



The Lord

WAS ALWAYS THERE

As a young German soldier during World War II, I learned that the gospel has the power to bring us peace and hope even in the most difficult situations.

By John L. Flade

My parents joined the Church in former East Germany in 1925, one year before I was born, so my sister and I grew up in the Church. The doctrines of the gospel became the focus of what our parents taught us and the foundation on which we built our lives.

As a young man I was drafted into the German military in 1943, during World War II. The day I left, my father gave me a priesthood blessing promising me that if I kept the standards of the Church, I would come home again. I clung to that promise. If ever I needed assurance of the Lord's mindfulness of me, and an ability to trust in Him, it was then.

Our unit was transferred to France, where I spent most of my service as a forward observer. Basically that meant I camped between our front line and that of the enemy and, using a large periscope, watched enemy troop movements. I then reported what I observed to my superiors at headquarters. It was an officer's position and I wasn't an officer, but so many of our



unit had been killed in Russia that I was made a sergeant and inherited the job. I was 18 years old.

At one point, I was camping out just outside a small forest near what became known as Utah Beach. About this time—it was July of 1944—my captain assigned me to oversee two other soldiers at my post: one was a fellow sergeant who had just been released from a punishment battalion for cowardice and was being given another chance to prove himself. The other was a brand-new soldier, just 16 years old. The three of us lived in a trench we had dug.

One night, the 16-year-old woke me up and said, “I hear something.” Sure enough, enemy troops were advancing toward us. I didn’t know whether they were American, British, or Canadian, but I could tell that they were speaking English. (I had taken English classes for many years in school.) Before we could hear voices, we received an artillery barrage that slowly moved over us and toward the German lines.

At this point, the other sergeant got up and ran away. I reached for the telephone to contact headquarters, but one of the grenades must have hit the wire because there was no answer. We weren’t about to move. If we did, we’d be shot. If my commander found me away from my post, he’d shoot me himself. It seemed best to wait it out and then work our way back to our battalion’s headquarters.

Before long, the troops were right over us. One of the soldiers fired rounds of a submachine gun, killing the other young soldier instantly. Another threw a small hand grenade into our hole, rendering me unconscious and wounded. Miraculously, through the kindness of the Lord, I survived.

When I awoke, I was in pain—especially my leg and my head—but I could stand and walk, so I started back for

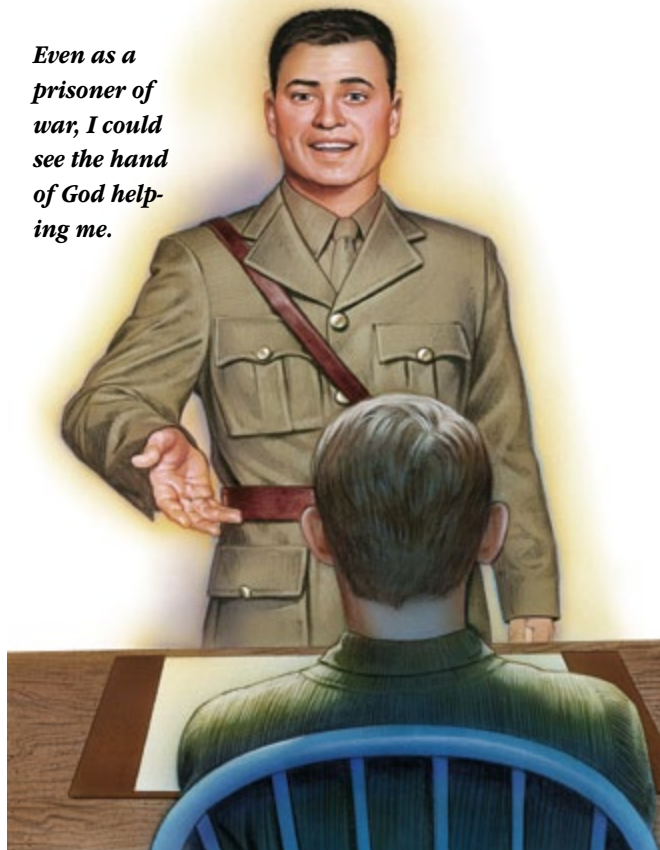
headquarters. However, I was still disoriented, and instead of walking straight through the forest, I veered left into a small opening. I pushed through some bushes and found myself looking directly down the barrels of three rifles. The Canadian soldiers holding the rifles looked at me and I at them. Gratefully—and this was just one of many places where I saw the hand of the Lord intervene in my behalf—they didn’t shoot.

I said something humorous in English, which made them laugh. They offered me a cigarette, which I didn’t accept because of my commitment to the Word of Wisdom, and they started walking me back to their first-aid station. I was a prisoner of war, but I was being treated kindly.

From there I was taken to England with other prisoners. On the ship, I heard a request for a prisoner who spoke English over the loudspeaker. Before I left home, my father had warned me: “Never volunteer in the army.” That seemed especially good advice now that I was in enemy hands. But a feeling urged me to offer my services anyway, which I did. I was offered good food, the likes of which I hadn’t eaten in some time. When we arrived in London, they took me to meet with military intelligence personnel. They thought I might have information about the area where I was captured, but I didn’t know anything about what they were asking me. After being in England for a week, I was taken to meet with another man, a Jew from England. This did not bode well for me as a German soldier.

His first words surprised me: “Is your father’s name *Hans*?” I assumed it was a trick, that I shouldn’t trust him. So I responded with *my* name and my prisoner number. He responded, “Son, I think I can help you if you are who I think you are.” When he said that, I suddenly felt

***Even as a
prisoner of
war, I could
see the hand
of God help-
ing me.***



different. A feeling of discernment told me I could trust this man. He continued, “Is your mother Hilda, and your sister Susan? And do you live on such-and-such a street?”

I was astonished. “How do you know my family?” I asked.

“I owe your father my life.” He told me that while he was on a work trip in Germany, the Gestapo was hunting him. My father, I learned, had helped this man escape to Switzerland and subsequently return home to England. When the gentleman saw my name, he wondered if I were Hans’s son. “If you are half the man your father is,” he concluded, “I owe it to him to help you.”

This man coordinated with a friend of his, a colonel in the United States Army who oversaw thousands of POWs, so that I would be sent to the United States on the *Nieuw Amsterdam*. This 36,000-ton ship (one of the fastest of the time) was transporting wounded American soldiers back to their home country. There were also a handful of us prisoners on board. I could see that Heavenly Father was inspiring ideas in me and in others and putting kind people in my path. That is one of the lessons I learned as a young man during the war: even in horrible situations, you can always see the hand of God. That helped me maintain hope and strength.

I thought it strange that the first time I saw the Statue of Liberty was as a prisoner. When we disembarked, we were taken to a train. Nobody slept because the train itself and the cities we were passing through were lit up. In Germany we hadn’t seen lights in ages. The war had turned everything back home pitch black. Blackout drapes hung in every home to block light; this prevented airplanes overhead from seeing our cities and towns. In other places, the cities were bombed out and there simply was no electricity. So this

light—a sign of freedom even though we were prisoners—was quite significant to us.

We arrived in Texas at a POW camp during autumn. Fields of cotton and onions were waiting to be harvested as far as we could see.

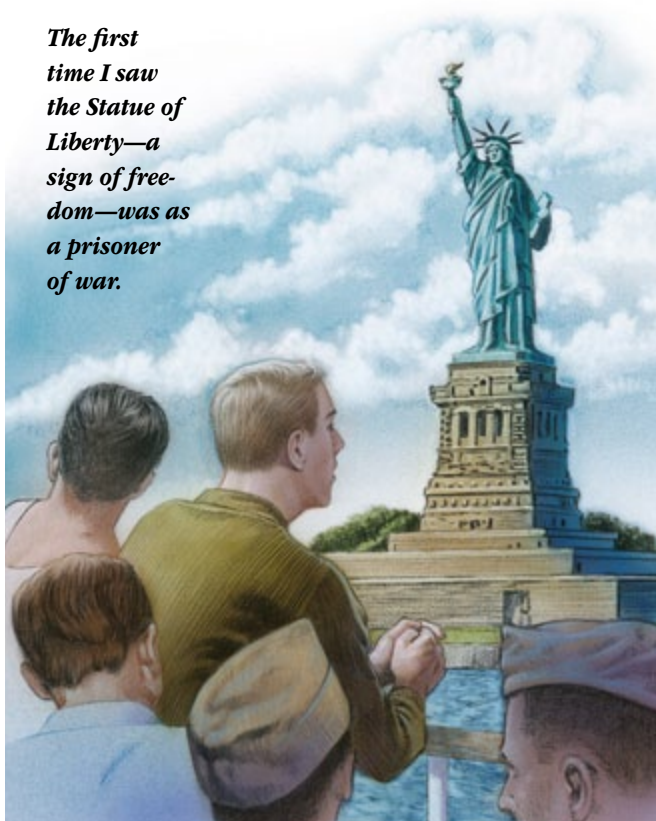
I discovered that my father’s friend had been very kind to me in making arrangements for where I was to go. Life at this prison camp was good. We didn’t have extensive comforts, but the

other noncommissioned officers and I had plenty of good food and decent living conditions. Although the harvesting work was hard, it wasn’t unpleasant. At one point, I was even given a jeep to drive because I worked as a translator.

Back home, my family had received notification that I was missing in action. I was later told that even in the face of that kind of uncertainty and many tears, my family had great faith in the Lord. My father told my mother and sister, “The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21). That kind of response takes more than a strong belief. It takes knowledge. Growing up in that kind of family, with parents who exhibited that kind of trust in the Lord and faith in the plan of salvation, helped fortify me in my own challenges.

A few weeks later, my family in Germany received the news that I was alive and was living as a POW in the United States. About that time, members of the Church in my hometown gathered for district conference. After the closing prayer, the mission president, who was presiding at the meeting, instructed the congregation to sing “God Be with You Till We Meet Again.”¹ Most of the congregation was in tears—during that bad time, the congregation knew there would be some they’d never see again in this life. Even though they had hope in the promise of eternal life, it was still an emotional time.

The first time I saw the Statue of Liberty—a sign of freedom—was as a prisoner of war.



Before leaving the conference, my father approached a young woman I was fond of, Alice Wagner. “Sister Wagner, I’ve got to talk to you,” he said. “John is alive. I need to tell you that he asked me to watch out for you because when he comes home, he’d like to marry you. You should wait for him.” She agreed to consider it.

Within a few weeks, Dad was drafted to Berlin.

For three years I continued to write home, both to my family and to Alice’s family, but I thought for sure they were all dead because I was not getting any mail in return. (I later found that the outgoing mail system was working quite well but the incoming system was not.) I eventually stopped going outside the barracks at mail-call time. But one day while I was still sitting in the barracks, I heard my name.

“Did I hear that right?” I wondered. I ran outside: “I’m here! That’s me!” I had not one but two letters. One was from Alice. The other was from my sister. When I saw my sister’s handwriting on the envelope, I instantly knew that Dad was dead. He had died two years earlier, but her letter hadn’t gotten through until now.

Dad was killed on the last day of the war in Berlin, May 8, 1945. The letter my mother received said that he died 15 minutes before the cessation of fire. We think he was on his way to the mission home to exchange his uniform for a suit before returning to civilian life.

The news was devastating, of course. But even with that terrible news, I knew I needed to maintain faith. I had seen the hand of the Lord in my life too many times to not trust in Him now. I knew that He would continue to take care of my family and me.

I returned home to Germany in November 1947. Alice and I married five months later. Our country had been

ravaged by war, and things were not easy for us starting out. But the faith and hope we had been developing our entire lives, and especially during the war, continued to fortify us.

We continued to grow in the gospel and participate in church. On Sunday mornings, we walked an hour to Sunday School and back, and the same distance in the evenings for sacrament meeting. We went to priest-

hood and Relief Society on Mondays, mutual and choir on Wednesdays, and on Tuesdays and Thursdays, I often held cottage meetings in small, outlying villages by assignment. We were happy to spend this time and travel long distances to participate in these things. We couldn’t wait to get together with our brothers and sisters, strengthen each other, and share in the Lord’s blessings together. In what were the worst times, we developed the strongest faith.

Five years later, my wife and I took our young daughter and emigrated to Canada. It was a risky, dangerous venture, but one in which we saw the hand of the Lord opening the way. We were sealed in the Cardston Alberta Temple in 1952. Seven years later, we moved to the United States, where we raised our four children. We taught them the gospel and the important lesson we had learned of trusting in the Lord. We know from personal experience that when we keep His commandments, He will bless us and take care of us.

I know that the gospel has the power to bring us peace and hope even in the most difficult and horrible situations. We can look to Him for strength and count on the power of the priesthood in our lives. We can feel fortified by our testimonies and share our faith to bolster others. And we can be assured, as I have been, that the Lord will not forsake us. ■

NOTE

1. *Hymns*, no. 152.