



United States
of America

Congressional Record

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE 104th CONGRESS, FIRST SESSION

Vol. 141

WASHINGTON, MONDAY, MAY 8, 1995

No. 75

Senate

COMMEMORATING THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FORCED MARCH OF AMERICAN PRISONERS OF WAR FROM STALAG LUFT IV

Mr. WARNER. Mr. President, today we commemorate the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe. Victory in Europe Day is one of the milestone dates of this century. I rise today to honor a group of Americans who made a large contribution to the Allied victory in Europe while also enduring more than their fair share of personal suffering and sacrifice: The brave men who were prisoners of war.

I believe it is appropriate to commemorate our World War II POW's by describing one incident from the war that is emblematic of the unique service rendered by these special people. This is the story of an 88-day, 488-mile forced march that commenced at a POW camp known as Stalag Luft IV, near Gross Tychon, Poland, on February 6, 1945, and ended in Halle, Germany on April 28, 1945. The ordeal of the 8,500 men, most of whom were U.S. Army Air Force Bomber Command noncommissioned officers, who suffered through incredible hardships on the march yet survived, stands as an everlasting testimonial to the triumph of the American spirit over immeasurable adversity and of the indomitable ability of camaraderie, teamwork, and fortitude to overcome brutality, horrible conditions, and human suffering.

Bomber crews shot down over Axis countries often went through terrifying experiences even before being confined in concentration camps. Flying through withering flak, while also having to fight off enemy fighters, the bomber crews routinely saw other aircraft in their formations blown to bits or turned into fiery coffins. Those who were taken POW had to endure their own planes being shot down or otherwise damaged sufficiently to cause the crews to bail out. Often crewmates—close friends—did not make it out of the burning aircraft. Those lucky

had to then go through a perilous descent amid flak and gunfire from the ground.

Many crews were then captured by incensed civilians who had seen their property destroyed or had loved ones killed or maimed by Allied bombs. Those civilians at times would beat, spit upon, or even try to lynch the captured crews. And in the case of Stalag Luft IV, once the POW's had arrived at the railroad station near the camp, though exhausted, unfed, and often wounded, many were forced to run the 2 miles to the camp at the points of bayonets. Those who dropped behind were either bayoneted or bitten on the legs by police dogs. And all that was just the prelude to their incarceration where they were underfed, overcrowded, and often maltreated.

In February 1945, the Soviet offensive was rapidly pushing toward Stalag Luft IV. The German High Command determined that it was necessary that the POW's be evacuated and moved into Germany. But by that stage of the war, German materiel was at a premium, and neither sufficient railcars nor trucks were available to move prisoners. Therefore the decision was made to move the Allied prisoners by foot in a forced road march.

The 88-day march was, by all accounts, savage. Men who for months, and in some cases years, had been denied proper nutrition, personal hygiene, and medical care, were forced to do something that would be difficult for well-nourished, healthy, and appropriately trained infantry soldiers to accomplish. The late Doctor (Major) Leslie Caplan, an American flight surgeon who was the chief medical officer for the 2,500-man section C from Stalag Luft IV, summed up the march up this year:

This was sent to me by LEO H. ...
Warner read this into the Congressional Record May 8, 1995
from the Senate Floor.

It was a march of great hardship . . . (W)e marched long distances in bitter weather and on starvation rations. We lived in filth and slept in open fields or barns. Clothing, medical facilities and sanitary facilities were utterly inadequate. Hundreds of men suffered from malnutrition, exposure, trench foot, exhaustion, dysentery, tuberculosis, and other diseases.

A number of American POW's on the march did not survive. Others suffered amputations of limbs or appendages while many more endured maladies that remained or will remain with them for the remainder of their lives. For nearly 500 miles and over 86 days, enduring unbelievably inhumane conditions, the men from Stalag Luft IV walked, limped and, in some cases, crawled onward until they reached the end of their march, with their liberation by the American 104th Infantry Division on April 26, 1945.

Unfortunately, the story of the men of Stalag Luft IV, replete with tales of the selfless and often heroic deeds of prisoners looking after other prisoners and helping each other to survive under deplorable conditions, is not well known. I therefore rise today to bring their saga of victory over incredible adversity to the attention of my colleagues. I trust that these comments will serve as a springboard for a wider awareness among the American people of what the prisoners from Stalag Luft IV—and all prisoner of war camps—endured in the pursuit of freedom.

I especially want to honor three Stalag Luft IV veterans who endured and survived the march. Cpl. Bob McVicker, a fellow Virginian from Alexandria, S. Sgt. Ralph Pippens of Alexandria, LA, and Sgt. Arthur Duchesneau of Daytona Beach, FL, brought this important piece of history to my attention and provided me with in-depth information, to include testimony by Dr. Caplan, articles, personal diaries and photographs.

Mr. McVicker, Mr. Pippens, and Mr. Duchesneau, at different points along the march, were each too impaired to walk under their own power. Mr. McVicker suffered frostbite to the extent that Dr. Caplan told him, along the way, that he would likely lose his hands and feet—miraculously, he did not; Mr. Pippens was too weak from malnutrition to walk on his own during the initial stages of the march; and Mr. Duchesneau almost became completely incapacitated from dysentery. By the end of the march, all three men had lost so much weight that their bodies were mere shells of what they had been prior to their capture—Mr. McVicker, for example, at 5 foot, 8 inches, weighed but 80 pounds. Yet they each survived, mostly because of the efforts of the other two—American crewmates compassionately and selflessly helping buddies in need.

Mr. President, I am sure that my colleagues join me in saluting Mr. McVicker, Mr. Pippens, Mr. Duchesneau, the late Dr. Caplan, the other survivors of the Stalag Luft IV march, and all the brave Americans who were prisoners of war in World War II. Their service was twofold: first as fighting men putting their lives on the line, each day, in the cause of freedom and then as prisoners of war, stoically enduring incredible hardships and showing their captors that the American spirit cannot be broken, no matter how terrible the conditions. We owe them a great debt of gratitude and the memory of their service our undying respect.

To Bob McVicker,
Thanks for bringing this
important piece of history to
my attention.
John Warner
U.S.S.