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Capture Living History - A doctor remembers more than doctoring

By Carl Kelly

Major Seymour Taffet was a medical officer, an Army doctor, in the European theater during World War II (WW II). Although his job was to patch up and care for the wounded, some of his most vivid memories have nothing to do with his job.

One memory that he eagerly shared resulted in his making an unusual capture. It occurred shortly after the battle at Dusseldorf. "The Germans were taking a tremendous beating from artillery and so forth," he said, "so they began to surrender in thousands. They just couldn't take it any more. They just threw down their arms. They wanted to live, to go home."

He noted that there was no place to jail all the surrendering German soldiers and not enough American soldiers to guard them. "There'd be maybe a thousand Germans with just one American soldier with a rifle watching them. They could have run away, but they didn't want to fight anymore. They wanted to go home."



Dr. Seymour Taffet gets animated as he describes the drab clothing of a German general who surrendered to him at his medical aid station in Dusseldorf, Germany.

Taffet had set up a medical aid station in a storefront in Dusseldorf and an old man came to the station. He was dressed in a shabby overcoat that he'd buttoned from his chin to his ankles and he wore a hat that did a little to obscure his face. The man spoke perfect English, "I want to speak to the commandant."

At first the Americans told him to go out on the road with the other Germans and keep going. But, he wouldn't go. He insisted he had to speak to the commandant. So, a corporal went to the back of the aid station, found Major Taffet, and said, "There's a geezer out here who wants to speak to the commandant. What's a commandant?"

Taffet replied, "A commandant is a head of a unit, and I'm the commandant." So, he went to the front of the aid station to see this geezer. The man was wearing a pistol belt with a German P-42. He took the pistol out, turned it butt end, handed it to Taffet, and said, "I surrender to you."

Since medical officers don't very often have enemy soldiers surrender to them, and since this man didn't seem to be the enemy, Major Taffet was not prepared for the surrender and said, "Who the hell are you?"

Without answering, the old man insisted that Taffet take the pistol saying, "We have had so many wounded that I was afraid my own men would kill me, and that's why I'm wearing this old overcoat and hat so they wouldn't recognize me." He threw it off revealing the full dress uniform of a German general, baby blue with a red stripe down the leg.

Taffet was even less prepared for this and asked again, "Who are you?"

"I am General Yodel," the old man replied, "second in command of the western front."

Finishing his story about the aftermath at Dusseldorf, Dr. Seymour Taffet grinned, "And, that's how a little medical officer captured one of the highest placed German generals." His expression became grim, though, as he added that Gen. Yodel was one of the German officers tried and executed at Nuremberg.

Dr. Taffet continued relating memories, telling of an American patrol that had gotten into the middle of a large German mine field. They were wounded and couldn't get out. Taffet said, "When I saw that, I couldn't send my technician into a mine field, so I went in myself. I brought them out, all seven. Treated them in the mine field and then I brought them all out."

Then, he commented on thinking about it afterward. "You say to yourself, 'How could you do such a crazy thing? You could have been blown up, arms, legs.' But, you don't think about that at the time. You're young enough so that you don't think about it. But, I couldn't send my men in. So, I went in. And I brought them all out, and I sent them on back to a collecting point."

Taffet was awarded the Silver Star for that act of bravery, an honor not often accorded those who did not actually fight on the lines. He thinks he may be the only medical officer to receive it.

Only a few of his vivid memories are about the job of doctoring in wartime, but he made one poignant observation, "You don't think about the fact that you're patching men up to go back and get shot up again."

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