

Near-escape From Infamous Stalag 17

By Susan Morse

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Ralph Lavoie, who was a World War II POW, says he doesn't plan on staying long at the Haven Health Center in Hampton. "I've just got to get this leg fixed -- then just give me a road map and I'll be on the road." [Photo by Jay Reiter]

HAMPTON - Ralph Lavoie, 84, vividly recalls the night he and another prisoner of war tried to escape the famed Stalag 17 in Austria.

They had gotten a hold of wire cutters, Lavoie said from his wheelchair outside of Haven Health, and made for the fence on a snowy night, Dec. 3, 1943. They thought they were part of a larger group of 10 men who had bribed a prison guard into aiding them. But the other guards caught wind of the plan and the escape was scuttled.

Lavoie and Jim Proakis of New York didn't get word. They successfully made it from their barracks to the wire, where they were caught in the lights of the guard tower.

Machine gunfire tore over them as they crawled on their bellies, trying to make it to the safety of an air raid trench. Proakis told Lavoie he was going to stand and make a run for it. Lavoie told him no, the bullets were firing over them.

Proakis stood to run and was cut down. A bullet smashed through Lavoie's left knee, shattering it for the rest of his life. The force flipped him over.

He lay there on the ground as a German officer and enlisted man stood over him. The officer had a pistol and the enlisted man a rifle.

The officer aimed his pistol at Proakis and shot him in the head, Lavoie said. Then the officer lowered the gun at him.

Lavoie shouted at him not to shoot and twisted his body to avoid the bullets, all five, which came at him. One struck him in the right shoulder; another in the neck; one went into his ribs; one went through his left cheek and came out of his wide open mouth, which was screaming at the officer. Lavoie doesn't know where the last bullet went.

The officer had emptied his pistol.

The other prisoners in the barracks banged on the walls, shouting for Lavoie to be given medical aid. Lavoie was carried to the first aid station and later to a hospital. He didn't emerge for three years.

Even a prisoner exchange in July 1944 that brought him home to the states only landed him in another hospital in Staten Island.

For Lavoie, the war was over. But it was never really over.

More than 60 years later, the war remains with him.

"I had post-traumatic stress and I didn't know," he said. "I was the most miserable husband you could ask for and I didn't know why. It wasn't until the '70s I went for psychiatric treatment ... it made a different person out of me."

He's also dealt with it by helping other POWs. He started a POW chapter in Massachusetts, where he lived in Fitchburg, and later one in New Hampshire when he retired to Rindge.

The New Hampshire Chapter of POWs helps veterans and their wives wade through the bureaucratic red tape and collect benefits for their service and disabilities.

Lavoie said he made sure wives were given equal treatment in the group, since they've endured as much as the men.

Lavoie's story is among those told in "Boys at War, Men at Peace," by Ed McKenzie.

Lavoie's room at the healthcare center where he's been since April is littered with books on the subject.

"The Greatest Generation" is must reading for veterans here, said to number more than a dozen.

Lavoie's roommate is equally famous. Manford "Buzz" Doucette of Seabrook was recently honored

with the Purple Heart, given by the president, in a ceremony at the American Legion in Seattle. Doucette was wounded during the three years he mined coal in a prison camp in Japan, following the Bataan Death March in the Philippines.



Actors William Holden, left, Neville Brand, center, and Peter Graves, right, are shown discussing ways of escape in the barracks of a Nazi POW camp in this scene from Billy Wilder's 1953 film "Stalag 17." [AP photo]

Both men enlisted in the Army Air Corps.

"We still got the war on our shoulders," Lavoie said. "A man is standing over you is trying to murder you. Buzz and I don't talk about stories of the war, but you sense World War II is still there."

Lavoie joined the 384th Bombardment Group in 1942 and became a ball turret gunner, a technical sergeant, on a B17.

His plane was shot down over Hamburg, Germany, in March 1943, he said. The shell exploded between the cockpit and co-pilot's seat, killing the co-pilot and severely injuring the pilot. The number three engine was on fire.

Lavoie heard the signal to bail out, but he couldn't get out. The 250-caliber machine gun he was curled up with needed to be pointing down for Lavoie to climb out of the turret. The door opened only two inches.

"The plane went into a dive," Lavoie said. "I put my face in my hands."

Lavoie said goodbye to his mother and fiancée. face in my hands."

The plane came out of the dive. Lavoie looked up, and the turret door was open.

"I didn't have to get an invite to get the hell out of there," he said.

Years later, Lavoie said, he contacted Boeing to find out how that turret door could have opened. None of his crew mates had done it. The company sent an engineer to see Lavoie, and told him the weight of the ammunition when the plane went into the spin probably forced down the door.

Lavoie hitched his parachute to his chest and jumped out the door on his back so the chute wouldn't cut his face when it opened.

The plane exploded, catching in its fiery shrapnel the parachute of right waist gunner Bill Waller, who was among four of the 10 men in the plane killed that day.

Lavoie and another crew member landed near each other in a field in June daylight, and were quickly surrounded by local residents and a German soldier.

Lavoie was sent to Stalag 17, the prison that inspired a movie of the same name. Within six months, he tried to escape.

In civilian life, Lavoie managed grocery stores, cut firewood and raised four sons. He put together the POW chapters.

"Our motto," he said, "is we are here to help those who cannot help themselves."

Lavoie, a widower, has been in a wheelchair for about five months. It's his knee. It's cancer. He doesn't know yet if it has spread. He'll find out July 18 at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston.

He expects to finally lose the left leg.

He's got a white luxury sedan in the Haven Health parking lot. He can still drive on his good right leg. He just doesn't know how to get in and out by himself with the wheelchair. Veterans Affairs will set him up with a drivable wheelchair van, he said, but he's got to lose the leg to get it.

Lavoie laughs. It's more red tape, and if there's anything he's used to, it's red tape.