

Transcript

Richard Box, Norway and South Paris, shares memories of spending Christmas overseas during World War II.

1943, I believe. We were still down there. Yeah, the big invasion come in '44, didn't it? (interviewer - yup, '44). Well, it come Christmas. Here we are. Thousands of miles from home. Blackout conditions. Didn't know when we were going to get back. Who could say. The war in Italy, at that time, was going badly. They were bogged down in the mud and they-the Americans and the Germans were throwing shells at each other. Enzo and all that stuff. But we didn't feel too much like Christmas. But, we had to do somethin' of course. So, some of the guys got together and they decided they'd make up a Christmas Eve show, best 'ee could. My part in the show was to make a pair of big baggy— baggy Arab pants. Somebody wanted to have in the show. Well, it took several times because no matter how much ya' made 'em they looked too much like regular pants. These had to be so they hung down about the seat, well that much, you know. Well, they put it— Made it ridiculous on purpose. That was part of the show. One of the guys took the part of the old -uh Arab Daddy and his daughter was playing with a GR and she got burned a little bit and he was pretty mad. Well, we made a comedy out of it. And three of the guys, they dressed up like native dancing girls and they danced as best they could. 'Course with the hairy legs and all, they got a kick out of that. Then, one fella had a guitar and another one had a harmonica and so we sang some -uh Christmas hymns, one thing and other. And, well, finally, it was over.

We went out from the day room into the dark and started back toward our tents. We weren't feeling too good, you know. Here it is, Christmas, a thousand miles from everybody we know and love and then we heard some music; accordion. It was coming from the Italian campground. Tha— They had a stockade around theirs because they were supposed to— not allowed to go to town. An' they had gotten some materials from somewhere and they'd built some kind of a platform for a stage in the corner and -uh they were entertaining themselves just the way we had. Well, it was better than going back to the tents just then, we went over and listened to what was left. Then, that stopped and we could hear them the 7 or 800 men, as I say, all hear their feet crunching on the gravel as they started back toward their barracks.

And, all of a sudden, one man climbed up on top of that platform and he started to sing; "Ave Maria". Now, those men had been pretty darn blue. We thought we had it bad. They didn't even know if their families were alive. They didn't know how the things were going to go, if they'd ever get home and if they did what they would have. Ya' know? Right after he started singing, that gravely sound stopped and then another one began to sing and another one and another one until all 700 were singing. 700 or more husky young Italians singing "Ave Maria". Not ,not as— There-there was no moon, just beautiful skies. No stars in the sky that night, black as can be.

That was not only beautiful, but those men had found something that they could pour their heart outs to and they did. It was like a prayer, so help me. And you know, as we were standing there listening, we could feel the tension coming right out of us.