



Pvt. Otto Mielke

Our Captives of the Great War

The Lives of Minnesota's Prisoners of War Following WWI

Caleb Boyer and Chase Imker. DFRACS, Spring 2023. Faculty mentor: Evan Roberts



Pvt. Richard Sigford



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

MINNESOTA STORIES

WAS A PRISONER IN GERMANY

Warren Boy Narrowly Escapes Being Hit by Shrapnel and Machine Gun Bullets.

Harold Swanson, son of Mr. and Mrs. H. M. Swanson, of this city, tells about his experiences in a letter to the home folks.

American Expeditionary Force, Jan. 8, 1918.

Dear folks: I just got some of my mail today—the first I have received since September. We returned to — yesterday, so you can address my mail to the old address. We thought for a while that we would be sent home, but the order was changed and here we are, back at the old place. It certainly was a disappointment, but we've got to make the best of it. From rumors circulating around we may be home the middle of March. At present the company is on drills, but we don't have to go out today, as we had no guns or equipment. From now on all we'll do is drill, support.

It isn't hard to go back to this life after our method of living the last three weeks. I have seen the Red Cross people, and we surely had the time of our lives. We passed through Switzerland and the people there certainly gave us a royal welcome. It's the prettiest country I have ever seen except to me in my life. We left Rastatt Monday evening, got to Basel, and reached Basel, Switzerland, in the morning about 10:30 o'clock. There the train stopped for two hours and we had breakfast in one of the large restaurants in the station. We had roast beef, rice that tasted like mashed potatoes, gravy, bread, butter, coffee and lots of things I've forgotten about. We were waited on by girls, (Red Cross girls), from all the allied nations. French, English, Italian, Norwegian and American.

From Basel we went to Rome and from Rome to Geneva. At Geneva we changed trains and went to Vevey, France. We rode all night in hospital cars as we left Geneva at 3:00 p. m. and reached Vevey at 3:30 p. m. on Tuesday. We slept in the berth of cots that the wounded are transported in and they sure are comfortable.

All through Switzerland at the larger towns the people gave us cigarettes and candy and at Berne and Geneva they couldn't do enough for us. It was the best time of my life, I think.

At Vevey we were sent to large hotels and quartered for five days. We spent 3 1/2 weeks there.

While at Vevey we slept in hospital cots with a mattress, sheets and pillow cases. Talk about comfort—it's different now. We were on the road from Vevey to this place for 5 days and 4 nights, with two days' rations. We rode in box cars but did not suffer for hunger as the train stopped often and we could get out to buy bread.

Rote and Stacy are back in the company. Stacy was not with us at Rastatt—he was wounded and kept at a German hospital. He got a machine gun bullet through the shoulder and can show two beautiful scars.

I had several close shaves myself—a machine gun bullet went through the pocket of my blouse and a piece of shrapnel through my neck. You seem to think I missed all of the last fight. I was in it from the 26th of September until the 8th of October, the day I was captured. Our company came out of the lines with 18 men—the rest killed, wounded or taken prisoners the same time I was. We were surrounded in a small village and they were pounding the walls of the houses down about our ears with light artillery and trench mortars. No chance to fight back or we would never have given up. It's a damn shame. I was more afraid of being taken prisoner than anything else. However, they treated us pretty well—except in giving us food—we surely were hungry for over three weeks, until we got to Rastatt, where the Red Cross fed us. The non-commissioned officers were hungry for over three weeks, until we got to Rastatt, where the Red Cross fed us. The non-commissioned officers were hungry for over three weeks, until we got to Rastatt, where the Red Cross fed us. The non-commissioned officers were hungry for over three weeks, until we got to Rastatt, where the Red Cross fed us.

FRANK DOWNS IS IN A GERMAN PRISON CAMP

Interesting Letter Tells of Capture and What He Wants Sent to Him Thru Red Cross.

Frank A. Downs, son of Mrs. Mary E. Downs and brother of Mrs. George Sanderson, is in a German prison camp. He was in the signal service and a member of Co. B, Fifth Field Battalion. With his creche driver he ran into a town occupied by the Germans and was captured after being knocked unconscious. He enlisted July 1, 1917, and was chief district clerk of the N. W. Tel. Ex. Co. He landed in France March 12. The following is the letter to his mother:

Gleason, Aug. 12, 1918.

My own dearest Mother, you have received my news that I am a prisoner. Well I suppose by now you are wondering what I wrote you a card from the first place I was taken to, but I am now in a permanent camp and have been assigned a steady address for you to write to, to send me things.

My own creche driver drove right into a town occupied by the Germans and then we had a little battle and I think we gave rather a good account of ourself. Anyway the aid that was with me was killed and I was wounded slightly and knocked unconscious and when I came to, I was a prisoner. We were first shipped to a temporary camp and now we are in a permanent one. I have no news now, only I am quite well and am getting pretty good oats, and in view of the fact that I am sergeant I am being treated good. Don't have to work so far. One thing I am thankful for, my car still goes on while I am here, but I don't get it until I am released and sent back to the States. My liberty bonds ought to be paid for in July and you ought to get it by the time you get this. I get \$20 a month so with the \$4.60 out monthly for insurance, I am getting \$15.40 a month saved for me until my release. Now, listen mother, don't worry about me because they are not treating prisoners bad so far, and I am eating o. k. The only thing I am short of is clothes, etc., so I am making you a list of things I want you to send me immediately on receipt of this letter. Put it in a good strong wooden box and cover that up with canvas and sew it on good, then put my name on it plainly several places. Now I will make a list of things I need right away and you can then send other things later every week. I will write you one letter and two postal cards every month, so don't expect more. Now be sure and send the things right away—Durham Duplex safety razor with 18 blades, shaving stick soap, shaving brush, trench mirror, 6 handkerchiefs, toilet soap, 1 towel, package of sandalwood tooth paste, comb, laundry soap, 1 suit underwear. Now this is what I want right away. You can write an often and send as many packages to me as you want to, but I can only write so much. I also want some canned goods like jam, some cocoa for making drinks, also sugar and be sure to send some hard tack like the army gives out. Now don't worry, the war will be over soon, but send what I ask for quicky.

Your own son,
Sergeant Frank A. Downs,
Co. J, Barracks E,
Gleason, Germany.

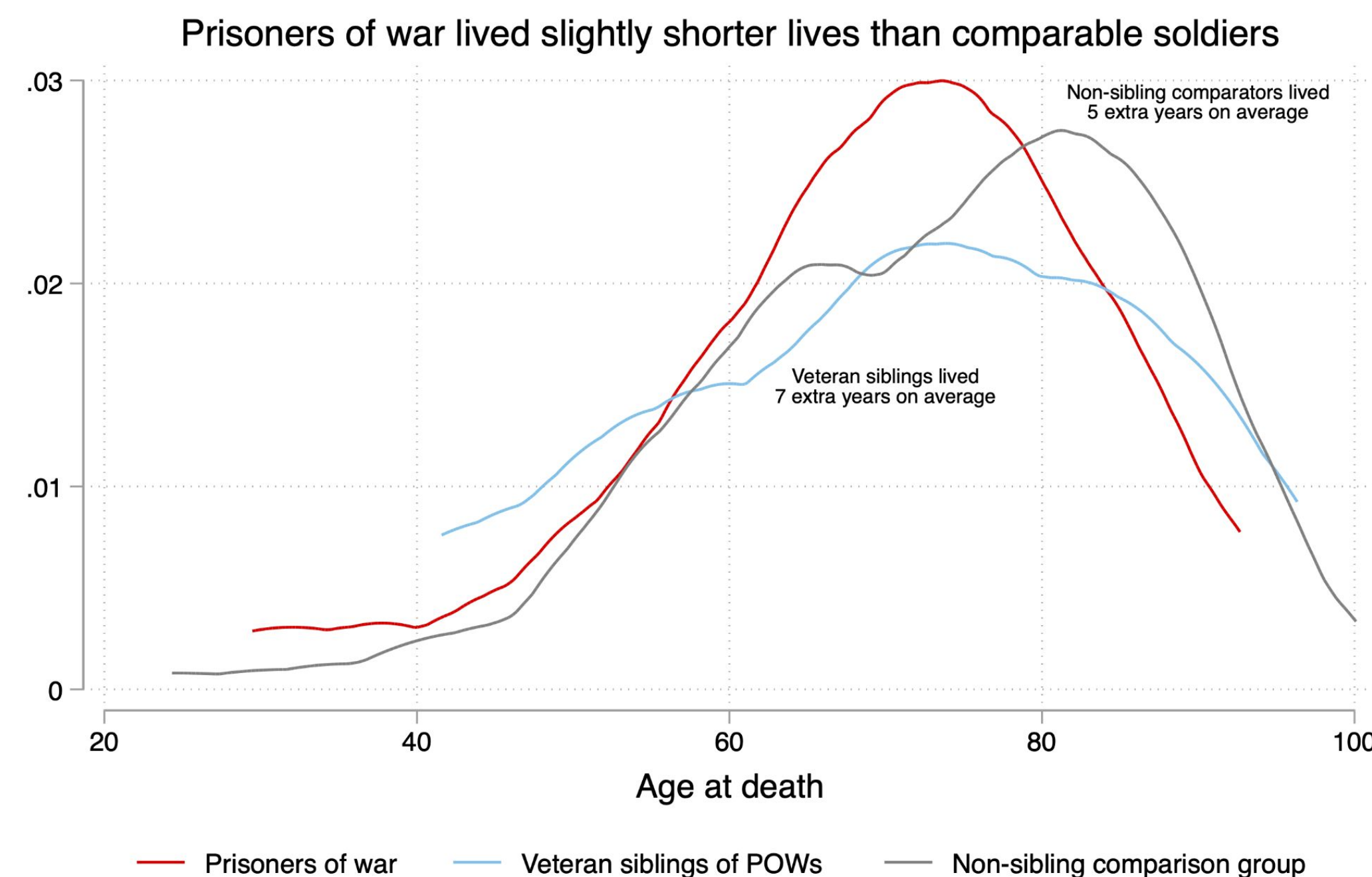
BACKGROUND

- Conduct an analysis of post war service questionnaires done by veterans of WW1
- Compare the experiences during, as well as post war lives of prisoners of war to soldiers that were never captured
- Develop a general understanding of how imprisonment can affect life on a large scale

RESEARCH MATERIAL

- Examined post war service questionnaires sent out by the state of Minnesota to each veteran of WW1
- Compared a prisoner of war to their brothers and/or a randomly selected comparison soldier. Randomly selected soldiers were of a similar age and in the same file as the POW's
- Utilized websites such as Ancestry.com to find census data along with other records to compare veterans post-war lives
- Searched databases such as Library of Congress and the Star Tribune for relevant newspaper articles; gained more understanding of how veterans lived post war

KEY FINDINGS



- When compared to other WW1 veterans, Prisoners of war had slightly lower life expectancies.

FUTURE RESEARCH

- Gather more data from other states to allow for a more comprehensive sampling
- Use a larger amount of data to determine whether or not the common trends observed in this study would change when given more information

STATE OF MINNESOTA
MILITARY SERVICE RECORD

Name in full: *Richard Sigford*

Date of birth: *March 25, 1893*

Place of birth: *Alvina, Douglas, Minnesota, U.S.A.*

Birth of father: *H. S. A.*

Nearest relative: *H. S. A.*

White, colored, Indian, or Mongolian: *White*

Previous military service or training: *Auto Mechanic*

Occupation before entry into the service: *Auto Mechanic*

Residence before entry into the service: *Alvina, Douglas*

Trained or stationed abroad: *France*

First went into action: *July 27th, 1918*

Participated in the following battles: *Chateau Thierry, Verdun, Argonne Woods*

Killed in action, killed by accident, died of wounds, died of disease, wounded, passed, shell-shocked, taken prisoner: *Taken prisoner*

Under medical care: *Yes*

Permanently disabled (through loss of limb, eyesight, etc.): *No*

Discharged from service at: *Camp Merritt, N.J.*

SERVICE QUESTIONNAIRE EXAMPLES

Return to Civil Life

Revised former activities in civil life under such the same conditions as before? *Yes*

If not, what changes occurred with respect to occupation, employer, etc. and why?

If a change of occupation was obtained by reason of disability acquired in the service, describe the process of re-education and retraining, and indicate the agencies or individuals chiefly instrumental in handling the new work.

Home address: *127 1/2nd Street, N.W., Duluth, Minn.*

The information contained in this record (except as otherwise indicated) was obtained from the following sources:

SOURCES CITED

Background image from Hulton Archive/Archive Photos/Getty Images
 Personnel images from Ancestry.com
 Newspapers from Library of Congress
<https://rb.gy/3ih1b>
<https://rb.gy/ci4ks>