

Former POW recalls his day of liberation

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KEN LENTZ, shown with a photo taken while serving in the Army Air Corps during World War II, was honored Thursday at Primrose Retirement Communities, where he is a resident. President Barack Obama proclaimed Thursday as National Former Prisoner of War Recognition Day. The retirement center posted information about Lentz's service and photographs around its buildings. Lentz was taken prisoner by the Germans in September 1944 and was not released until the camp was liberated by American soldiers in April 1945. (Photo by Randy Roberts)

By SARA ARTHURS

Staff Writer

Ken Lentz was not quite 20 when his plane was shot down over Germany in 1944. Seventy years later, Lentz was honored Thursday at Primrose Retirement Communities, where he lives, on the day President Barack Obama proclaimed as National Former Prisoner of War Recognition Day.

April Mangett, sales director at Primrose, said information about Lentz was posted with a present-day photograph and a photograph of him during his time in the service around Primrose's buildings. Mangett said Lentz is the last living World War II prisoner of war living in Hancock County.

A McComb native, Lentz enlisted in the service in 1943 at age 18. He was drawn to the Army Air Corps because he wanted to fly. After basic training in Amarillo, Texas he was sent to Kingman, Arizona. His superiors wanted him to be a lower ball turret operator "because I was a little squirt" but he wanted to be a tail gunner. He was eventually made part of a crew of nine training in Louisiana. They went overseas in June 1944, encountering delays including the copilot getting the mumps which meant the rest of them were quarantined. Lentz was part of a group that flew to England, where they were supposed to meet up with the rest of the crew.

"They went across on a boat and they beat us," Lentz said.

Their first mission was July 1944. After about five missions Lentz' pilot was made a first lieutenant, and the military wanted an officer in the tail of the plane, where Lentz was. This meant Lentz wasn't sent on as many missions, so he started volunteering for missions.

It was on the 18th mission he volunteered for that "we got hit with flak in Frankfurt, Germany." It was Sept. 25, 1944.

The bomb base of the plane was hit and the bomb blew up. Lentz said "it's a wonder" he wasn't killed, like the others in his crew. Because of his position, in the tail of the plane, he was instead blown out of the plane.

Lentz' right leg was badly injured.

“My parachute caught on the corner of a building,” he said.

He was taken by Germans to a hospital. His leg became infected, and he nearly lost the leg but, the day before an amputation was planned, the infection disappeared.

Lentz learned that the Germans “used me as a guinea pig”. They were experimenting with a new medication — penicillin, which was not yet available on the market. Lentz said it’s likely for this reason that he can walk today. He spent nearly three months in a German hospital in Frankfurt while his leg was being treated. At that point the Germans were “real good to me. Couldn’t complain. I had plenty to eat.”

But that changed. After he no longer had to be in the hospital he was moved, then moved again, and eventually held prisoner at a German military barracks, 12 miles south of Munich, from January to April 1945.

“That’s where I was liberated” on April 29, 1945. Lentz was one of about 15,000 prisoners of war liberated by American soldiers that day.

In the hospital he had received three meals a day, but in the barracks he was given just a “slice of bread and a little soup about 11 o’clock.” The bread was very hard.

“They said it was made out of sawdust,” he said.

He was kept in a barracks, on straw, with about 35 other prisoners.

There was no chance to exercise. They had reading material brought in by the Red Cross, and Lentz would pass the time reading.

“I just lived day by day,” Lentz said.

He had no contact with loved ones back home for several months. When he was first made a prisoner he was allowed to send two cards home and sent one to his mother and one to his girlfriend. They didn’t receive the cards, though, until February, five months after his plane was shot down.

“They didn’t know whether I was dead or alive. ... I was listed as missing in action,” he said.

He had turned 20 during his ordeal, on Christmas 1944.

“I wanted to come home,” he said.

After the Americans liberated the prisoners, Lentz and others were taken to a restaurant not far away, where they were able to eat real food for the first time in months.

“They gave us eggs. ... Oh, they gave us a wonderful meal,” he said.

Lentz went home on a ship with 3,200 other service members, landing in Boston before making his way home. He recalls seeing the Statue of Liberty from the ship.

He would eventually marry his girlfriend shortly after returning home, and go on to build a life that included becoming a parent of a son and a daughter. Today Lentz has five grandsons and two great-grandchildren. Much of his family lives in northwestern Ohio. His wife, Mary Lou, died in 2004.

Lentz is retired from Whirlpool and worked at Garwood Industries prior to that. Now 90, he stays active playing pool at Primrose and walking at the mall.

Lentz said he is often invited to events on National POW/MIA Recognition Day every September.

Asked what the day means to him, he replied: “Liberation.”

After being liberated from being a prisoner he was aware of his freedom.

“I am a typical American and I’m just glad to be an American,” he said.