

Harry Boegaholz Jr.
USAAF B-17
Stalag XVII Kaisersteinbruch

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'Stalag-17'

Columbus native Harry Boegaholz Jr. had not only been interned in a prisoner of war camp immortalized in a movie called "Stalag-17" but was shielded for several months by the French Underground after his plane had been shot down.

He and 12 other airmen being shuttled across the country by the French Resistance were later captured in Paris by the Nazi Gestapo.

Harry was 22 years old when he entered the Air Force and was eventually assigned as a gunner to one of the Air Force's "Flying Fortresses."

When the unit shipped out to England, one of his crew members was movie star Clark Gable.

When the unit arrived, Harry wrote home about his famous crewmate.

"He's one of the finest fellows I ever met. He's a real guy, and I hope I get to stay with him."

That wasn't to be. Less than three weeks after writing that note, Harry was aboard a plane hit by German fighters over France.

He and two others were able to bail out. He landed in a tree and during the fall he broke his nose and dislocated a shoulder.

Those were the least of his worries. He was in enemy territory.

Fortunately, the first to reach him were French farmers who hated the German occupiers. They took him to a French home, and a French doctor treated his wounds. A tailor was brought in to measure him for a suit of clothes that would help him blend into the surroundings.

He didn't stay any one place for very long. Given forged papers, he was guided from village to village, staying in homes overnight or for several days.

The experience was unnerving. He often traveled in trains alongside German soldiers unaware that they were seated next to an enemy.

"They were really swell," he later wrote his parents of his French hosts. "When the neighbors learned there was an American airman nearby they brought in part of their rationed food and also kept me in cigarettes."

His life on the run lasted seven months. It ended Dec. 17 in Paris when he and a dozen other airmen gathered on a Paris street corner where several cars came to a screeching stop in front of them. Out poured a horde of armed Gestapo agents.

"They lined us up against a wall," he wrote his parents. "We thought, well this is it."

Interrogation scars

Instead of executing the group, the Gestapo took them to a prison in Paris for interrogation. Even after he returned to his Columbus home, Harry still had visible signs of that interrogation, including a scar on his cheek from where an agent struck him with a rifle butt.

The questioning lasted several days, but the Gestapo turned the group of fliers over to the German Luftwaffe for transfer to one of the Air Force's prisoner-of-war camps.

That turned out to be Stalag-17.

Columbus natives

Initially, Harry didn't incur any of the brutality shown in the movie. In fact, the early experience was something of a reunion since other internees were Columbus residents Dick Thayer (later a Bartholomew County sheriff and Columbus mayor), Harry Robert Swartwood and Charles Leslie Jr.

Things turned bad however when a rotation of the prison guards brought in many soldiers whose families had been killed in Allied bombing raids.

As the war wound down, Harry and the other internees were transferred from prison to prison. Eventually he was repatriated by an American army unit near Adolf Hitler's birthplace.

Harry re-enlisted in the Air Force but later returned to civilian life. He married Thelma Daugherty Redford in 1953, and they raised a son and her two children.

No answers

Harry died in 1962, and there is no trace in the area of his family.

The closest living relative in Columbus is Mike Grable, but he was only a child when Harry died.

"He never talked about his war experiences," Mike said.

There is one more fascinating aspect to the story of Harry Boegaholz Jr.

That would be why someone in France 60 years after the fact would want information about an American airman shielded by the French Resistance.