



March Forward

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Note: This article looks for hope in the profound lessons of history. Reflection is an uncertain time...

I was on a walk with an old man. He had a need to get out into the sun this particular morning. He moved slowly, quietly but his eyes were full. I asked, "A penny for your thoughts." He told this story.

A farm boy from rural Iowa, he enlisted in the Army when he was 18. He went to boot camp down south, had his first inglorious brush with extreme prejudice. Then on to Baltimore for a few indelible memories before being shipped off to England. A few days later thrust into battle, infantry in the Battle of the Bulge. Within a few days, he and three others became trapped in a small farmhouse, three more nights, ammunition spent, his company decimated, they became Prisoners of War.

He was shipped across Germany in trains packed like cattle. The German war machine had little resources at this stage in the war. And these resources were not allocated for US prisoners. Stalag 13 was frightening. He was beaten, his feet frozen. An old German soldier rubbed his feet with kerosene to stave off gangrene. One night, while cleaning the yard, he overheard two German soldiers speak about a work detail being organized to head north to the cliffs outside Berlin. Dangerous, cold hard labor but his heart said he would not survive in this camp.

He begged the commanding officer to join the detail. Granted, he joined a small team of prisoners and guards and made their way north. They worked long hours. At night, they sat, front row seat to observe the bombing of Berlin. By May of 1945 over 1.7 million people fled, 40% of the population.

One Sunday, strangely quiet, a sole aircraft passed nearby, and spat out two parachutes and, as if clouds, they floated quietly toward this inconsequential camp. A US Officer approached the work detail. The War is over. Report to this US base camp.

The March Forward was what the old man pondered that day. The prisoners and guards collected anything needed to go forward. The unfortunate few former guards and prisoners didn't have too far to go, yet moved slowly, deliberately to carry their wounded and injured brothers.



Russian troops stopped them. But this unruly gang wouldn't submit, the risks too brutal. US troops confronted this rag tag bunch. The German soldiers would open their rifle magazines. See, no bullets. The US prisoners vouched for them. It took two days to reach camp. Exhausted, starved, and wounded, prisoners and guards, now survivors, all victims of the war.

What lay ahead? None knew. The uncertainty overwhelming, their resources spent, all going home. Victims now perhaps, but not for long. Every day for 70 years forward hopeful choices made. This old man, from The Great Generation, only shared this story a few months before he passed away.

Marching forward, this Great Generation made sacrifices for the greater good. This Generation had limitations on their childhood, but their children did not. Often, access to higher education wasn't realized, but they supported education for all. The Great Generation chose to rise up.

Now, we have choices to make. We also have the gentle hand of another Generation to guide us. With this history in our hearts, together, let's march forward.

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