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### **Damon Holben Back Home War Prisoner Ten Months**

Sgt. Damon Holben is back home on a 60-day recuperation furlough. He reached here Monday and is visiting his mother and other relatives, and may become a hand in harvest for his brother, Marion.

Sgt. Holben entered the service in March 19, 1941, and was assigned to an armored unit, and was overseas in England, leaving the United States August 4, 1942. During his three years of service he was in combat action in North Africa and was in the landing at Salerno, Italy, and fought North until he was captured July 12, 1944. Damon was a tank commander in the 752<sup>nd</sup> Tank Battalion of the first Armored Division, a unit of the First Armored division, a unit of the Fifth American Army. He had gone through the terrible fighting in southern Italy and on the day he was captured his tank was hit four times, first a track was knocked off, then the engine was hit, followed by a shell into the gas tanks and finally the turret was hit. The Germans were using their famed 88 against tanks, with four of the vehicles being put out of commission on rough land while on a reconnaissance. With the tank afire Damon assisted his gunner from the turret and sustained burns before leaving the vehicle. Several of the men were released but as they ran, suffering from terrible burns the German troops opened fire on them. Damon and his gunner escaped gunfire and were taken prisoner. Twenty Americans were taken captive that day, and but seven of them lived. On the third day after being captured Damon and his gunner received some treatment from an Italian medic. Days later they arrived at a prison camp in the Po Valley. They were captured near Leghorn and on the way to prison camp their captors pointed out the leaning tower of Pisa as they passed it at a distance.

Damon said that prisoners received fair treatment from the enemy combat troops, but does not hesitate to say that treatment by rear echelon men and civilians was almost unbearable.

After a month in the Po Valley, about 40 prisoners, Russian, French, Polish, English and Americans were locked in a small railway car, and moved through the Brenner Pass to Moosburg, Germany.

There were three Englishmen in the box car, one of whom showed an unusual amount of spunk. In a shakedown a knife was found. He did not hesitate to claim it, and even defied the guards. Rather than the usual treatment he was permitted to ride in the German guards car and even was given their food. The Englishmen even tried to make an escape while in the box car. They attempted to make a get-away through the floor.

After Moosberg they were moved to Stalag 3B on the Elbe near Berlin, to remain until the Russian winter offensive. As the Russians gained, prisoners were moved westward, and Damon was among the group which was marched 100 kilometers to Lukenwald Prison. He was there for two days, and witnessed the horrors which have been revealed. It was his choice to remain or move on, and Damon said a decision came quickly. They were told the march to the next camp was 18 kilometers but it turned out to be 40 kilometers. It was a terrible march, but memory of that terrible prison full of starving people kept him going to get away.

From the next prison camp 800 men started out but only slightly more than 450 made the trip. They finally landed up at Brandenburg near Berlin, but went through a Russian barrage before moving on. The roads were jammed with evacuees from all European countries. There were even German air corps men wounded in action and released from hospitals, trying to get away from the oncoming Russians. These airmen were in self-propelled wheel chairs, and there were civilians driving horses and other animals that were so weary that they fell in their tracks but were made to get up and move on. From Brandenburg on there were no German guards but they were advised to try and reach a designated neutral area. This was a terrible place, Damon said. Men, women and children of all nationalities, including Moroccans and Algerians, and even Indian Gurkas, all starving and many ill. This

place was at Eltengrabeau as nearly as Damon can remember the spelling.

Sgt. Holben was actually liberated May 3 by American troops, and the day following Russian forces took the camp. At times the prisoners, refugees and all others were in line of fire with Russian artillery going overhead and landing in the fields. The first American soldier to pass Damon, threw handfuls of gum to the prisoners, then came some K rations. A 24-hour ride by truck brought Damon to a place where he boarded a C-47 transport to be landed near Nancy, France. Then came medical attention, food and clothing. From Nancy he was moved by an English hospital train manned by Americans to Le Harve. He then went to England to remain for 37 days.

When training in England Damon met Mr. Phillip Mills and later became acquainted with his daughter, Miss Dorothy Mills, and on June 23, he and Miss Mills were married at Caerlon, South Wales, the home of Mr. and Mrs. Phillip Mills. Sgt. Holben expects his wife to arrive in the United States in six months or as soon as travel conditions will permit. The young people had become engaged before the sergeant left for North Africa. Reported missing in action on July 12, 1944, the first word that she and relatives in this country heard of Damon and relatives was on September 22 of the same year. Through the Red cross the young people were permitted to correspond, and letters were received and sent from relatives here. His trip to England was arranged by the Red Cross and the military organizations. Mrs. Holben is looking forward to coming to the States, and Sgt Holben said that her parents contemplate a visit here after the war. Mr. Mills, a veteran of World War I us a chief railway inspector and will soon be eligible for retirement.

Sgt. Holben wears the Purple Heart, the American Defense, Good Conduct and Mediterranean-ETO ribbon with three battle stars, and Presidential Unit Citation ribbon. He has regained his weight after having gone down to 155 pounds during ten months as a prisoner. At times the ordeal was almost unbearable, but Damon said he made every effort to keep in condition on the scant diet of watery grass soup, the small amount of bread and the barely given

them on rare occasions. He has eaten horse meat and said it tasted like chicken. Sometimes the prisoners would be sheltered in barns or sheds, and if there was a cow nearby, it was not unethical to milk them. Damon has eaten his share of mangels and now and then he and other prisoners would watch while civilian prisoners were planting potatoes, and when out of sight, dig the cut potatoes from the earth and eat this delicacy. Sgt. Holben was rather aggravated by some boys from large cities, who believed that potatoes were not eaten raw, and much less with peeling. To have a knife meant a severe reprimand, so no vegetables were peeled. Damon said that he carefully guarded what clothing he had, and made two pairs of socks last almost forever. He often cautioned the men about trying to keep their feet in good condition as possible, but in spite of care all men suffered from calluses which became terribly painful piercing corns.

But one man captured with Damon remained with him, and he was sent to a hospital when they arrived in France.

Sgt. Holben will go to Santa Barbara, Calif., after his 60 days at home and then expects to receive his discharge. He has 124 points.