Despite stark setting...

POWs had Christmas spirit

Nobody asked me, unless you count the radio announcer who called bright and early and said in dulcet tones, "Would you like to recall for our listening audience, sir, the most memorable Christmas you ever had?"

Having a somewhat strangled public-speaking voice and not being given to talking on the telephone any more than is necessary, I declined to recall.

Later on I felt a twinge of guilt. After all, this is the season of giving, and what could be more generous and warm-spirited than sharing one of my Christmases past. What indeed?

Memorable is not the right word for it. Vivid would be better, or maybe stark.

It was 30 years ago, in 1944. There were about 10,000 of us, a motley collection of Americans, Canadians, English, South Africans, Scots, Sons of Eire, with a few Russians thrown in for an Asiatic touch.

The camp was near the village of Kiefheidi, 90 miles northeast of Berlin. It consisted of roughly 10 acres enclosed by fences and barbed wire, with guard towers at regular intervals.

During the summer several hundred of us had lived in tents while more barracks were being built. When the Baltic winter began settling in, we

moved inside and that was a comfort of sorts.

The holiday season was formally opened with a visit by Max Schmeling, the former world heavyweight champion. He had become a gentleman farmer after retirement from the ring and was the most affable German, the only affable German, we had run into.

A bold spirit among us shouted, "Wait'll Joe Louis gets hold of you again," and Schmeling covered his head with his arms and then joined in the laughter. Nobody could figure out what Max Schmeling was doing touring POW camps. The way the war was going, it would have made more sense for him to be spreading Christmas cheer among German troops. Though puzzled, we accepted his visit with good grace and wished him a Merry Christmas.

Christmas itself that year was what others would call scrimpy and forlorn. It was fat and joyful by our everyday standards.

A Christmas gift shop did a brisk business in one of the barracks. Some ingenious souls had unraveled sweaters and used the yarn to knit a striking array of caps. There were hand-carvings, paintings, hand-tooled leather goods, and unaccountably, an assortment of jellies and jams. The gift shop proprietors refused to say how the jellies and jams got in there. Free enterprise manages to survive all kinds of adversity. The medium of exchange was that universal wartime currency, cigarettes.

A few days before Christmas we were sent through the Germans' private wash house and luxuriated for once in showers and then were given a change of clothes. Later on we learned that this was for the good of the Fatherland, not a Christmas present to us. They wanted our uniforms to use in the Battle of the Bulge, not knowing that then, it was nice just to be shed of the lice for a while.

Early Christmas morning two trucks came into our compound and headed for the cook shack. We counted 16 legs sticking up and a great cheer arose. We figured to be eating high on the horse that day — four horses. And we did.

The Germans threw in a few extra loaves of ersatz bread, a strange concoction with the texture of sawdust; extra ersatz coffee, a brew that tasted like burned peanuts; and extra measures of an exotic seaweed soup. I nearly foundered myself.

That afternoon the Germans released some of our mail, not the packages, of course, just letters. Those who didn't get any, which was most of us, read other people's with great interest.

Before they locked us up and brought in the dogs for the night, the C Compound Christmas Carolers went from barracks to barracks singing those fine old Yuletide standards. The carolers weren't Fred Waring's Pennsylvanians, but they had practiced hard and were pretty good.

When they went into "Silent Night" a lot of grown men swallowed hard and looked away or studied the ceiling. After the carolers finished there was nose-blowing all over the place.

The spirit of Christmas might have seemed incongruous in that place where life was cheap, surrender to animal instincts easy, and the constant concern mere survival. But it came, and in a way it was amazing.

Personally, given a choice, I prefer the kind we have now.

12/18/74