

The Julius Karp Story



I was born on the Lower East Side of New York City. We moved to East Harlem, and later on to the Bronx. I enlisted in the Air Force and flew as a flight engineer and gunner with the 15th Air Force, 2nd Bomb Group out of Foggia, Italy. When I arrived in Italy, we started our missions flying to the town of Anzio, which the Germans were using as a fortress. We flew two missions a day to bomb them out of there. We did this for about three days straight until the American troops took over the area. From then on I flew numerous missions until I was shot down. My pilot was the base Commander and we always flew lead plane in the formation. On my last mission, I volunteered to fly with another crew, as I was anxious to finish my combat tour and return the states. It was my 48th mission. I needed one more to be sent back home, but my luck ran out that day.

My brother, Louis, was killed in a B-24 explosion and fire at Morrison Field, Florida just days before I arrived in Italy. Morrison was a field for planes going overseas. I flew into there the day after my brother's crash. I heard about a plane crashing, but I did not know it was his plane until a few months later. This information was kept from me while as I was in heavy combat and I did not find out about it until I returned home. The photo above was taken at Louis's grave shortly after I returned to the US. My brother, Milton, was in the US Army where he was stationed and fought in Yugoslavia. My other brother, Morris, was in the Battle of the Bulge when I was shot down. My mother sent letters to the War Department and asked them to send Morris back home because she had one son killed and another missing in action. The Army found Morris fighting in Belgium and sent him back home for duty in the United States. He found out there that I was awarded the Silver Star in March 1944. My citation reads:

For gallantry in action while participating as Right Waist Gunner on a B-17 type aircraft during a bombing mission against an important enemy aircraft factory at Steyer, Austria, on 24 February 1944, his formation was intercepted and heavily attacked by approximately 150 enemy fighters. In the ensuing engagement the aircraft was severely damaged and Sergeant Karp received a serious and painful wound in the left leg from the enemy plane cannon fire. Despite the pain and shock he continued to man his guns in gallant defense of his plane and crew, beating off successive attacks until he lost consciousness from loss of blood and lack of oxygen. By his conspicuous courage and unselfishness in his determination to carry out his

mission regardless of all hazards together with his gallantry and devotion to duty in the fulfillment of his personal responsibility, Sergeant Karp has distinguished himself and the Armed Forces of the United States of America.

I received the medal personally from Major General Nathan F. Twining, Commander of the 15th Air Force, while I was in the base hospital recuperating from my wounds. That was a big surprise. We were playing cards when he came in.



I was shot down several months later on August 7, 1944. We were awakened that morning at about 2:00 AM. We got partially dressed, ate breakfast, and went back to our tents to finish dressing and put on our flying gear. We took a truck to our briefing on the mission at 4:30. We were told that the mission was going to be very little action and there would not be any enemy fighter planes in the area. They said that the only resistance we might run into would be enemy flak. The briefing lasted about an hour and then we boarded the trucks to take us out to our plane. After we checked everything out, we prepared to take off and join the rest of the planes into the formation and start our mission.

We arrived at the target and dropped our bombs. After we dropped, the whole formation started to make a run to get out of the area when all of a sudden the sky got black with enemy flak all around. We got a direct hit on one of our engines and it burst into flames. The pilot was concerned that we would not be able to get the fire out and that the flames would eventually get to our fuel tanks. He gave the bail out order. We were flying at about 25,000 feet. As far as I heard, everyone jumped out of the plane before it blew up in the air.

I must have opened my chute too soon because I was unconscious for a little while after bailing. When I awoke, I heard gun shots near my chute and looked down and saw some German soldiers shooting at me. I immediately took my gun out of my holster and threw it away so I wouldn't be caught with it. When I hit the ground, I took my chute off immediately and before long I was surrounded by numerous ten to eleven year old kids holding rifles with bayonets and pitchforks. They took us and marched us through a town. The kids didn't think I was walking fast enough so they attacked me with their bayonets and pitchforks to make me move faster. The townspeople called us names, spit at us, and threw rocks at us until we finally arrived at a police station to be secured as prisoners. There we met some Russian prisoners and they greeted us as friends. We were searched and locked up until some SS troopers arrived to question us. The only food they gave us was some black bread and water. I was there for three days when I was taken to a railroad yard and put in a pig box car and shipped to Frankfurt for more questioning by SS troopers. They asked me again and again where we were flying and what our mission was. The only information I gave them was my name, rank and serial number. They got angry and made me get undressed and put me in another room. They poured ice water on me. After a while they told me to get dressed and I was taken again to another room. The guard looked at my dog tag and

asked me what religion I was. I had an H on my dog tags for Hebrew, but I smashed the H with pliers before I went over seas. I had heard rumors that they were killing Jews. I told them I was Protestant.

Eventually we were shipped to a new prison camp somewhere on the border of France called Stalag Luft 6. We were only there for a few weeks. The British were bombing all around the area and were nearby with tanks. So they marched us out of camp and put us in pig cars again. This time we were shipped to Stalag Luft III where we stayed for a few weeks before we were moved again to Stalag Luft IV. During this whole time I received no medical care for my wounds, as there were no doctors available.

At Stalag Luft IV, I was put into Compound C with 50 other prisoners in the barracks. One morning I was ill with a fever and asked to be put on sick call. I was taken to the camp hospital where Dr. Caplan took care of me. I was at the hospital for a week or so and we became good friends. I told him about my religion and that I had a little medical experience as I had been studying to be a mortician before the war. He thought my background would make me a good medic and asked me if I would be willing to stay on as an aide to the doctors. I responded "yes". Dr. Caplan really inspired me when I met him. He told me about how he flew the mission and was shot down, and his courage just inspired me to get through it all. I mean - to get in that plane when he didn't have to! He did something that no other doctor wanted to do in order to find out what we went through when we were flying. A lot of doctors didn't care one way or another about us. He was different. He volunteered for Stalag Luft IV when he could have gone to an officer's camp. He had no consideration for himself.

There were two other British flight surgeons at the hospital and an Australian doctor, serving 10,000 people in the camp. The Australian doctor was somewhat friendly with the German command, and sometimes visited them at night at their quarters where he was given schnapps. The other doctors did not fraternize with the Germans. We passed the time playing cards when we were done working. There were some small rooms in a little barracks at the hospital. I stayed there at night, along with Dr. Caplan. I helped him remove shrapnel and helped him hold guys down with shrapnel wounds. I administered medications and assisted in surgery, among other things. Although we were working in the hospital, we suffered the same as the other prisoners in the camp. I lost a lot of weight in Stalag Luft IV. The meals were sometimes so bad you couldn't even eat them. The black bread was like eating sand.

No one but Dr. Caplan knew I was Jewish at Stalag Luft IV. When the Germans came to the hospital, I could understand some of what they were saying. I just played dumb. If they had known I was Jewish, they wouldn't have let me work in the hospital. I kept to myself and Dr. Caplan knew I just wanted to keep myself quiet. Also, if you were Jewish in the service at that time, you had to sort of keep to yourself because there was anti-Semitism among the Americans at times too. One pilot I flew with did something wrong on the flight and I told him so. I was the flight engineer. When we got back, he called me a "damned Jew". I went to my commanding officer and told him about this and I refused to fly with them again. He agreed and grounded me for a few days and then put me with another crew. The next day, the crew that I had flown with was shot down.

At Stalag Luft IV, they knew Dr. Caplan was Jewish, but somehow they didn't dare harm him. There was a German doctor at Stalag Luft IV who took care of the German guards. He did nothing for the prisoners except steal medical supplies given by the Red Cross. 75% of the time, the Red Cross parcels were not distributed to the prisoners. The guards took the Red Cross parcels, and broke open the ones that were given to the prisoners. Many men got very sick from eating from the cans that had been opened by the guards. Dr. Caplan argued continuously with the German doctor and the camp commander, at great risk to himself. He often shouted at the German officials and let them know that he knew they were stealing our medical supplies and food. He was a fireball as he stood up to the German camp commander and demanded items he needed from the Red Cross for the hospital. The Germans used to threaten him but always backed down.

When we were evacuated from Stalag Luft IV, I left with Dr. Caplan and worked with him throughout the march. He had very little medication besides the charcoal for dysentery. He had some disinfection powder that he used for blistered or infected feet. He organized a system of barn hospitals for the many men who were very sick. We had seven or eight barns that had hospitals each night. He assigned medics to each field hospital and I ran one of them. I also traded things we had to get food for the sick. Sometimes we would find a guard that had a heart who would help us. Dr. Caplan walked from one barn hospital to another to make sick calls. They were from half a mile to a mile apart. He had absolutely no consideration for himself. During the day, he walked behind the wagon. Sometimes he was so tired he had to hold on to the wagon. I never saw him sleep. I myself got maybe an hour's sleep a night. I got some frostbite on my fingers and toes, and had dysentery. Dr. Caplan was sick at times himself too. Somehow we just had the willpower that we were going to get out of there. He would often tell me, "You have to have patience. Stay strong."

I saw a lot of arguments between Dr. Caplan and the Germans. He urged them to slow down and give the men a rest. He fought to get the sick wagon. He fought to get us fresh water for drinking. He was in danger every single time he stood up to them. Nobody else in the world would dare do what he did.

At the end, the Germans ran away. I weighed 110 pounds at liberation. I had weighed 172 before I was shot down. When I got home, I received a letter from one of the German guards from Lager C. He apologized for what he had done and asked me to send him food in a parcel. I tore that letter up. Since then, I have had three knee replacements. I got no service connection until I got 100% two years ago.

I am the man named Sergeant Wagner in Dr. Caplan's article "Death March Medic". The name he used was fake. It was myself and another man. Dr. Caplan recommended me for an award for meritorious service, and I received the Bronze Star Medal. He wrote his citation in July 1945 while he was at Fitzsimmons General Hospital. My official citation reads:

Technical Sergeant Julius Karp, Air Corps, rendered meritorious service from February to May 1945 while on a six hundred-mile march with other prisoners from Stalag Luft IV, Germany. He constantly sacrificed his own rest to tend the weak, footsore or discouraged. Braving the wrath of the Nazi guards, he often persuaded them to secure doctors for the more seriously ill prisoners. His services materially reduced loss of life among his comrades. Sergeant Karp's spirit and unselfishness reflect credit upon himself and the United States Army.

After the war, I returned to New York, married and moved to Houston, Texas. It was there that I got into the steel business. I am very proud to have two wonderful daughters, a son, three stepsons, and eleven grandchildren, all of whom I dedicate this story to. Dr. Leslie Caplan was a big inspiration to me throughout my life, and I am proud to be able to share this part of my history now with my children and grandchildren, and all of those who love Dr. Caplan so much.

