

Capt Lucian James 'Screws' Siracusa - Pilot

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It is thanks to the courage and sacrifice of men like Capt. Lucian James Siracuse, now age 96 living in Mandeville, who gave everything short of his life while serving in World War II for the Army Air Corp.

As you relax for the coming Fourth of July weekend, consider the men and women of the United States Armed Forces who have served for decades. This is the story of Lucian Siracuse, just one of those men who was captured during the war and was held captive in a POW camp for 401 days, displaying the true heroism and valor of our American soldiers.

Siracuse was born in New York, N.Y. in 1920 and remembers playing in the streets of Manhattan when a plane flew overhead.

"I looked up and remember thinking I'm going to fly airplanes." From that day forward I never gave up that dream," he recalls.

At the age of 22, Lucian enlisted in the Army Air Corps as World War II was intensifying, knowing it would keep him from serving with the ground troops while giving him an opportunity to fulfill his dream to fly airplanes.

Starting at the 29th Flying Training Wing in Tuscaloosa, Al., Siracuse was trained at several different flight schools and finally assigned to the 416th bomb group out of Laurel, Ms., where he was preparing to deploy to the European Theater.

Siracuse remembers wondering how long it was going to take him to fly since it was months of classes in school, and then the actual toughest test he had to overcome in learning Morse Code, both visual and audible forms. In the end, however, Siracuse was the only airman to get a perfect score on the Morse Code test and was ready to take his skills to the war.

Flying bomber missions in Europe was dangerous every time the pilots were sent out, so much so that the military said when a pilot finished his 26th mission, he was allowed to return to the states.

Siracuse had a near disaster on his 22nd mission on May 24, 1944 when he was flying over German-occupied France and his left engine of 43-10203 was shot out. Fortunately, he was able to get the plane trimmed up to fly on one engine and made it to England before he crash landed in a field at the White Cliffs of Dover.

The Royal Air Force of England saved Siracuse on that crash landing by helping him repair the plane and fly back to his base. Given a short time off, Siracuse was ordered to return to his next mission, which would be number 23.

While waiting to depart, Siracuse said he remembers one of the gunners saying "I hope we get home early, I've got a heavy date." The Mandeville resident then recalls a feeling that came over him that he will never forget.

"I knew I wasn't coming back from the mission. Don't ask me how I knew, but I knew it," he said. "It was a powerful feeling—a premonition and it was so real. I knew I wasn't coming back."

Siracuse said the mission was to knock out a train that was carrying ammunition to the front lines in France. An earlier group had tried to take it out, but missed the targets and the general was furious.

"So we got sent back out right after a weekend, which was very unusual," he said. "It was just me and two gunners—we didn't have a navigator on that trip."

While on the way to the target May 27, 1944, Siracuse's A-20 43-10203 got hit, knocking out one engine that caught fire and was torn off. With the wing on fire, Siracuse was still able to stay in formation and dropped his bombs on the target, but as the aircraft deteriorated and the fire could not be put out, he ordered his gunners SSgt James N. Hume and SSgt Floyd E. Brown to jump.

Left alone on the burning plane, Siracuse initially couldn't jump since the 200 mph winds kept blowing him back into the cockpit. Finally he devised a plan to leap out of the cockpit with as much force as possible. He made it, but was blown back into the tail fin and injured his leg.

As he fell toward Earth, he was able to pull his ripcord and land with the parachute. But German soldiers were

immediately there waiting for him. After hours of interrogation he was taken to a POW camp called Stalag Luft III, where German citizens were demanding the Americans be hung since their town had been decimated by American bombers.

While the Germans slowly moved him from one camp to the next, the biggest issue was starvation and disease that so many of the soldiers faced.

"I never realized how torturous it is to be starving," he said. "It's horrible. You never realize how difficult it is to go days and days with nothing to eat."

His time in the prison camps was always about trying to find food in any manner possible, while also trying to find ways to escape. Men would always try to tunnel out. They would dig at night and put the dirt in their pants, with the pants tied tight at the bottom. Then when they walked into the outside yard area, they would deposit the dirt there.

Siracuse said the American Red Cross tried to send packages to the POW soldiers, but most of it was taken by the Germans.

"The packages were designed to give one to each soldier, but we usually got one for every eight soldiers. There were dried raisins in them and one year the men saved enough raisins to make wine at Christmas. Everyone got drunk and were trying to climb over fences," he said.

Almost a year into his capture, the Russians began to get close to the Stalag camp he and others were in, so the prisoners were ordered out into the snow at 7 p.m. and told they were going to march to the next camp.

Over 10,000 soldiers were marched in the freezing cold weather for six straight days in temperatures as low as minus-7 degrees. The walk was over 100 miles and the first stretch was for 53 hours straight, Siracuse recalled.

"Men were dying every day from malnutrition and exhaustion," he said. "We finally started throwing away the little bit of food we had—cans of spam that seemed like they were worth a million dollars each—it was like throwing away your own child.

"But we threw them out because we were so exhausted we could not carry the weight anymore," he added.

They came into one little town after the other, but never with any food, nor any real shelter until one town that had a 5-story tall factory building.

"I remember being put in there and falling on the floor, just wanting to die," he said. The Germans continued to march the soldiers to another POW camp in Moosburg where Siracuse said "it was a horror. The places we were at before were tolerable, but this was a horror."

He recalls sleeping the first night and waking up to see another prisoner with his face bit up. "It was vermin biting him all night," he said.

Seven more months there and Patton's army finally rescued them, defeating the Germans in a three-hour battle before the Germans finally fled.

"When the bombing stopped, we got up out of our holes and there was a school house right next to the camp. It had a flag pole and we looked up to see they were raising the American flag. You should have seen these hardened, beat-up soldiers crying like babies watching that," he recalled.

Siracuse said that getting back to the American camp still had its trials since they loaded soldiers on flat-bed trucks that had nothing to hold onto.

"I wasn't going to die falling off a truck after all that so I hitched my way back to my camp in northern France," he said. Siracuse said he was helped by Germans, French and others, "just glad to see me."

He remembers walking up to his camp and recognizing some of his soldier friends around a bonfire.

Siracuse said he was given \$750 as back pay for his time in the prisoner camp and headed to Paris, France with a friend where they spent money as if it would never run out.

"We bought the most expensive bottles of champagne and met some girls, one who I never forgot. She walked by me and dropped a newspaper so I grabbed it and went over to her table and asked if I could sit down with her. I was supposed to see her later that night, but then remembered it was time to go.

"I always wonder if I might have fallen for her. Maybe it was because we hadn't been with women in so long, but she was the most gorgeous woman I had ever seen," he said.

Siracuse returned to the states and met the woman he would marry and be with for 53 years—Mary Hazel Hill. The couple had two children, a son and daughter, and Siracuse worked in the newspaper business much of his life before retiring in 1999. After his wife passed away, he moved to Mandeville where he resides there with his son Jim.

Siracuse was awarded with the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Purple Heart, Air Medal with three clusters,

American Campaign Medal, European African, Middle Eastern Champagne Medal, WWII Victory Medal and Distinguished unit Badge. The Prisoner of War Medal was not enacted until Nov. 8, 1985 and he was recently honored with that medal at a special ceremony.

Siracuse was actually born Jim Siracusa, but his family that came from Italy used the spelling of "Siracuse," which is what he has gone by his entire time. However, when he enlisted in the military, he was officially "Siracusa," since that was on his birth certificate.