

Remembering World War II Prisoners of War

By Jay M. Jones

Several Iron County servicemen were captured during World War 2. Their stories deserve to be remembered. There may be other stories not included below that should also be told, and stories from conflicts other than World War 2 that are just as important. Readers are invited to send information of contributions of our servicemen to Iron County Today for consideration for future publication.

One of the first servicemen from Iron County captured by the enemy during World War II was Austin Halterman from Parowan. He enlisted in the Army Air Corps in January 1941 and was sent to the Philippines in October of that year. The day after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, the Philippines came under attack. Although the American and Filipino defenders fought courageously, the islands eventually fell into Japanese hands. Austin became a POW after the fall of Corregidor in May 1942, and he survived the infamous Bataan Death March. Two years later, as the tide of the war changed and the Americans began a drive to recapture the Philippines, some of the prisoners on the islands were transported to prison camps closer to Japan. Austin was one of 1,781 prisoners jammed into the hold of the Japanese freighter Arisan Maru. Not knowing that American POWs were aboard the freighter, an American submarine torpedoed the ship on 24 October 1944. Only nine prisoners survived the sinking, the largest loss of American lives in a single sinking during the war.

Another Southern Utahn who lost his life in the sinking of the Arisan Maru was Maurice Clothier of Minersville. He enlisted in the army in November 1940 and was transferred to the Philippines in January 1941 where he served in the coastal artillery. After Maurice enlisted in the service, his father moved to Cedar City to work in the iron mines.

Donald Vance, originally from Fairview, Utah, was an employee of the Soil Conservation Service living in Cedar City when he was drafted in April 1941. He arrived in the Philippines in November of 1941 and was sent to help develop an air base on the southern island of Mindanao. He was captured by the Japanese and spent most of the war as a prisoner in a camp near Davao, Mindanao. After the war he married Donna Sorensen of Mount Pleasant, Utah. He died in Littleton, Colorado in 2004.

Leonard Ward, born in Chehalis, Washington, was a world champion rodeo cowboy that lived in Cedar City for a time prior to the war. In December 1941 he was a civilian employee working on the construction of electrical installations on Wake Island when the island fell into Japanese hands and he was captured. After the war, he worked in construction and operated a dude ranch in Talent, Oregon. He died in Oregon in 1985.

Kent Johnston, born in Lund, Utah in 1921 enlisted in the Army Air Force in 1943. He was a gunner on the B-29 bomber "Sitting Pretty" that was shot down on a mission over Yokohama, Japan on May 29, 1945. After the war, he returned to herding sheep on the family ranch near Lund and did not speak much of his experience as a prisoner of war. He died of a heart attack in 1957 while watching the sheep near Lund. In 1994 his sister corresponded with Wally Moritz, a crew member of the "Sitting Pretty" and Kent's cellmate in the POW camp. Moritz, from Brooklyn, New York, said that Kent had rambled on for hours with stories of the Utah desert, of raising sheep, and of cooking lamb. These stories had helped Moritz endure the POW experience and later to get a degree in engineering and raise a family after the war. "All of this would not have occurred if WILLIAM KENT JOHNSTON had not helped me through a very difficult time," Moritz wrote.

Delbert "Deb" Warner of Provo, a star athlete at the Branch Agricultural College in Cedar City, was a gunner on a bomber based in North Africa when it was shot down while on a bombing mission to the Ploeste oil fields in Romania on 18 August 1943. He was liberated a year later after the Russians occupied the capital city of Romania. He died in 1997 in Orem, Utah.

Earl Warner of Cedar City joined the Canadian Air Forces in September 1941, before the United States entered the war. He was a gunner on a heavy bomber that was shot down over Germany in May 1943. According to the Iron County Record, "Because he was an American in a British uniform, he was shunted all over Germany, spending short periods in a number of German prisoner of war camps." After being freed near the end of the war and while waiting in England to return home, he married Margaret Brand from London. Earl died in Lewis, Washington in 2011.

Francis Betensen of Cedar City was the co-pilot on the B-17 “The Breaks of the Game” that was shot down on a mission over Berlin on 4 March 1944. He was held at the Stalag Luft I prison camp near Barth in Northern Germany. Near the end of the war and with the Russian army advancing quickly toward the camp from the east, the German guards abandoned the camp during the night of April 30, 1945 under cover of darkness. In spite of orders to take the prisoners with them, the prisoners were left behind and the gates unlocked. Francis arrived home in June of 1945 and lived in Cedar City the remainder of his life. He died in 2002.

Richard Lunt, son of Cedar City mayor Harry Lunt, was pilot of a B-17 shot down over Germany in July 1944. After a little less than a year in the German POW camp, he was freed. The Iron County Record reported that Lieutenant Lunt told his father after his release “that it was certainly a big thrill to see the Yanks marching in, and pointed out that one of his biggest thrills was meeting Court Nelson [of Cedar City] who apparently was with the liberating army when Lt. Lunt was freed.” Richard died in January 1992 in Santa Barbara, California.

LaMar Matheson of Enoch was serving in the infantry of the Third Army when he was reported Missing in Action on 23 December 1944 in Luxembourg during the German offensive known as the Battle of the Bulge. His family received no word from him until after he was freed. He and the men he was with were kept in cold, unsanitary conditions on nearly starvation rations until they were liberated by Russian troops on 2 May 1945. LaMar died in Cedar City in 2002.

Another Iron County soldier captured during the Battle of the Bulge was Dewey Topham from Paragonah. As he was being marched down a road after his capture, he spotted a Bible in the road and was granted permission to pick it up. He found that it was his own Bible that he had left in his camp many miles away previous to capture. That Bible offered encouragement to him during the difficult days as a POW. After his release, he weighed only 85 pounds (down from 175 previous to capture). He was hospitalized due to his weakened and malnourished state. His brother Waldo was serving in the military in France in the vicinity of the hospital and was able to visit with him. Unfortunately, Dewey suffered from pneumonia and related complications and was transferred to a hospital in Paris. His condition did not improve and he died on 24 June 1945 in Paris.

It is impossible to know all of the stories of all of the sacrifices made to keep our country free from the tyranny that threatened the world during World War II. The threats have not stopped. What Abraham Lincoln stated in the Gettysburg Address still applies today. “It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. . . . that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”



POW Flag, from Wikipedia

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