And it might help...

It won't kill you, we hope

At the time, we were huddled together, an ailing mass yearning to breathe free, in an army barracks with inside plumbing and other comforts of home, like bunks and windows.

The Russians were coming, and on one of the last nights we could hear the rumble of explosions in the distance and scatterings of small-arms fire. It didn't take a general to figure out that the situation was becoming fluid.

The main body of prisoners, about 10,000, had already been evacuated. Those of us in the barracks had been culled out because we were unable to march. We had pneumonia or frostbite or appendicitis or whatever. A few through some stroke of genius were managing simply to dog it, a risky business but worth it if you didn't get caught.

Most of the German soldiers had marched out with the main body leaving the camp deserted except for our little enclave. The German soldiers' barracks that we were in now had been converted by voice command into a field hospital. "Achtung. This barracks is now a hospital." Like that. That's how we came to be enjoying the comforts of home.

The hospital facilities were makeshift and the medical supplies scanty. There was one doctor, an American captain with frostbite so painful that he could barely hobble about.

Despite the medical shortages and his own physical discomfort, the captain's professional approach was lighthearted, some would say devil-may-care. He performed an appendectomy on a wooden table at one end of the barracks using a pocketknife for a scalpel and common thread to sew up the incision. During the operation the captain smoked a black cigar that he had scrounged somewhere, hummed and whistled and was generally jolly throughout. When he had tied the last knot with a grand flourish and cut the

thread, he smiled at one of the "medics" holding the patient down and said cheerfully, "Take a look at what I cut out and see if it was an appendix."

A good many concluded that the captain wasn't exactly all there, which wouldn't have been unusual in that time and place. From then on when he asked how they felt, they would either shrink back or laugh and shout, "Fine, Doc, fine," and try to put on a healthy face.

Another time, the captain came upon a prisoner writhing on the floor. The poor fellow was clutching his stomach and between gasps pleading for help.

The captain gazed at him for a minute. In the circumstances this amounted to a careful diagnosis. He took a bottle of pills from his hip pocket, frowned in puzzlement at the label, and removed the cap and sniffed. Then he shook out a handful of pills, gave them to the fellow on the floor and said with a happy chuckle, "Take these. I don't know what they are, but if they don't kill you they might help you."

As it turned out, the pills didn't kill the poor fellow and eventually his stomach cramps went away. For all I know he's still living.

I can't say what happened to the captain when the war wound up. There was a terrible mix-up right there at the end and it was headache enough just getting back to the proper country, much less trying to keep track of what happened to everybody else.

If I had to make a guess, I would say the captain eventually got out of medicine and has become an academic or maybe a newspaper editor.

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