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Stalag XVII-B Annual Reunion Interview

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About 400 survivors of the Stalag XVII-B Prisoner of War (POW) camp located in Krems, Austria recently met in Biloxi, MS for their annual STALAG XVII-B POW reunion. These are individuals who not only served in the service of our country and helped to preserve the freedoms we all share, but personally experienced the harshest of treatment from the enemy and endured reprehensible conditions some 55 years ago. The ex-POW's reminisced about times long past when they were young men, most were still teenagers at the beginning of World War II. They exchanged stories of how and where they were shot down, and some of the treatment and conditions they experienced while POW's. The national organization is currently looking for sponsorship for their annual reunions.

The group spent three day on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. They cruised on the Natchez riverboat in New Orleans, spent a day playing golf at Keesler AFB, while the ladies had lunch at the Keesler Club, and a brief tour of the Heritage Museum on Keesler AFB. The reunion concluded with a banquet where the group recognized the commander of the



Stalag XVII-B group, Mr. Gary Stein, for his efforts for the past two years.

Gary Stein (left) out going Commander, receives a salute for a job well done from Ralph Moulis (right) National Service Officer.



Mr Roy Livingstone and Dorris Holliday met at a POW convention in Evansville, ID in Oct. 99. They were married on 4 May 2000 prior to the Annual Stalag XVII Banquet held this year at the Imperial Palace Hotel in Biloxi, MS. The

wedding at a POW reunion is the first of it's kind in the group's history. Dorris was married to Mr. Holliday, a former Stalag XVII POW as well. Their best man was Mr. Bob Hansen. Hansen and Livingstone spent 20 days evading capture after bailing out of their boxcar bound for another prison camp. Mr. & Mrs. Livingstone are retired and have purchased a new home in Florida.



Boeing B-17 Flying Fortresses

Keesler Field was the training center for many of the radio operators assigned to B-17 Flying Fortresses, B-24 Liberators, B-25 Mitchell's, and B-26 Marauder's during the early stages of the war. Many of the POW's met for the first time at Keesler and later as POW's, spent much of the war in Stalag XVII-B, the Prisoner of War camp about 60 miles outside of Vienna, Austria. The POW camp was "home" to some 4,500 American aircrew Non-Commissioned Officers (NCO's) POW's during World War II. About 1,800 Stalag 17-B survivors remain and meet annually to remember old times and pass the message to others of the sacrifices they made and that the freedoms we all enjoy today as Americans we paid for with the blood of their generation.

I was shot down Labor Day morning 1943 on a bombing run over Stuttgart Germany a grey-haired, thin man proudly wearing a red vest adorned with his medals and various patches called out. We were strafed by ME-109s (Messerschmidts), Stuka's, and Focke Wulf 190's were the new planes the Germans had recently brought to the war.

I was here in April 42 for basic training we used to say this is the only place where you could stand in water up to your neck and have dust blow in your eyes. We lived in tent city at that time. They were bringing in troops by the trainload. After we got through with our technical training here, we were shipped out to Scott field in St Louis for radio



Focke-Wulf Fw190 Attack Fighter

school to Ft. Myers, Ft for gunnery school then to MacDill field for operational training. I arrived on a Wednesday and went to town that next weekend, and the MP's picked me up and I said ,”what did I do?” and they looked at me and said, your shipping out! I had no operational training or anything, but was sent to Morrison Field in West Palm Beach as a radio operator on a B-26. The original radio operator was indisposed and I replaced him. I was assigned to a new B-17 crew. I met the crew at 9pm one evening and at 1:00 am that night we were airborne for Africa. Upon our arrival in Africa, they (ground crews) unloaded our Bombay tanks, and loaded us up with new bombs, and off we went for our first bombing mission over the Mediterranean. We never made it back, got shot down on our first mission. We were stationed at Bisscraft, Algiers. Spent the rest of the war as guest of the German government.

I went down on my 20th mission, which was extremely rare (to have survived that long without being shot down). 87 of 91 original B-17 flying crews that were formed at Keesler field in Oct 7 '42 went down. Squadron commander killed, squadron leader killed, 55 men were killed of the 91, and 32 prisoners taken.

We lost 600 men the day I was shot down, 60 B-17's in one day. The 8th AF lost more men than the whole Navy lost. The AF lost 26,000 men killed and 28,000 were taken prisoners. “We were fighting against the best men the Germans they had. They were trained from 1939, they were the best. I seen them come through a formation, and they (Folkwolf) the B-17 would fall out of formation and the fighters would take them out one by one.



A shot up B-17 plummets to earth.

When Carl Newman was first at Keesler Field, it was a different place than it is today. “What a change 55 years can make on a place. There was nothing but pup tents we would come up from the middle of the state, and spend a week to 10 days here”.

When William Caruso came home it was a different feeling, they just discharged us guys. We were unfit to live with human beings after being in the POW camps, we were half animal. “A Gestapo guy was angry at me cause, he said that Italy and Germany were allies. He says you're an Italian, and I said, no I'm an American, he put a gun to my head... I didn't say anything”.



Photo By
TSgt Rick Parker

F4U Corsair and A-26 Avenger

The day Pearl Harbor was bombed, 7 December 1942, Mr. Frank Bartlett was 16 years old. He vividly recalls when he was first put on guard duty.

“They put me out on a pier on the Gulf, somewhere around here and handed me a baseball bat and told me to challenge any strange craft that I saw, he jokingly exclaimed. But we survived that. I got shot down on my 26th mission and we were only supposed to fly 25. I had flown over San Naziar, France seven times before, but on 29 May ‘42 I was shot down”.

Mr. Allen Magee spent 28 months as a POW in Stalag XVII-B. His is quite the remarkable story. He is even listed in “Ripley’s Believe It or Not” for having fallen the greatest distance and surviving. On January 3, 1943 Sergeant Magee was a radio operator in a Flying Fortress flying over San Naziar, France. Suddenly, the plane was hit by enemy fire, and rolled over. The corridors in the B-17 were so small; you couldn’t wear your chute and get through the doors. So when he bailed out of the aircraft he was not wearing a chute. In Europe, there were these glass domes over all the railroad houses and he hit that. When he landed on the ground, he had 27 fractures on his left arm alone. He was wearing only one boot, all his other clothing had been torn off. He was wearing long-johns, an old fashioned heated suit, his uniform and leather flying jacket, and leather pants. “When I went through the roof, all the struts that hold the glass in ripped everything off, and that’s the way the Germans found me and pulled me out of the roof. I don’t know what happened. I was unconscious completely.

Mr. Jack E. Jones and Mr. Ray Ellias remember the living conditions as vividly today as if it were last week. It’s something we’ll never forget. During that bleak time of captivity, the young NCO’s survived on “food” that most people wouldn’t touch. The bread was made out of about 75 percent sawdust and the rest potatoes. We survived mainly on eating worms. The Germans occasionally gave us blood sausage, which was mainly pig’s teeth and pig’s hair. Half the guys wouldn’t eat it, so when the lights went out at night, I would eat it. That’s what kept me alive”, according to Mr. Jones.

Stalag 17 nearly ended the war for the Germans. The Russians were coming up close to our prison camp, and the German guards didn't want to be captured by the Russians so they marched us some 290 miles East so they would be liberated by the Americans, cause they didn't want to be taken by the Russians. They didn't take any prisoners. So we marched 19 or 20 days to complete the nearly 300 mile trek and were liberated in the town of Braunau, Austria, on the River Lech, (consequentially the birthplace of Adolf Hitler). Most of the guys that started in the training didn't return, but were killed or died from a variety of causes.

The Germans marched the POW's across Austria, some 291 miles during the worst spring in their history. We slept outside, we dug manure piles, and we ate dandy-lion weeds and sour grass and that's what we lived on going across the mountains Ellias stated. I never had a pair of shoes, and all I had to wear were wooden clogs. My foot got so &!#*&(^ big I doubt if my feet could fit any shoes. You found anything you could to strap across your feet. My feet swelled up so much, they were black, cracked, split and bled said one man.

Mr. John Monahan of Mentor, Ohio a retired truck driver from Cleveland, Ohio was stationed at Keesler Field over 58 years ago. He mostly remembers the aroma of mutton cooking from the mess hall. Thinking back he recalls of the days when he entered the service. "I took 18 days of basic training, took five weeks of gunnery school, and immersed as a buck sergeant making about 38 dollars a month". Trained as a gunner in B-24 Liberators, but was assigned to a B-26 Maurader Bomber. His (gunnery) position was in the top turret, manning twin 50-calibers. He was shot down on his 10th mission over the Mediterranean when, his plane was jumped by enemy fighters. The engines caught on fire, and we went down. The crew of six bailed out of the burning aircraft. "I was laying in a ditch and when I looked up to have a look around, that's when they spotted me. They fired a few shots over my head, and that's when I knew, that was it. We were lucky though, we all made it out. The Germans took us to a place in Frankfurt where we were interrogated, and then we went by boxcar to the camp...Stalag XVII. The interrogator, a very sharp German knew more about us than we knew ourselves". Each year there are fewer and fewer of us Mr. Monaghan said, so we try to see as may as we can.

Mr. Clair "Rusty" Swarmers speech

From Mount Sera-Bachi, to the borders of Mexico to the far-flung Allusion Islands, from Europe, Asia, Africa and thousands of islands around the world Americans have displayed their unquenchable thirst for rights and freedom. Over them all has flown the banner of our country. The symbol of all for which they fought... the flag known around the world, as a symbol of freedom and justice. That banner, our flag, has changed over the last 2 centuries. Bright shiny new stars have been added to her sky of blue as new territories have proved themselves worthy of joining that elite group, know as the United States of America. Hundreds of thousands of our countrymen have died in defense of the ideals of democracy and thousands of others have given up their freedom fighting for the same things, which those men died. POW's are those who gave up their freedom. They are indeed a special group. They endured the most subhuman treatment one can imagine. The treatment they received at the hands of their enemies is incomprehensible to most. They were abused and mistreated in ways most cannot conceive. As a result of their mistreatment, most many still bear the scars of that POW experience. Those fortunate enough to have survived, still suffer from mental and physical disabilities that will remain with them for as long as they live. Nevertheless, many of them did survive, and return home, for this we will be forever grateful. This points up to the resilience of the human body and spirit. Some did not return home. We know that many died at the hands of their enemies when forced to work in mines, fields and factories without sufficient food in the coldest weather without sufficient clothing. For some it was more than their weakened bodies could bear. Others died from disease and other causes. They lie buried on foreign soil, many in unmarked graves. We know others perished when on the ships on which, they were being transported were sunk by enemy torpedoes. These men will be forever MIA's, swallowed up by a relentless sea. It is up to us, to see that our young of people today are aware of what we did to give them the freedoms that they enjoy today. We paid an enormous price for that freedom. Let's never let them forget that. Just remember this, if we don't remember history, we have a tendency to repeat it, we don't need that.

Buddy, Buddy

*I have given up the bodies that survived this searing shell
I have bore from my hammock cactus leaves you would not sell
I have trained the nearest beauty from the crippled hills of hell
And I weave a wreath of sorrow . . . buddy, buddy*

*I have scouted with the embers of the trenches, but in vain
I have crawled along the mountains and along the desert lane
Seeking but a badge of Jesus to adorn that valiant strain
But the crucifix is cactus . . . buddy, buddy*

*I have sought among the ruins where the ghost of flags acrew
But I cannot find the fragments of the dear old flag we knew
So fold upon your memory and toward the sand from you
So I lay you with your buttons . . . buddy, buddy*

*I have commandeered a fraction of Africa's old breast
With my fingers I have torn for you a bivouac of rest
And your eyes turned towards heaven and your boots are to the West
I have fulfilled my promise . . . buddy, buddy.*

*And I cannot bring you bugles, as I close your weary eyes
As I clasp you hands together `neath the blue of foreign skies.
A bit of me detaches and descends to you, and dies
No, you are not alone in slumber . . . buddy, buddy.*

A poem written in Mr. Clair "Rusty" Swarmer's logbook from Stalag XVII-B by an unknown POW comrade.