Although Ike said it was okay...

POW license plate? — No thanks!

The word from the Department of Motor Vehicles that all of North Carolina's ex-prisoners of war are entitled to special license plates has got me torn in the worst kind of way.

The license plates will be red, white and blue and will be permanently assigned to those eligible and applying. Ex-POWs can switch the plates if they trade cars, a real convenience.

The reason I am torn is that the last thing in the world I want to advertise is that I am an ex-prisoner of war. I have been trying for 30 years now to live that down. I don't mind listening to war stories and I am certainly glad that the Allies won, but beyond that I try not to say much.

Riding around with a red, white and blue license plate created especially for ex-POWs would make about as much sense in my case as wearing a Stalag 3 monogram sweater or having Kriegsgefangenen tattooed on my forearms.

I have been letting the POW part of my past lie fallow since May, 1945, when General Dwight Eisenhower dropped in on some of us for a little repatriation pep talk.

About 10,000 of us were at Camp Lucky Strike, one of the centers on the Cherbourg peninsula in France where POWs were being herded together as they drifted out of Germany. Even after being de-loused, trimmed, outfitted and put on regular rations, we were still a pretty scruffy lot. Extended time

in a POW camp tended to leave you a trifle worn around the edges.

Eisenhower flew in from his headquarters to welcome us back to allied control and wish us bon voyage to the states. Ike's syntax wasn't any better when he was a general in the field than after he became President, and he was in right much of a hurry that day, too, blurting his speech. I figured he was anxious to get on into Paris.

As I understood him, Ike said that it was all right for us to hold our heads up even though we had laid down our arms in the face of the enemy. The war was over anyway and nobody was going to go on blaming us for surrendering. I got the idea that the welcome back to allied control was something less than a hot embrace.

In the case of the fellow next to me, leaning on his crutches to hear the speak, he had laid down his arms, along with one leg and his right eye, when his B-17 exploded 24,000 feet over Berlin. Trying to buck up his spirits, I told him, "You hear that, boy? Ike says it's okay for you to hold your head up."

I have been plagued ever since with feelings of guilt about laying down my arms. When children ask me how it was in the war, I always tell them I still can't bear to talk about it. I had an uncle who used to say the same thing when I asked him about World War I. It turned out that he had been a cook in Texas and the only shooting he ever got close to was in a roadhouse near Fort Worth.

That's why I'm planning to pass up the special red, white and blue license tag, even though I'm clearly eligible. I hope the Department of Motor Vehicles will understand; I don't want to seem ungrateful.

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