



**THE
HISTORICAL COLLECTION
OF THE
STALAG LUFT III
FORMER PRISONERS OF WAR**

AN EXHIBIT

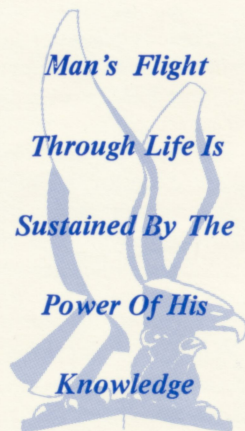
PRESENTED BY

**THE FRIENDS OF THE AIR FORCE
ACADEMY LIBRARY**

IN COOPERATION WITH

**THE SPECIAL COLLECTIONS BRANCH
OF THE
AIR FORCE ACADEMY LIBRARY**

15 MARCH THROUGH 15 JUNE, 1997



ABOUT THE COLLECTION

The Special Collections Branch holds a number of interesting and historically significant collections of documents, photographs, diaries and memoirs. Among the most significant of these is the collection which tells the story of the Allied airmen who, having been shot down in combat over Europe in World War II, were prisoners of war in Stalag Luft III, the German camp located in Silesia (now Poland). This was the camp that became famous for its escape activity including the "**Great Escape**."

This collection, assembled through the efforts of the Stalag Luft III Former POW Association, has become a centerpiece of the holdings of the Special Collections Branch of the Academy Library. It includes hundreds of photographs, many taken in the camp during the war by clandestine cameras in the possession of the POWs. There are also official photographs taken by the Germans and acquired after the war. Among the many research documents are the memoirs of Colonel Friedrich Wilhelm Von Lindeiner and Major Gustav Simoleit, both of whom served as commandants of this Luftwaffe camp. Also available is the oral history of Hermann Glemnitz, a senior non-commissioned officer in charge of preventing escape.

Another highlight of this remarkable collection is the assembled work of Henry Soderberg, the Swedish volunteer with the International YMCA. He spent much of the war serving the Allied camps in Eastern Europe and kept copious diaries, photographs and official reports of his life in wartime Germany. Soderberg's remarkable freedom of movement within Germany enabled him to record a rare picture of the prisoner's life and that of the German people themselves. He visited the Russian prisoners in their camps and recorded their desperate conditions. Soderberg was also an eye witness to the bombing of Dresden and he served as a volunteer among the ruins helping to save lives.

As early as October of 1944, the prisoners of Stalag Luft III learned of the atrocities occurring in the concentration camps from a group of incoming prisoners who had been erroneously sent to the

Buchenwald Concentration Camp. They carefully documented the facts and carried one of these documents at great risk through the German searches until the end of the war and brought it home. Another paper outlines the official escape policy of one of these camps. Of great importance are the end-of-war reports written by the respective camp Senior American Officers, as well as reports of incidents and shootings that occurred in the camps as reported to the Protecting Power. A number of individual scrap books and works of art done by prisoners also survived the war and are included in the collection.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the collection is that many of the rare documents, were carried out of Germany by former prisoners. On Hitler's direct orders, Stalag Luft III was evacuated on the bitter cold night of January 27, 1945. On very short notice some 11,000 British and American officers were force-marched westward to avoid their liberation by the advancing Russian armies. The fact that these men gathered up this significant historical material and carried it with them on this difficult forced-march is most unusual and reflects their deep sense of history. One officer carried on his back several large ledgers filled with the names and brief accounts of how each of 2000 prisoners was shot down and captured. Another prisoner brought out a file of weekly camp newspapers.

The collection began in 1974 with a scrap book compiled by General A.P. Clark after he retired as Superintendent of the Academy. He was a POW in this camp himself and donated his extensive collection of photographs and important documents to the Library. Gradually the collection grew in size and significance.

The Air Force Academy values this collection highly. It constitutes a rich source of unique original historical documents and is widely studied by the Academy's cadets who thus learn the importance of using primary source material for their research papers. Each year a growing number of scholars also use the collection. It has also been the subject of numerous documentaries which have been carried on national network television.

ABOUT THE EXHIBIT

A brief summary of the contents of the panels and cases in this exhibit follows:

The Air War

Allied losses in the air war over Europe were staggering. Tens of thousands of airmen survived the loss of aircraft in combat only to find themselves prisoners of the Germans. They were the surviving 35% of the approximately 114,000 total crew losses.

Panels # 1 and 2, Case # 1.

Capture and Dulag Luft

Capturing downed airmen was often a game of fox and hounds. Many were able to evade the Germans and a large number, with the help of courageous citizens of the occupied countries, got back to England. Those who were captured were promptly sent to Dulag Luft, near Frankfurt, for interrogation. Subsequently they were moved to a permanent camp, officers to one and enlisted crewmen to another. Back home, their loved ones established mutual support organizations that ultimately enabled their sons and husbands to receive food and clothing from home.

Panel # 3, Case # 2.

Stalag Luft III

Stalag Luft III, located 100 miles southeast of Berlin at the small town of Sagan, was opened by the Luftwaffe in April, 1942. It was administered generally in accordance with the Geneva Conventions of 1929. When evacuated in January, 1945, the camp held over 11,000 Allied prisoners of war.

Panel # 4, Case # 3

American Personalities

The difficulties the Germans faced in running this camp are recorded in the memoirs of the Kommandant, "The flyers were all between 21 and 30 years old, as flyers, they had been trained well, physically as well as technically. Their escape attempts were aided by materials cleverly hidden in packages from home as well as items smuggled into camp." Colonel Friedrich-Wilhelm Von Lindeiner-Wildau.

Panel # 5 and 6, Case # 4.

German Personalities

The Luftwaffe garrison of Stalag Luft III consisted of non-flying officers and enlisted men who were not qualified for front line duty. While the enlisted men may have been content not to be on the Russian Front, the officers surely had drawn one of the least desirable duty assignments.

Panel # 7, Case # 5.

Food

Food was one of the most critically important elements in a Kriegie's life. The Geneva Conventions require the prisoners to be given the same ration as the captor's garrison troops. The Germans failed to do this and without the efforts of the International Red Cross, the Allied POWs in Germany would have been seriously undernourished.

Panel # 8, Case # 6.

International Young Men's Christian Association

The humanitarian efforts of the International Young Men's Christian Association played a critical role in maintaining a relatively healthy and stable environment within Stalag Luft III. The Y.M.C.A. supplied a wide variety of athletic equipment and the very popular and useful "Kriegie Log Books". The Red Cross, on the other hand, supplied food, clothing and medicines.

Panel #9 and 10, Case # 7.

Escape

Although generally overlooked in the historical record, two hundred and sixty-two escape attempts were made from Stalag Luft III prior to the "Great Escape" of March 24, 1944. Planning and preparing for escape was the main occupation for at least half of the South Camp Kriegies.

Panel # 11, 12 and 13, Case # 8 and 9.

The March

On Hitler's orders, Stalag Luft III was evacuated on the night of January 27, 1945. On thirty minutes notice, South Camp became the first column as 11,000 POWs were forced-marched westward to avoid their liberation by the advancing Russian Army. After three days and nights of marching under guard in very severe winter weather they reached Spremberg, about 75 miles southwest of Sagan. There they were locked in box cars for the remainder of the journey to Stalag VIIA at Moosburg, near Munich, in Bavaria.

Panel # 14 and 15, Case # 10.

Moosburg

By April, 1945, Stalag VIIA was severely overcrowded. Approximately 130,000 Allied POWs of all nationalities and ranks were either behind the wire or bivouacked in the local area. The crowding and filth in the camp had reached crisis proportions. Stalag VIIA was ripe for an epidemic. Fortunately the war soon ended.

Panel # 16 and 17, .Case # 11.

Liberation

The 14th Armored Division of the U.S. 3rd Army liberated Stalag VIIA at Moosburg on the morning of April 29, 1945. Former Kriegies remember this day as one of the happiest of their lives. Official estimates of the number of Allied prisoners at Moosburg vary from 110,000 to 113,000 including about 30,000 American officers and men.

Panel # 18 and 19, .Case # 12.

Going Home

Suddenly the Allied forces had the task of providing food, medical services and transportation home for tens of thousands of former POWs all eager to depart this wretched camp. But the war continued for another week and the Allies found themselves with millions of defeated Germans on their hands as well. There were delays in getting the Kriegies moved out. Eventually all the Allied former POWs were flown to assembly camps on the French channel coast where they were debriefed, given medical attention, food and clothing and shipped home largely by sea. It was a mammoth task for the U.S. Army but the former POWs were given first priority and most were home by the end of May, 1945.

Panel # 20

The Next 50 Years

Cases # 13 and 14..

The trauma, anxiety, hunger and even more importantly, the fellowship of the POW experience was not quickly forgotten. So the last fifty years have been filled with the joys of reunions, the nostalgic returns to the scene of the combat or the camps, the finding and thanking of those who gave assistance and even friendly meetings with former foes. Some of these latter experiences have been very heart-warming. Cy Widen's experience is a classic example.

Case # 13 and 14.

The Friends of the Air Force Academy Library is a tax-exempt charitable foundation established during 1987 for the purpose of enhancing the quality of The Academy Library as an educational, research, scientific and cultural institution. The Friends enable the Library to acquire materials, to pursue projects, to create publications and to implement services beyond those made possible by funds allocated by the Air Force.

For information about membership contact:

Lt. General A.P. Clark, USAF (Ret)
The Friends of the Academy Library
Post Office Box 188
US Air Force Academy, CO 80840-0188

The Friends extend their deep appreciation to the following for their generous support of this exhibit:

The American Numismatic Association
and
Cowen Moving and Storage/
United Van Lines