



RETURN TO SAGAN

by Marilyn Jeffers Walton

Above: Replica of a 'Goon Box' at Stalag Luft III.

Historians have always walked figuratively in others' footsteps, but for the sons and daughters of prisoners of war of Stalag Luft III, they recently had the chance to literally walk in very meaningful historic footsteps. The self-proclaimed "Kriegie Kids," now all in their fifties and sixties, marched to honor the loved ones of whom they were so proud. Still living POWs who had originally made that march six decades ago, for the most part, were a bit puzzled as to why this group would want to make the trek. The pain and misery those men endured was still frozen into their collective psyche. To the "Kriegie Kids," there was no question. It did not even have to be discussed. We all knew why we were there. It was something we had to do.

Growing up and being raised by the former POWs of the camp in Upper Silesia, we had all heard the same stories. Some fathers talked more than others. We heard the same kriegie terms, knew the wartime songs and learned the lessons of wasting nothing from men who had been so deprived during their captivity. We eagerly shared with each other even the most minute detail that had been related to us that perhaps another son or daughter had not heard. We researched the march route, knew the times spent on the road and the distances to where the men stopped, and we knew what awaited them on the box cars in Spremberg. Some of us had already lost our dads. Some were lucky enough to still have theirs. Regardless, we all wanted to walk on the same cobblestones they had, pass the same tall snow-frosted pines that lined the route and get a feel for the sheer distance they had walked under the most trying of circumstances.

Our group represented the same cross-section of America that populated the camp so long ago. Only a few of us had previously met, but

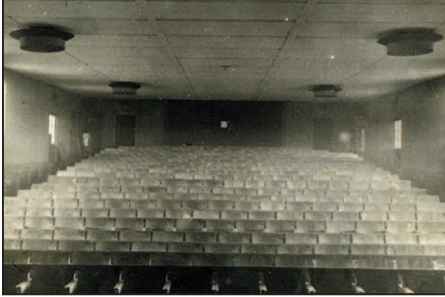
'men who had been so deprived during captivity'

from the minute we all flew into Berlin from every corner of the U.S., we shared an instantaneous bond. No words of explanation or justification needed to be spoken. It was simply understood why we needed to do this.

We spent the night in Berlin to acclimate and took the time to tour the city. I remember standing in the bombed-out Kaiser Wilhelm Church there, left as a memorial to the destruction of war. I stood with Becky Lawson, another daughter of a bombardier, gazing upward to the blackened and broken steeple seeing the damage WWII bombs had done. It was a moment to reflect upon for two bombardiers' daughters. After our stay in Berlin, we next moved into Poland and Stalag Luft III where we spent two days at the camp. We walked among the broken bits of brick and porcelain and sought out the individual compounds where our fathers had lived. When we identified that small patch of sacred ground—the very spot where "our" barrack had stood, we paused to quietly remember. After pictures were taken, we scoured the ground there to pick up small rocks, broken pieces of crockery and shards of foundation that we could bring home. All these pieces marked a significant chapter in our fathers' lives.



Above: Monitoring the BBC with clandestine radio. Stalag Luft III, and below: Clandestine radio in the museum at Stalag VIIA in Moosburg, Germany.



Above: Remains of the fire pool in the South Compound. Middle: The theatre at Stalag Luft III. Bottom: The author stands in the remains of the theatre in the South Compound.

Broken bricks that would be worthless to anyone else were the gold we had come for. We gave little thought to the fact that whole bricks would add significantly to the weight of our luggage with the new Draconian weight limits imposed by the airlines, but no one gave it a thought.

‘Ghosts have a way of lingering in such places.’

At North Compound where Lt. Gen. A.P. Clark, Senior American Officer, had lived with Roger Bushell, the mastermind of the Great Escape, the area was the best preserved of all. We could see the foundation of that barrack where the notable men had lived. The sight of the fire pool in South Compound took me back to the raucous 4th of July celebration sixty-six years before. Rowdy American POWs who had been moved into South Compound, partly due to the German suspicion they were helping the RAF POWs in North Compound with tunneling, invaded North to have some fun with their British counterparts. Announcing, “Arise, arise, the British are coming,” POW Jerry Sage had awakened Roger Bushell that day. What followed was an all-day celebration, fueled by kriegie “home brew,” created for the occasion with stored up raisins from Red Cross parcels. The Germans could not fully understand the significance of the revelry. On that day, many a Senior British Officer or Senior American Officer were tossed unceremoniously into the



An RAF Hut, Stalag Luft III

fire pools in the camp. North Compound had also been the home of the feisty escape artist, legless British fighter pilot, Douglas Bader, who had been marched out of the camp through a gauntlet of German guards, when the frustrated commandant threw him out of the camp. It was Gen. Clark who inherited Bader’s bunk. Ghosts have a way of lingering in such places.

We examined the crumbling foundations of the compound theatres where we knew our fathers had passed many hours sitting upon wooden Red Cross parcel seats watching amateur POW productions that were surprisingly professional. Our fathers had spent lonely Christmases here in the company of other lonely men and lonely German guards, all forced to remain apart from their families at such a holy time of the year. True to the American spirit, we knew our fathers’ voices rang out with hearty carols they brought with them in memories from home. The Messiah had been beautifully performed here. It was here, too, in January, 1945, where many got the announcement that their departure was imminent. Col. Charles Goodrich from South Compound had clomped down the center aisle wearing wooden shoes. He interrupted a production of “You Can’t Take it With You,” so ironically named, to send the audience back to their barracks to prepare to

evacuate the camp upon Hitler’s immediate order, signaling the start of the Forced March. Although the men suspected such an order was coming, they had constantly discussed the departure among themselves, asking in hushed tones, “They’d never move us at night - would they?”

But they did move at night in a line stretching for twenty miles - into the freezing snow that swirled around them, and over the course of several days, dressed in mismatched kriegie attire, underfed and in varying states of health, they continued for fifty-two miles to board the fetid boxcars in Spremberg. For three days and four nights their limits were tested in the overcrowded cars. Some men went to Nurnberg before eventually ending up in Moosburg, where other compounds of Stalag Luft III had already arrived. That camp, originally constructed for 10,000 men, held 100,000 by the time liberation day, April 29th, 1945, arrived, thanks to Gen. Patton’s Third Army. Carrying our memories and thoughts of our fathers and strapping on brilliant headlamps, it was soon our turn to start the trek. Some in our group wore military greatcoats and Army-issue caps and blankets. George Bruckert, a WWII reenactor, marched in full kit. Old medals, wings, dog tags tarnished with age, pins and American flags were taken on the march.



RAF PoWs



Jim Keeffe walking alone.



Army Air Corps olive-drab shirts made before the trip that showed our fathers' faces and gave some information on each man, were standard marching gear. On this march, we carried our fathers close to us.

On January 27th, the sixty-fourth anniversary of the snowy and frigid night that the prisoners were evacuated from the camp, our group of fifteen left at 11 p.m., just as South Compound had done. We huddled together in the cold clear night for a prayer, asking that God walk with us and protect us as He had our fathers. Each one mentioned the loved one he or she was marching to remember, and then the group set off down the same icy road out of the camp where our fathers had departed. The ground was still frozen in the woods, and a few inches of residual snow slowed our eager steps. Ominous signs of wild boar footprints were visible indicating that the dangerous animals now inhabit the deserted camp where the thousands of prisoners and their guards had lived.



Val Burgess, Jim Keeffe and George Bruckert on the platform in Spremberg where our fathers were loaded into 40 & 8 boxcars.

Bottom:
Jim Keeffe and George Bruckert stop to rest.

Just as our fathers had done, we broke into a rousing chorus of *Off We Go into the Wild Blue Yonder*, which then led to the Australian marching song that the RAF had taught our fathers, *I've Got Sixpence*. It had been a long time since those lyrics had floated on the night air that drifted through the stately pine forests our fathers had marched through, but we sang with the same enthusiasm and gusto that they had, as they thrilled to the fact they were finally on the other side of barbed wire. Out of the camp proper, the air was cold, but the road was fairly clear.

One advantage that the former prisoners had that we did not was age. Most were in their twenties and a few in their early thirties when they participated in the march, which was in

complete violation of the Geneva Convention. Whereas our fathers had the advantage of youth, we "children" had the advantage of painkillers. Sore knees, feet and legs were a necessary evil that we all expected when we made the commitment to march. As though a heaven-sent gift from our fathers, the weather suddenly warmed just before our arrival in Poland. It had been -11 F degrees just the week before with falling snow. But our group did not experience snow until we reached Spremberg, where a light celebratory dusting fell on the square outside our hotel.

'finally on the other side of the barbed wire'

South Compound's first stop had been on an overpass that crossed over the autobahn. That was nine-and-a-half miles from Stalag Luft III. For the POWs, the wind picked up as they approached that overpass, and treasured letters, diaries and logs were burned there to keep warm. It was the coldest place South Compound had stopped. Many a cherished letter from home went up in smoke so desperate was their cold. For us, our hotel sat just beyond that overpass, and we all arrived at 2:00 a.m. with bright red cheeks from the cold but a warm appreciation for that haven they never had. One of the stops along the way for the Kriegie Kids was the barns in Lipna where our fathers had stumbled in order to sleep for a few hours. The German farm had been owned by a wealthy count and his wife, and they gave the men hot water from the now-abandoned manor house. We toured what had been cow barns there, and we stood before the barns for a picture as we gathered behind a big American flag.



Above: The church in Iłowa where Center Compound slept.

Middle: Plaque of remembrance given by American Col. Delmar Spivey in thanks for the church allowing his men to sleep there in 1945.

Bottom: The manor house at the barns of Lipna where the German count and countess brought out water and soup to the marchers.

Out on the road again, we found that word had travelled through the Polish countryside that we were on our way. At one stop at a small Polish equivalent of a convenience store, the man who owned it gave each marcher a small pack of tissues to carry along. Our stop at a Polish school resulted in a pre-planned tea party complete with fancy cakes. The children there sang in Polish for us, gave us pictures of their town and special t-shirts bearing the school logo. At

a second Polish school, we were ushered in as the first Americans to ever visit that school. Some of us joined in an impromptu volleyball in the gym, much to the students' surprise, and a bit of swing dancing in their music class. The graciousness and hospitable nature of the Polish people we met along the way will be long remembered.

A stop in Iłowa, which during the war was Halbau, found us at the Catholic Church where Center Compound had sought refuge. The tired men were crammed into the church, school, cemetery and crypt upon arriving late in the afternoon. Some found no shelter at all and rested leaning on the side of the small church.

The pace of our march varied. The stronger, more-seasoned marchers led the way. Some of us straggled along behind, and gaps often allowed each of us to walk with another person on the trek for long stretches, virtually alone, through the winding roads and small villages of Poland and Germany. Songs and talk, punctuated by frequent picture taking at milestones kept us going. Everyone on the trip far exceeded their distance expectations. Many on the march went the full fifty-two miles, which according to those keeping track was fifty-eight miles with our frequent diversions. For some stretches we were the modern-day Pied Pipers of Poland with dogs and kids following along. Nights in the hotels along the way allowed for comparison of blisters and aches and pains, but no one was deterred.

Finally, the marchers arrived in Spremberg where champagne and apple juice toasts at dinner celebrated the conclusion of the march. We met a German man outside our hotel the next day who later met us at the train station where our fathers had boarded the 40 & 8 box cars. The building, which had been used for storage of cargo that was loaded onto the trains during the war, now sat abandoned. Unfortunately, our fathers had become part of that cargo. Our German friend, who was eleven at the time, remembered the thousands of men there who stood out in the cold waiting to be forced in the cars. He told us many had no gloves and blew on their hands to give some warmth. He later gave to one of our members, Miriam Larson, a pocket watch that had belonged to a dear friend of his who had been a German POW in the United States. In addition, he gave her a wooden carving of an eagle that his friend had made while a POW on American soil. It was important for him to give these things to her that had belonged to his now-deceased friend, and she told him she would find a place for them in an American POW museum. Richard Calvert, from our group, gave the man his bright orange Alaska baseball cap, which brought a broad wide German smile.

Our next stop was Dresden, a place where the box cars had passed, and then we moved on to Nurnberg. Those whose fathers had been confined in West Compound made a stop as we were leaving Nurnberg to find any remains of the camp there where their fathers had been held. Then we continued on to Stalag VIIA in Moosburg, Germany. We met with the press at a small museum there that had been especially opened for us that day. A display of the camp as it had once been sat on a large table in the museum, and artifacts made by the prisoners were displayed in glass cases there. One of our members, Jim Keeffe, found his father's picture in a book at the museum, much to the delight of

the curator there. Our group walked in St. Kastulus Catholic Church which sat on the edge of the camp. The church's ancient twin steeples were always in sight of the prisoners, and at one time bright red flags emblazoned with the black swastika flew from the steeples. SS troops had held out there in the final skirmish of the war before the camp was taken by U.S. troops. A P51 pilot on liberation day was more than happy to shoot the flags off the steeples the men had come to know. The church was also the first stop for many a thankful liberated POW who finally took comfort within its walls.

Our fathers' memories of the now-modern places we visited would be far different than ours. They saw the bombed-out buildings and broken glass. They heard the screaming air raid sirens while they were locked in box cars, and they knew the abject fear of being strafed by fighter planes. They knew the danger of being in close proximity to angry German civilians who were anxious to attack them, and they would have remembered their thirst, hunger, filthy conditions and fear of the unknown as they were moved deeper into the Third Reich. Their lives depended on the arrival of the Russian and American troops, and that day finally came.

We can never completely duplicate our fathers' experiences. We can, however, more fully understand the distance they walked as they were hurriedly evacuated. We know how sore their feet became, how cold their cheeks were and how important it was for them to depend upon their fellow POWs for the sake of morale and comfort. We did the same.

We had the advantage of hotels along the way, a bus if we needed it for back up and decent meals each night. Where the men had carried Spam, raisins, sugar cubes, margarine and German brown bread, the Kriegie Kids depended on band-aids, bottled water and changes of socks and shoes. The POWs traded cigarettes from Red Cross parcels along the way, and we traded smiles with the Polish and German citizens we met. More importantly, we knew where we were going and what would be there when we arrived. The POWs did not.

We will all have special memories of our odyssey in Upper Silesia—snapshots in our minds that will last a lifetime. I will remember the Allied POW School in Poland, named in memory of our fathers. I'll remember the pictures of the POWs, some on the march, permanently on display so that the students never forget. They let us take over their school and enjoyed the uproar our visit created. I'll remember a little boy who stared curiously at the red, white and blue pinwheel I carried. It was my gift to him, and, as I spoke no Polish, I had to smile explaining to him "how it worked." But mostly, I will remember my fellow marchers, and I marvel at the thought that our frost-bitten fathers could never have imagined sixty-four years ago that their children would meet as a group and return to that place and time they knew so well and do it in their honor. History is not just dates in a book or places on a map. Neither is it simply a dry chronology marking epochs of time. History is about the people who lived it, and in our case, those who loved them.

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