

“Taps” and *The Great Escape*

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They were shot down by German fighters during World War II, and on Friday, April 26—68 years after they were liberated and freed from prison—Marine Band trumpeter/cornetist Master Sergeant Susan Rider sounded “Taps” in honor of their fallen comrades. They all shared one thing in common: they were survivors. They were former prisoners of war of Stalag Luft III, the Luftwaffe-run prisoner of war camp that housed servicemen during World War II. The prison was made famous by the 1962 movie *The Great Escape*. After spending months “behind the wire,” their stories are what movies are made of.

Last week, the real life heroes held a reunion in Washington, D.C., to share their memories of the war and Stalag Luft III. The reunion included lunch and a wreath-laying ceremony at the National World War II Memorial. “One of the greatest and most important things I get to do as a trumpet player is to play ‘Taps’ and honor our veterans,” Rider said. “It was truly humbling to commemorate the service of all these brave and inspiring men and to hear their incredible stories.”

While waiting for the ceremony to begin at the memorial’s Atlantic arch, the former POWs freely shared their stories with Rider and a multitude of tourists and visiting service members.

Former U.S. Army Air Corps bombardier Jerry Conlon’s B-26 was shot down by German fighters and crashed in Hungary where he was captured by Hungarian and German soldiers. It was war, and he was lucky; half of his crew perished in the crash. Before the enemy soldiers searched him for valuables he hid his high school class ring in his mouth, protecting his memento from home. At the reunion he wasn’t wearing the class ring, but he was wearing a red poppy, the official memorial flower of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States.

He told of his time in solitary confinement, an 86-mile forced march in icy winds and almost a foot of snow, and being locked in cramped boxcars with more than 70 other POWs for several days. “It was tight,” he recalled. “Every now and then they let us out to relieve ourselves. But you had to wait for someone else to move to be able to sit down. It was like that for days!”

But he also told of a different time—his life before and after the war as a doting husband and father of three. He showed off a photo of his blushing bride from their early years of marriage more than six decades ago, and another of her gardening in her later years. He beamed while he held up a laminated 3x5 black and white snapshot of a young Army Air Corps serviceman in uniform, a reminder of days gone by. Who knew that the strapping young bombardier in the photo would soon go through a hellish ordeal that few can imagine.

On a bench near Conlon sat former prisoner of war Donald Shearer and his wife of 56 years, Martha. The spry West Virginians were eager to tell their World War II experiences. He shared his story of being shot down over France on his 46th mission—he would have gone home after 50. When he desperately parachuted from his plane and landed in a tree, he was saved by the French underground. Assisted and outfitted by locals, he hid and traveled from house to house until a Belgian betrayed him and turned him in to the Gestapo for a price. Since Shearer was dressed in civilian clothing, he was interrogated and charged as a political protestor and sent to the infamous concentration camp Buchenwald where he spent two months sleeping on wooden shelves and eating rations of soup along with bread made of beets and sawdust. A German officer changed his status to POW (since they determined he was in fact in the American military) leading to his transfer to Stalag Luft III, the POW camp for officers.

Another former prisoner of war at the reunion, Charles Woerle, said, “So many people ask us what we were doing, what we were thinking. We were hungry. Very, very hungry.” He told of the Germans stealing their Red Cross parcels and that the prisoners drew cards for bread crumbs and talked about food all the time, sharing recipes from back home and dreaming of a home-cooked meal. Shearer added that he served as a cook at Stalag Luft III and that he was happy to serve Spam when he could. What he didn’t share, out loud, was that he had been possibly days from execution at Buchenwald. The German officer who changed his status to POW likely saved him from certain death.

Jerry, Don and Charles, epitomes of humility and bravery, shared their experiences in an effort to educate and tell the story of World War II. During the wreath-laying ceremony, Woehrle spoke four words that have transcended the many battles and wars millions of men and women have fought and supported: “freedom is not free.”

Following his remarks, Rider sounded “Taps” and the men saluted the flag and the wreath that was laid in honor of their fallen comrades. And when she played her trumpet the heroes saluted, a poignant and stirring display of pride and patriotism. It was there that she caught a glimpse of their love of country and each other, a picture of courage and the American spirit, something else they had in common. There was no escaping that.