

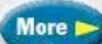


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Prisoner of war

Former POW Lemoyne Coffee recalls service as airman in World War II

By **Scarlet Sims**
Post-Dispatch Editor

Lemoyne Coffee, 84, doesn't much care to talk about his experiences in World War II. After more than 40 years, he still trembles thinking about the German prisoner-of-war camps, long, forced marches, friendly fire, murdered comrades and starvation.

In 1943, Coffee joined the war effort and was assigned with the 9th Air Force 416th bomb group on the 669th squadron stationed in Wethersfield Essex, England. His three-man crew flew an A20 and consisted of a pilot, a gunner and an engineer, who was Coffee.

When Coffee first joined, the Army only required about 15 missions before decommissioning airmen. But as the crew got close to its goal, those missions were increased.

Then on May 27, 1944, mission 36, one of the plane's engines was shot out over Amine, France. As the crew tried to figure out what to do, the second engine died from lack of oil pressure.

The plane was going down.

Coffee pulled the gunner out and told him to jump. He was the first to jump as the plane sped toward the ground. Coffee was second with the pilot, jumping last by climbing out on the wing to avoid being hit by the tail.

Coffee broke his foot during the jump, but all three men survived only to be captured by Germans and taken to the POW camp.

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"They picked us up in a convertible -- came out of the field and got us," Coffee said from his Dardanelle home last week. A young, German soldier stuck his rifle in Coffee's back as the vehicle bounced across the field, his finger always on the trigger. Coffee was certain the gun would go off at any moment, ending his life.

But that same guard helped Coffee later. After the crew was forced to empty its pockets and undergo interrogation, the guard circled the table and surreptitiously returned Coffee's lighter. Coffee hid it in the waistband of his pants, and it took several raids on the prisoners' barracks before the lighter was eventually found and confiscated, Coffee said.

"He tried to take care of us," he said of the young soldier.

"They (Germans) would pull raids every once in awhile."

But most guards were not friendly.

Coffee remembered one time a perimeter guard walking outside the fence suddenly raised his gun and fired at the Americans' barracks, killing one. The guard's son was set to go to the German front lines and was sure to be killed, Coffee said.

"He was taking out frustrations on the Americans," said Margie Coffee, 79, and Lemoyne's wife of 61 years.

At the camp, food became priority as soldiers slowly starved. The Americans were fed twice a day. Sometimes, they ate horse or dog. Sometimes, rotten cabbage and weevils. Coffee sat in the dark so he couldn't see the bugs rising to the soup's surface.

He said he wouldn't be alive today if it hadn't been for American Red Cross packages delivered to the POWs from one month to two weeks. The packages were handed out after the German soldiers took what they wanted.

The POWs found a chocolate in the packages and tied a string around it, dipping it in hot water to make hot chocolate. The chocolate helped keep them alive, Coffee said.

As the Allies closed in, POWs were moved from camp to camp.

"For a while, we rode those rail cars around, while they had them," Coffee said.

The Germans packed the small rail cars about 50 people per car so the men couldn't sit down at the same time. Half the prisoners had to stand up so others could nap and then switch. They stayed for several days.

Coffee was in Berlin just as the 48-hour Blitz began. Guards

hid under the rail cars to avoid the Allies' assault.

"We got out just barely in time," he said.

After that, the marching began.

POWs were forced to march from camp to camp for three to four weeks at a time. Coffee said he marched from Poland to Germany and even witnessed Adolph Hitler deliver a speech from a balcony in Nuremberg.

During one march, the prisoners were marching four wide and passing through a small town when two American planes, one flying high and one low, strafed the entire group of POWs, believing it to be a German army.

Coffee said he didn't know how many men were lost from American friendly-fire and said the entire group, both Germans and POWs, broke and ran. Coffee hit the woods, crawling through the brush and was just deciding to make his getaway when he ran into a German police dog. He stayed put, fearing the dog would attack.

Then one day, the Germans disappeared.

Gen. George Patton's army was marching zigzag across Europe, defeating every army in the way. Coffee could hear distant fighting drawing near; then the army would turn completely around and attack a different group.

"[The Americans] were marching toward our camp, and [the Germans] just all got up and left," Coffee said, adding the Germans left to keep from becoming prisoners themselves.

On April 29, 1945, Coffee's camp was liberated.

Previously liberated camps had taught the army not to allow ex-POWs to eat whatever they wanted. Several men had died from gorging on candy and other food.

"They had to get used to eating again," Margie said.

The army set in to fattening the men on chicken broth and chicken. By the time Coffee returned to the United States in October 1945, he had gained 30 pounds.

"He dreaded coming home, he really did," Margie said. "He never heard a thing from the family for the year he was gone. When he called from Fort Smith, he found out everyone was alive."

Margie, who had dated Coffee before he went overseas, had sent many letters, but none ever reached Coffee.

After the war, Coffee, then 22, married Margie, then 17, and they moved around the country until he got a job at the Port of Dardanelle, where he worked 18 years.

It took awhile for Coffee to adjust to being home. When he

and Margie were first married, he would fall to the floor and take Margie with him if a car drove by. He suffered insomnia and was restless, Margie said.

He also developed high blood pressure and a problem with ulcers from being a POW.

And Coffee had a problem with family holidays.

He went into the service on his father's birthday, was shot down on his mother's birthday, his family received word he was Missing in Action on his oldest sister's birthday and that he was a Prisoner of War on his younger sister's birthday.

"I really had a problem with family holidays because I knew something was going to happen to me," Coffee said.

Now, Coffee is a retired grandfather of three and has nine great-grandchildren. He and his wife are members of the Calvary Baptist Church. Coffee is a member of the local VFW.

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