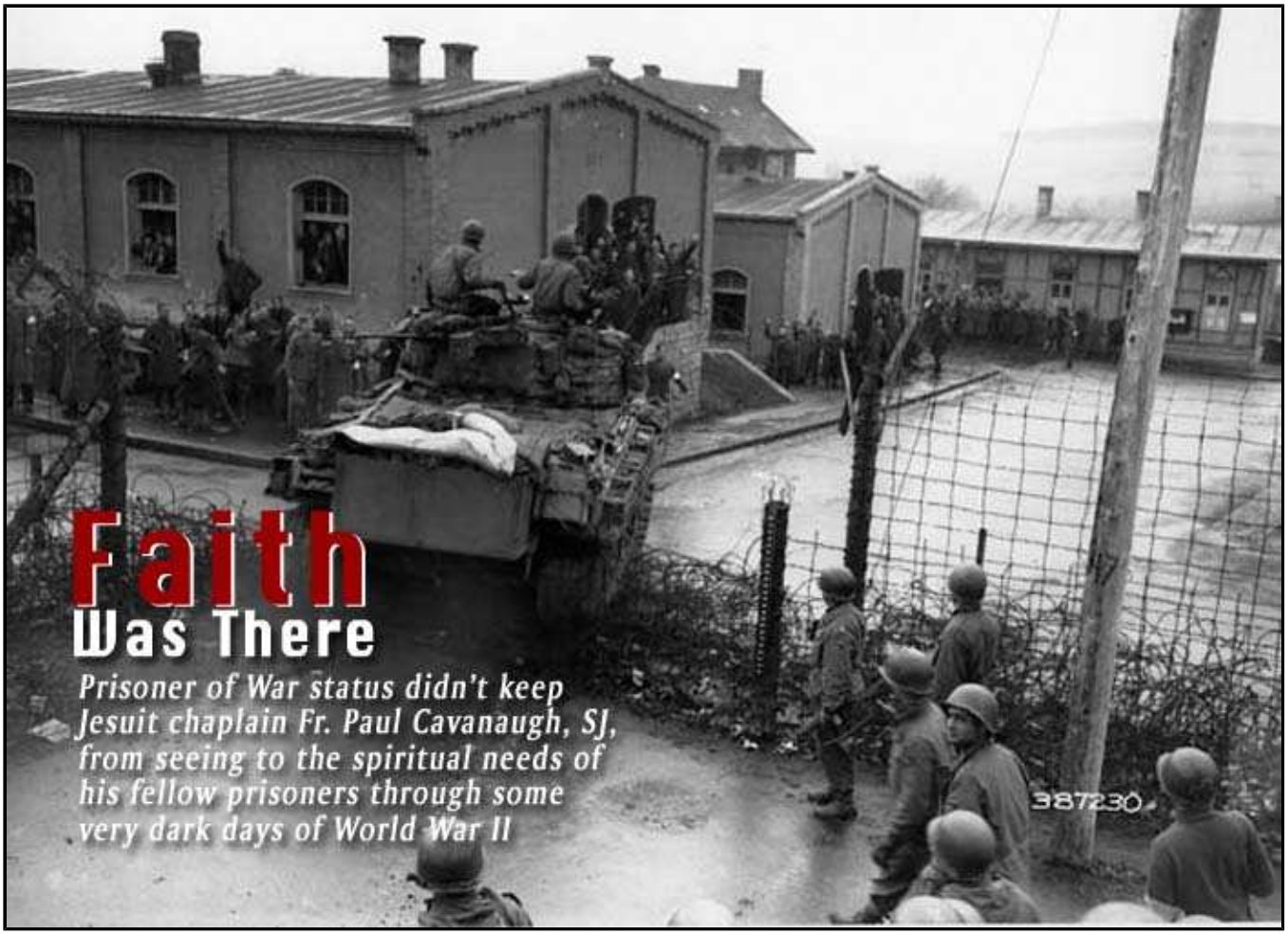

It's an incredible story. A Jesuit working at Loyola Academy in Chicago one January ends up in a German POW camp by December. But 1944 was an amazing year. The Allies, having landed on Normandy's beaches in June, were on a bloody advance toward Berlin. Fr. Paul Cavanaugh, SJ, had left Loyola and joined the Army Chaplain Corps in April. By December he was with the 106th Infantry in Germany's Eifel Forest, an area that bore the brunt of a surprise German attack, later called the Battle of the Bulge. It was a drastic gambit launched by the Germans on December 16 that caused thousands of Allied casualties. Many were taken prisoner, including Fr. Cavanaugh, after surviving the horrors of combat.

"To the Supreme Allied Headquarters we were lost regiments ... no food, no ammunition, no replacements. As individuals we were missing in action. Many would later be discovered to be 'killed in action'; many more of us went down into the limbo of Nazi prisons," wrote Fr. Cavanaugh in his narrative of his 135 days as a Kriegsgefangener, prisoner of war. He and his fellow "Kriegies," as they called themselves, were imprisoned near Hammelburg, Germany.

"Being a chaplain and untutored in the science of military strategy and tactics, it is not my purpose here ... to discuss the military side of the war," writes Cavanaugh. "I merely recount what I saw and heard." But this mere recounting tells a tale of a dedicated chaplain whose ministry to his fellow man continued even in captivity. Company shares with you excerpts from Fr. Cavanaugh's story.

After a hopeless battle against the Germans, Cavanaugh and others surrendered on December 18, 1944. Herded onto boxcars, 60 prisoners in each, they headed to a camp

deep inside German lines. Some were killed when Allied planes bombed the trainyard in Limburg, where their train was stopped. It was bitter cold, and they had no food or water:

In the gathering twilight some women came beside the train with bread. They were conducting what practically amounted to an auction. Moving from car to car they asked what they could have in exchange for a loaf of bread ... After much haggling and collecting the boys with me obtained four loaves of bread in exchange for several billfolds, some fountain pens, and a few packages of cigarettes. Four loaves of bread for sixty men. "What are these among so many?" They brought the loaves to me, perhaps in the hope that I might perform a miracle of multiplication. I ... suggested that we get a mess sergeant to do the dividing. We had a dandy fellow with us in the car, T/4 John Barbeau, from Dayton, Ohio. Under the light of a few matches and the beam from a flashlight with a very weak battery Johnny divided the bread into sixty equal parts and all were satisfied—not so much with the quantity as with the fairness of division.

Cavanaugh and the other prisoners spent Christmas Eve on the train, stalled because of bomb damage to the tracks:

With an audience of fifty-nine GI's who were perhaps closer to me than any audience I had ever had and yet were invisible because of the total darkness in the boxcar, I began to relate the sweetest story ever told ... the Annunciation and Incarnation ... the journey to Bethlehem ... the Virgin Birth ...

When I awoke it was daylight, the sun shining, the ground covered with a fresh layer of snow, and the train was still standing in the railroad yard at Limburg. Church bells were ringing, the merry Christmas bells summoning the German folk to Mass ... How we would have liked to escape from the train and steal silently into some neighborhood church. In medieval times on days like this warriors proclaimed the Truce of God and mingled together in prayer at the crib of the Prince of Peace. But there was no freedom for us. The car remained locked, and up and down the track paced the guards ready to fire at any prisoner who should attempt to escape.

Army chaplain Fr. Paul Cavanaugh, SJ, spent over three months at this German prison camp outside Hammelburg, Germany, after being captured during the Battle of the Bulge in late 1944. On April 6, 1945, this American tank led parts of the 14th Armored Division into the camp and liberated it.

About a week earlier, a smaller U.S. force had attempted to free the Americans but was destroyed on its way back. By the date of this second liberation, Fr. Cavanaugh and other

Cavanaugh and other officers were sent on to Oflag XIII B, a prison for officers, and were searched thoroughly. Fr. Cavanaugh's turn came. He was desperate to hold onto the tools of his ministry:

Assigned to a place at the counter, I said, "I am a Catholic priest, Priester, Katholich." A few eyebrows raised and a group of Germans gathered round ... I withdrew from my pockets the winter volume of the

Americans who had stayed behind were headed toward another POW camp; their freedom would come in a month.

breviary, a small ritual, my stole, and the triple oil stocks. The breviary and the ritual were passed from one to the other German and all nodded assent that they were evidence of the Catholic priesthood. The oil stocks were something new to them ... I felt the last pocket in my pants and slowly pulled out the contents in one handful — three dollars and forty cents ... a rosary, and a pair of dice. They all gazed at the little pile in silence and amazement. Then the sergeant picked up the dice. "You are a hell of a priest," he said in English and walked away.

Cavanaugh and the other prisoners faced a daily struggle to stay warm and survive on meager rations: soup and slices of bread, both very thin:

The first two or three days in Barracks 11–7 we burned coal and wood extravagantly ... We kept a low fire going continuously during the day, adding several more lumps in the evening to heat water for washing our soup bowls and toasting bread. Too late one day we learned that what we thought was a day's issue of coal had to last for three days ... Fuel had to be found somewhere. In sauntering around the compound, old boards and wooden boxes were spotted. Under cover of night a small group led by Lt. Mannis Schlitt of Akron, Ohio, left the barracks and returned by way of the rear windows with a supply of wood ...

By slow stages gnawing hunger and gastric pains subsided and hunger became more of a mental obsession in regard to food. The eons of time between soups became more and more a mental fantasy of good food. No matter what the subject of discussion, unless we were weary, it turned into talk about food ... Sitting in a circle around a fire each man in turn would order an imaginary dinner from an imaginary kitchen.

Oflag XIII B was unforgiving. The German guards killed more than one prisoner for being out of barracks. The bitter cold of winter, miserable sanitation, lack of medicine, and poor diet led to sickness that claimed more lives:

A fair number of us Kriegies began to suffer from a form of dysentery. Day by day I became weaker and thinner and more languid from the interruptions in sleep and hurried trips to the latrine. The American doctors, Berndt, Linguiti, and DeMaroo in the dispensary were plagued with fellows in the same plight as myself. Handicapped by lack of medicines, they tried to little avail all the drugs supplied them. Those of us who suffered worst received ten drops of an opiate once a day until the supply ran out.

Cavanaugh ministered to the prisoners despite horrible conditions. He gave sermons, conducted prayer services and funerals, and baptized Lt. Garnott Joseph Prior, of Huntington, Indiana. "The newly baptized Joseph had two godfathers, as no godmother was present," Cavanaugh writes. But he still longed to hold proper liturgies:

During my siege of sickness the good Father [Alan] Madden [OFM Cap]

carried on the campaign to get a Mass-kit from the Germans. Two and a half weeks had passed since our first request and still we were put off with vague promises. For three Sundays we conducted services without Mass ... On the 31st of January we decided on a drastic step; we wrote a formal and urgent letter in Latin to the Apostolic Nuncio in Berlin ... This letter we presented open (we had no envelope) to the block-commandant, Hauptmann Stammler. He read it with interest, translated it into broken English and remarked pleasantly, "You have a fine Latin style." He broke our bold front with this remark and we all laughed ... On the evening of the next day a German guard delivered without comment to Father Madden a knapsack containing the complete equipment for Mass ...

We passed the news around the camp that there would be Mass at four P.M. in Barracks 11–7 ... At three-thirty they began to drop in singly and in twos. By four o'clock we had a congregation of sixty. The chairs, boards, and benches in the room were arranged in the form of a church. In that rude and lowly setting the great event of the first Mass in Oflag XIII B brought all participants great consolation. The setting was rough, but faith was there.

Oflag XIII B's population included hundreds of Serbian prisoners who had been there since the war's early days. "Knowing the rigors of captivity through long months and years of waiting . . . individual Serbs served small groups of Yanks hot coffee in tiny tin cups and thin slices of bread and sugar through the barbed wire fences," writes Cavanaugh, who held the Serbs in very high esteem for their generosity and courage. The Serbs graciously shared their highly prized Red Cross packages when none arrived for the Americans, a favor returned when the Americans liberated the camp.

Fr. Cavanaugh and Fr. Madden began a Catholic study club:

Our plan came from the men themselves—fifteen minutes of explanation followed by a period of discussion and questions. We would follow the broad outlines of the catechism as a framework for topics. Beginning with the Apostles' Creed, on the first night we explained and discussed what is meant in the Catholic sense by "I believe." The study club grew in popularity and the numbers increased until [Barracks] 11–7 was nightly jammed with men.

Words of appreciation for the study club have come to me again and again since liberation. Lt. Ted Altier of Rochester, N.Y., put his thoughts in these words: "Father, you know all of us fish-eating Kriegies learned something from your spiritual

leadership while in the jug. Without it I think I would have cracked wide open. Thanks, I suppose, are best expressed by what we do when things are back to normal."

An agonizing few days for the prisoners began in late March, 1945. General Patton had sent a task force to liberate the camp, more than 50 miles beyond the American front. Historians debate whether Patton meant to mislead the enemy, to save prisoners from possible slaughter by retreating Germans, or to rescue one particular prisoner at this camp, Lt. Col. John Waters, Patton's son-in-law:

On Tuesday morning, the 27th [of March, 1945] we distinctly heard the sound of firearms. Men stood along the barbed wire fence at the edge of the camp looking out over the meadows dotted with grazing flocks of sheep. Across the hills they saw columns of German troops maneuvering, and vehicles and ambulances moving down the roads. By noon rumors were spreading that the American forces were approaching Hammelburg. The rumble of guns grew louder.

Col. [Paul D.] Goode and I met ... at two o'clock. "Padre, that's the way a tank battle starts. I've heard enough of them to know. General Patton's boys are getting close, and the Germans are going to move us out of here."

With the noise of battle all around, Cavanaugh said his last mass at Oflag XIII B:

At the Gospel a shell exploded in the camp. We all dropped flat on the floor, I under the table we used for an altar. I stood up, told the men to be calm, (though I did not give them a very good example) and to remain kneeling. "If anything happens, just stretch out on the floor. I'll give you General Absolution now." With trembling hands I made the sign of the cross over the kneeling congregation.

At the Lavabo (washing of the hands) the building shook with another explosion —- a direct hit, it seemed ...

There were approximately 100 men at Mass. Just as I finished the last line of communicants, a tremendous shout of jubilation rose from the windows across the street.

"What happened? I asked.
"Father, we're free! We're liberated!"
"The German General has surrendered to Colonel Goode."
"The Stars and Stripes are flying from this building!"

But the task force could not take all the prisoners back. It and the Kriegies who went with were attacked on the way back; survivors were brought back to the camp. By that time, Cavanaugh and others who had stayed behind were being marched toward another camp. They relied on villagers and occasional Red Cross packages for food. They slept in barns; during the day they feared that planes might mistake them for Germans. They had practiced laying out strips of cloth to spell "USPW" (U. S. Prisoner of War) to warn pilots. "Each man who carried a piece of cloth knew which bar of what letter in the signal he carried," writes Cavanaugh. The practice paid off:

Out of the west came another plane. The two now swung high up overhead. Together they wheeled around and came down broadside for another look. There could be no doubt that we were spotted, but could the pilots read our signal? As they flew in parallel to the road we held our breaths and prayed. We felt sure that they would open up their machine guns to strafe our column. Instead they sharply turned, flew in low again, and tipped their wings in salute. We all stood up and cheered, thankful that we were recognized by our own.

Many on this march were killed by Allied bombs, dropped from much higher altitude, on targets too near the prisoners. Cavanaugh gave Last Rites to many wounded and dead after one particularly devastating encounter. "How many anointings there were is impossible to say. Perhaps fifty, perhaps over a hundred," he writes. He still managed to say Mass, including on Easter Sunday, at churches in the villages through which they passed.

German resistance was collapsing in these last days of war, and the guards were becoming less conscientious in their duties, more concerned about the imminent end of hostilities. On May 2, Cavanaugh and others in the column simply stepped out of formation by ones and twos, fading into the town they were marching through at the time, Gars-am-Inn in Bavaria:

> I found myself in front of a two-story stone house with the monogram of the Society of Jesus worked in metal on the door. Two priests were looking out of an upper window . . . I quickly mounted the steps and rang the bell. The door opened immediately and I quickly slipped inside. There I was confronted by a nun.
>
> "*Ich bin Priester ... Katholischer ... Jesuita,*" I exclaimed.
>
> The sister looked at me for a moment in surprise, then she laughed. "Oh, Father, come in!" she spoke in perfect English. "We are glad to have you come. Come upstairs to see the Fathers."

The house bore the Society's monogram because it belonged to the Sisters of the Holy Family, founded by German Jesuit Rupert Mayer. Cavanaugh ate a large meal and had his first bath in months. That same day liberation truly came. When part of the U.S. 14th Armored Division rolled into Gars, Cavanaugh's designation changed from Kriegie to RAMP, Repatriated Allied Military Personnel. The journey home was long, but he knew where he was going:

The America ... far removed from mechanized columns and terror in the skies. The America whose ... radios and presses are free means of communications and open to the expression of everyone's private opinion. The America whose churches welcome all who would worship the God Who made us and thank him for His blessings. The America whose fundamental goodness the Kriegies had learned to appreciate and whose security they helped to purchase even with the cold and hunger and lice of Nazi prisons.

Postscript

Fr. Cavanaugh later served at the Jesuit novitiate in Milford, Ohio, directed retreats at Manresa in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, and worked on staff at Gesu Church in Toledo. He died in 1975 at Walsh Jesuit High in Stow, Ohio.
