

Unsung heroes

Unsung Heroes by Rufus Ward

The Dispatch: Columbus, Miss.

On Friday, I spoke at the Base Community Council luncheon at Columbus Air Force Base. My topic was stories my father had told me about his World War II experiences as a tail gunner on a B-17 named Smoky Stover Jr., which was shot down near Frankfurt, Germany. He was captured and spent a year as a German prisoner of war. One of his comments to me was that there were so many stories of heroism that were unknown outside of the POW camps because the stories could not be passed along and were thus lost to time.

That comment of my father's struck home Friday evening. I was visiting with Joe and Carol Boggess and had mentioned to them what my noon talk had been. Joe's father, Dr. Julian Boggess, had been one of five camp doctors at Stalag Luft IV which was the POW camp where my father had been held. Stalag Luft IV had opened in May of 1944 and was designed to hold up to 6,400 air corps POWs. However, more than 10,000 American, British and Canadian airmen were sent there.

Conditions there were anything but good and were a doctor's nightmare. Charles Lee, the Smoky Stover's waist gunner, told his daughter, Tennessee Supreme Court Justice Sharon Lee: "...food was very limited. It was mostly a soupy mixture of rotten cabbage and bread made from saw dust...The barracks were made for 16 but usually contained 25 men."

He also recalled horrible infestations of lice in the barracks. Red Cross documents confirm Lee's descriptions, even mentioning that the bread was made from rye and beets but contained about 30 percent sawdust and straw.

At Stalag Luft IV, there were five doctors, including Dr. Boggess, to care for the 10,000 POWs, almost a third of whom had combat-related wounds or injuries. The medical facility there only had about 100 beds and no bed sheets. There was a shortage of medicine and only one bath. A camp history published in 1950 described the doctors as "working miracles" with their very limited resources.

As bad as camp life was, to Charles Lee the worst of all was the evacuation of sick, wounded and injured by rail to Stalag Luft I in early 1945. They were crowded 60 to each small cattle car without heat or coats or food, except for watery cabbage soup. There was no room to sit and all of the POWs had to sleep standing up. Many suffered from dysentery but there were no bathroom facilities in the cars in which the POWs ended up spending more than eight days.

As for Dr. Boggess, he had landed in North Africa with Operation Torch and by February 1943, was in the Tunisia area as a medical officer with the 168th Infantry Regiment. At the Battle of Kasserine Pass on Feb. 17, 1943, the 168th made a gallant stand against elements of Rommel's Afrika Corps' 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions. The American infantry was surrounded by the much larger, heavily-armored German troops and along with its field aid station was overrun and forced to surrender. After his capture, Boggess was sent to Officerslager 64 a German POW camp for infantry officers.

In mid-1944 Boggess was transferred to Stalag Luft IV, a POW camp for noncommissioned airmen, to serve as a camp doctor. There he provided an unbelievable amount of medical assistance, given his limited facilities and lack of medicine and equipment. Then in January 1945, during one of Europe's coldest winters on record, the sick and wounded from the camp were to be moved by rail to Stalag Luft I.

Dr. Boggess was one of the officers put in charge of tending to 1,500 sick and injured POWs loaded onto unheated cattle cars. His selfless service in aiding and assisting those weakened men in inhumane conditions was appreciated both by the soldiers and the senior American officer at Stalag Luft I. That officer, Col. Zemke, sent Dr. Boggess a letter of commendation for his saving so many lives through his efforts.

The most memorable compliment, though, came from airman Royce McMinn, a POW who was from Ackerman and had been on that train. Shortly after the war, McMinn learned his sister in Crawford knew a Boggess in Macon and told her the story of what Lt. Julian Boggess from Macon had done. He gave Boggess all the credit for getting the men through. He told how Boggess, at the risk of his own life, argued with the Germans for better treatment for the POWs.

McMinn said, "he and all the other men on that journey would never forget the courageous 'Doc' who fought so hard for humane and decent treatment for the men in his care...A man like that...he should be a general." After his liberation in May of 1945, Dr. Boggess ended the war with the rank of Captain at Walter Reed Hospital. He then moved to Columbus where he had a long time medical practice.

There are many veterans like that around us and yet we seldom realize it for they do not promote themselves as heroes but rather as simply someone who did a job that had to be done. Veterans Day is a time us to reflect on and honor all of those men and women who have been willing to sacrifice to keep us free and to honor those serving still today.

OFFICE OF THE GROUP COMMANDER
GROUP I, USAAF, NORTH COMPOUND
OFLAG LUFT I, BARTH, GERMANY

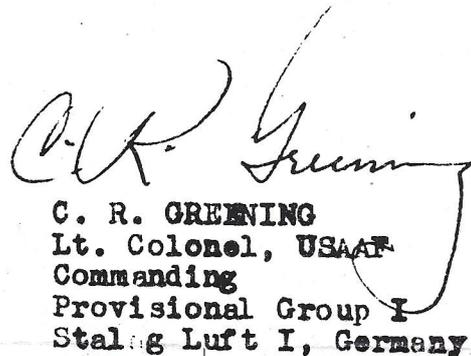
February 14, 1945

SUBJECT: Letter of Commendation.

TO : First Lieutenant Boggess, J. E., O-417900, through
Senior Allied Officer.

1. During the recent evacuation of air crew members from Stalag Luft IV to Stalag Luft I, Germany, Lt. Boggess as Medical Officer, under extremely difficult circumstances performed his duties in a manner highly commendable to himself and his profession. His constant attendance of sick and injured men for a period of more than eight days with almost total lack of facilities in locked cars, brought superior results by arriving with almost the entire compliment in as good health as circumstances could permit. His vigilance during long hours and performing of minor operations under adverse conditions reflects credit to himself and the service. Every individual comprising the troops of this evacuation has expressed their gratitude for his services.

2. It is recommended that a copy of this letter be forwarded to this officer's 201 file.


C. R. GREENING
Lt. Colonel, USAAF
Commanding
Provisional Group I
Stalag Luft I, Germany

1st Ind.

To: First Lieutenant J. E. BOGGESS, O-417900. From: Headquarters
Provisional Wing X, Stalag Luft I, Barth, Germany. 1 March 1945.

1. It gives me the greatest of pleasure to forward this letter of commendation. Your efforts toward bettering the trip and circumstances of the many prisoners of war during their trip from Gros Tychow, shows that your endeavors were more than normally expected. The tales and words of the enlisted men who you accompanied are only of praise toward your actions. My congratulations again and keep up the good work.


HUBERT ZIEMKE
Colonel, U. S. Air Corps
Senior American Officer



WAR DEPARTMENT
MILITARY INTELLIGENCE SERVICE
WASHINGTON 25, D. C.



23 July 1945

1st Lt. Julian E. Boggess
Macon, Mississippi

Dear Lieutenant Boggess:

Thank you for your reply to our letter of 27 June 1945.

The particular service which you performed for the War Department while a prisoner of war in Germany merits the highest praise, and is greatly appreciated. Your name will be entered on the permanent official records of this Branch, along with all those who were connected with this exceedingly valuable activity.

Sincerely yours,

RUSSELL H. SWEET
Colonel, GSC
Chief, Captured Personnel
and Materiel Branch



Army of the United States

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

This is to certify that

JULIAN E BOGGESS JR O 417 900 CAPTAIN

168TH INFANTRY REGIMENT

*honorably served in active Federal Service
in the Army of the United States from*

14 AUGUST 1942 *to* 21 FEBRUARY 1946

Given at SEPARATION CENTER
CAMP SHELBY MISSISSIPPI

on the TWENTY FIRST *day of* FEBRUARY 1946

W. L. CHEATHAM, Major, Infantry