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American Red Cross Mile High Chapter newsletter

Red Cross kept WWII POWs alive

The Allied airmen in the German POW camp were cold and hungry. At Stalag Luft III in Sagan, food was scarce and only the food parcels sent by the International Red Cross kept them from starving.

On August 22, 1944, Chester (Chet) Woodward, a 26-year-old second lieutenant bombardier on a B-24, was in the sky over Blechhammer in Eastern Germany along with 200 other bombers, targeting an oil refinery, when his plane was hit by German gunners on the ground. He and his crewmates parachuted toward the earth.

“I was being shot at from below and bombs were falling from above,” he said. “As my parachute swung wildly, all I was thinking about was surviving.”

Woodward and 75 American and British officers were captured and questioned at Blechhammer, then loaded onto a train to Frankfurt. Isolated in cells with straw-strewn floors and a small, high window, the airmen were interrogated for a week. “What was spooky was that they already had detailed information about each of us,” he said.

A German officer announced that the Geneva Convention required them to warn escapees before shooting them. “Consider this your warning, he said in English. “There won’t be another.”

They were loaded onto a train to Stalag Luft III, a POW camp near Sagan in northeastern Germany (now part of Poland), that was carved out of dense forest and surrounded by barb-wire. It housed almost 40,000 Allied officers.

Just five months before, 76 Allied prisoners had made a daring escape attempt from this camp, made famous in the film *The Great Escape*, by digging a tunnel that took more than a year to complete. All but three of the men were recaptured; 50 were executed. Only three made it to safety.

The POW’s ordeal would last nine months

Woodward and the other Allied airmen at Stalag Luft III were housed ten men to each unheated 10 by 12 foot bunkroom. They slept bundled in their clothes, he said, to survive the bitter cold.

The men survived on starvation rations provided by their captors. The Allies were bombing trains carrying food. Woodward lost 30 pounds. “Once we thought the guards were giving us black-eyed pea soup. But it was the usual brew of sugar beet tops, this time with weevils boiled into the mix.”

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