

Shreveport 31, Louisiana
June 19, 1945
1789 Lakeshore Drive

Mr. Emmet Walker
Valley Falls
Spartanburg S.C.

Dear Mrs. Walker,

This is the hardest task of duty I think that I will ever have to perform, in the Army of the United States. That is to tell you about your son, s/sgt. George Walker #1200, Stalag Luft 6, Heydekrug, East Prussia.

George and I slept in adjoining beds in the same barrack in England for four months, before we were shot down on Feb. 3, 1944 over Wilhelmshaven, Germany. George already had a verified report of shooting down one of the enemy planes, before I ever flew with him.

When we were finally attached to the same crew, we were the best pals because we had known each other for some time... So we always had a good time together.

The day, Feb. 23, 1944 (11:30 AM) was very unpleasant. After we had been hit with flak from the coastal guns, we were ordered to bail out into the North Sea. Eight of us were picked up out of the water, including your son. One member went down with the plane. Another drowned (sgt. Keller and sgt. Sikes respectively).

After we were all heralded into German hands, nearly immediately after being rescued from the water, we were taken to the German interrogation center. From there we were sent to the Luftwaffe camp Number 6 in Heydekrug, East Prussia. We arrived there on Feb. 19, 1944. Walker, Collins and Cournoyer all lived in barracks F#1. I lived in the adjoining building F2.

Naturally, all of us made up our minds on escape and George was the first to attempt it... April 28, the day preceding his death. He and another prisoner (sgt. Jurist) made their way into the Vorlager to an uninhabited building, planning to steal away in the night. On the following morning, 2AM, Walker and Jurist proceeded to crawl towards the fence, were nearly there, when the tower guard with a roving search light spotted the two boys. They evidently stood up and held high their hands in surrender. There also happened to be a guard with German police blood hounds the area at the same time. The tower guard called for him to come over (in German) and the guard with the dogs started over, pistol drawn. The guard then sicked the dogs on Walker and Jurist.. Rather than have the dogs chew them p, Walker then started over towards the guard with hands still high in the air., to get under his custody. The guard came within 8 feet of Walker, pulled the trigger hitting George in the heart. Jurist immediately fell to the ground as if he had been shot, or walkers fate would have been his own.

Funeral services were held the next day in the prison cemetery, with what military honors can be given under the point of a gun. They would not permit a casket or even a box. I was one of the pall bearers. Due to risks beforehand, I awaited the time for burial to see about the bullet. Here is what I found: as walker was a heavy set man and

the coat he was wearing was small, when he had his hands raised that would be the only way in which a bullet could strike from beneath to his heart, without going through his coat. There were no holes in his coat.

I will make a full report of this the War Crimes commission. I think the guilty German will be found. I personally put Sgt. Walker in for one of the highest medals the army can for bravery; for he was my buddy, your son and a good man.

Enclosed is a brief sketch of the cemetery, where it is located in case of his returning to the USA for internment. I figured that you wanted the straight facts, so I told them. George, even though he gave his life, was saved of many a painstaking days of cruelty and treatment since that day, that was inflicted on us.

May God bless you and peace remain in memory of one that was as near and dear to you.

Sincerely

Sgt. Charles I. Whetstone.

Who was George Walker?

The Luft VI Trojan Horse Escape

Written by Greg Hatton 1994

On April 29, 1944, **T/sgt. George Walker** was killed by a guard while attempting to escape from prison camp in Germany. The epitaph for the WWII airmen from Spartanburg was written in Barbed Wire News, the camp paper:

"In a little burial plot on the edge of a grove of young birch trees, six of his comrades laid to rest the body of T/Sgt. **George B. Walker**. Thousands of miles from his native Carolina, the only touch of home was the simple American flag that draped his bier; and the sharp notes of Taps, that drifted across his grave in a chill wind, under the clear blue Baltic sky... just a stone's throw from one of the guard towers of Stalag Luft 6."

Spring comes late to the Baltic coast of Lithuania, which shares the same latitude as Hudson's bay. For half a century, the remains of George Walker have rested beneath that rustling grove of birch trees, waiting to come home.

In April 1994, Claude Watkins left Reston, Virginia with his son Kelly, to see if he could locate the gravesite of Walker and two other Americans who died at the prison camp for captured Allied fliers. After landing in Germany, they took a Russian train through Poland and Belarus into the capital city of Lithuania, Vilnius. The camp, Stalag Luft 6, was located in a part of Lithuania that had been annexed by Germany. Following the War, Lithuania was made part of the Soviet Union. Today it is again an independent country, and the town of Heydekrug is now Silute. In Vilnius, the Watkins hired a car, driver and an interpreter, then headed west.

"Fifty years ago I was a twenty-two-year-old prisoner in Stalag Luft 6. When I returned on April 16th, I was 72. For almost two years, I had been trying to organize a nostalgia trip back to the area of our captivity. I wrote to the mayor of Silute, asking him about accommodations. I received a detailed reply from a journalist, **Stasys Melinauskas**, the local authority on the history of the prison camp.

We drove about 4 hours on the divided highway that stretches from Vilnius, to the port of Klaipeda on the Baltic coast. We passed through farmland and a few rare villages, and the condition of the highway is in sharp contrast to the roads through the villages; no doubt because the Soviet government maintained it for military purposes. About twenty miles out from Silute, I began to experience feelings of expectation and excitement. When we arrived at the site of what had been our camp, I experienced a shortness of breath. What hit me was, not so much that I was there again, but that 50 years ago, I never conceived I'd be back under such macabre or morbid circumstances.

Shortly after I heard from the journalist, I got a call from the Consul at the U.S. Embassy in Vilnius. He had been contacted by an office of the Department of Defense, charged with POW/MIA affairs. While researching rumors of prisoners having been taken to the Soviet Union after Liberation, they discovered that the remains of three Americans, who died in Luft 6, had never been recovered. Most of us from the camp assumed that everyone had been brought home or relocated. Heydekrug was one of those few places that the Soviets would not let our authorities search.

We evacuated the camp in July 1944 and in 1945, the Russians converted the camp into a Gulag to hold Lithuanian political prisoners. They continued the operation until 1954, at which time they almost completely destroyed the camp.

The U.S. consul, together with some local officials, had visited the site but could not determine where our people were, and discovered that there were now several acres of unmarked individual and mass graves in the area. He knew of my contact with the mayor of Silute, that I was a former prisoner and lived in the Washington area. He asked me to contact an analyst with the DOD, POW/MIA office. I soon found myself part of the investigation into

what happened to our men and the camp after we evacuated it. Now, 16 months later, I was trying to locate the northwest corner of the camp and find three unmarked graves."

Records indicated that George Walker had been shot on April 29th, 1944, while attempting to escape. Sgt. Walter Nies was shot by a guard on the morning of 28 May. A third man, T/Sgt. **William Teaff**, died of illness, on 10 July. The facts and the fates of these men were never in question and the Germans sent pictures of their funerals to the Red Cross. In the years following the War, the Soviets were asked to return the remains of two dozen Americans. They could not locate nine men, including the airmen from Luft 6. In 1953, the remains of these men were declared non-recoverable. Their names were memorialized in American Military Cemeteries in Holland and Luxembourg. What stood in the way was the Iron Curtain and paperwork that could pinpoint their locations.

"In the months prior to my trip, I had located several of the men who were on the burial details. **Charles Whetstone** and **Armand Cournoyer** were air crewmen with George Walker. Based on their recollections, they provided me with a diagram and general description of the site. I knew that the location was 100 yards from the northwest corner of the camp and the guard tower. The general location had been pointed out to me from where I worked in the German part of the camp, and my memory tracked with their information. Practically all that is left of the place today is what was the road in through the main gate and the perimeter road on the northeast side. The perimeter road turns to the left at the northwest corner, and that was the clue we needed, to get us into the area of the three graves. With a compass and a steel tape, my son and I worked our way, right to the edge of a copse of birch and oak trees.

There are many grave mounds, going in all directions, so it's uncomfortable to walk over. The Lithuanians have fenced off a good deal of it, erected monuments and adopted unmarked graves, which they care for. The place where our guys are buried is outside the fenced area; but the actual limits of the area would be difficult to determine. For the locals, it's not a memory that will just go away. There is a small, fast moving river at the back end of all this. The townspeople told me, that if the river rises a little, and cuts into its banks and it exposes bones."

For **Armand Cournoyer**, of Yarmouthport, Cape Cod, the matters of the War are private. For so many years, he's kept his focus on his family and his job, as a designer of printing equipment. Because of renewed interest on George Walker's fate, he has been asked to come to terms with bitter memories of his youth:

"I'm not gung ho about my PW memories, the way a lot of fellows are; but certain things do come back as you discuss it. I do remember some of the details about George Walker, because I was responsible for overseeing his burial. I acted as undertaker.

I was with the 306th Bomb Group and flying as waist gunner. Our crew landed in England on November 11th, 1943, and we started flying immediately. Our outfit had made the famous Schweinfurt Raid, just before we got there. We got shot down on our fifth mission, which was on February 3, 1944. We were bombing the submarine dumps at Wilhelmshaven and got zapped on our way out. The pilot, Lt. Wong, was heading for Sweden; but we never made it. I wound up bailing out into the ocean. We lost a few that day, like my buddy, **Sikes**. There was a lad from New York, **Kells**, who damn near drowned, but we revived him.

We had several replacements on our crew that day; we had never seen one another before the mission. Of course, I didn't know what the new crew members looked like, because you are flying with those goggles and helmets on, and all the rest of the outfit. **Whetstone** and **Walker** were very unfamiliar to me; I met them in prison camp. In the back of my mind, I always picture him as Clark Gable; he was that type of an individual. Walker was a big man, but he had certain flamboyance about him. He wasn't like a small town guy. He appeared older than I, and perhaps for that reason, he was a little more of a man of the world. That's the way I remember him; of course our acquaintance was very limited.

The circumstances of his death were, that he was trying to escape during the night, and it was obvious, that he had been shot with his hands over his head. He had a flight jacket on and the bottom was unbuttoned. If he had his hands up, this would open the jacket. It was obvious he was shot without the bullet going through the jacket."

Charles Whetstone is a retired machinist living in a suburb of Corpus Christi, Texas. His good natured, delta charm masks the toughness of a survivor, a trait shared by many former prisoners of war. When contacted by **Claude Watkins**, Mr. Whetstone provided drawings of the camp, indicating Walker's location. He was also one of the last persons to see George Walker.

"I was flying with Lt. Wong's crew as a replacement gunner, because my crew had been shot down previously. I had an accident and while I was in the hospital, they didn't come back. Then the next mission I went on, I didn't come back. I have the Purple Heart for being killed in action... they made a mistake! Actually, I believe the Germans reported my death deliberately so as to stir things up back home.

We were hit by anti-aircraft fire and had to bail out over the North Sea. It was February 3rd and it was real cold. When I got to shore, the Germans took me into the center of town and we waited for them to round up the rest of the fellows. There was this old Gendarme; he cussed me out to a fair ye well. They were the first words I heard in English, so I had to laugh. I don't know where he picked it up, but those people didn't like us at all. It was lucky that we had a guard. You keep bombing someone and they're going to get after you!

They kept us in a civilian jail for a day or so, and then they shipped us out to Frankfurt, to Dulag Luft. It was their interrogation center. They put us all in solitary, and I don't recommend this to anyone. You're in this pitch black room, you don't know if there's snakes in there or what...you don't hear any voices and its dead quiet for 24 hours. That gets to bearing on your mind real strong; it's meant to do just that.

When you get out, they interrogate you; except they ended up telling us more things than we knew. Anyway, after about a week, the enlisted men were sent up to Stalag Luft 6, on a long train ride through East Prussia. It was a passenger train, but it was so cold, it was pathetic. When we finally got there, plenty of snow was still on the ground. The place was run by a bunch of British who been PW's since the war began. Our barracks were made of brick, and they even had a nice big hearth in the center of the room...except we never got any coal to speak of, so we didn't have much heat. I'm from Arkansas originally, so I'd seen snow; but those nights were long and cold. I used to wrap newspaper around my legs and chest, and then put my shirt and britches on.

The main thing with the Germans was, they'd have to count us a couple of times a day. Generally, there'd be an error, so they'd do it over and over again. They called it Appell, and that's how we used to hide the fact that someone was missing. Guys would scoot in and out of the barracks to keep the count right.

Most of us took the escape business lightly, because if you think about it, we were a long way from home. The conditions were pretty rough, and those Germans were all really good friends. If they saw a stranger, they'd turn him in, right quick. If they watched you eat with a knife and fork, or saw you smoke a cigarette, it would be a dead giveaway.

My job on a tunnel project, that Walker was on, was to get rid of the dirt. We all had two Prince Albert Tobacco tins that we'd fill up with dirt, and carry out to the latrine. It was a ten-hole affair and pretty soon, it had so much dirt in it, that it finally overflowed. As if that wasn't bad enough, we had a heavy rain and the day afterwards, the tunnel caved in on this Russian prisoner, who cleaned the latrines.

Although we had been on the same crew, we were new friends and Walker kept it quiet about trying to escape. I didn't know that he had tried, until after they came in and told us he'd been killed. He seemed so easy going and jolly... you liked to be around him; but I guess he couldn't stand it and wanted to escape.

Some of the guys took burlap bags and sewed together a flag. They made water colors from vegetable dyes and ink, and painted up a flag. That's what we used to cover him

up with, because the Germans wouldn't give us a box. I was given information that he had escape maps and money, sewn into the lining of his britches. All that stuff was gone; I guess the Germans found it.

When I got to Camp Lucky Strike in 1945, I wrote these things down, before they slipped away from my memory. It seems like you'll never forget something like that, but as time goes by, you do. Right now, I can see it in my mind, just like it happened."

It is the essence of youth to think that stamina and courage can accomplish fantastic ends. There's no thought of compromise with the forces of history. Only one man can tell what drove George Walker to plan his daring escape, from the barbed wire of Luft 6. Even in his mid-seventies, **Ed Jurist** was burly, dark-haired and dapper. A successful entrepreneur, his showroom in Nyack, New York exhibited his classic cars, speedboats and vintage aircraft. Late in 1991, he allowed a glimpse of what led them into those desperate pre-dawn hours of April 29, 1944.

"I'd been shot down on the March 6 raid to Berlin, and got to Heydekrug with several of my crew about mid-March of 1944. At this time, all sorts of escape activities were in progress at the camp. There were tunnels being dug, and both the British and Americans had made successful break-outs above ground. It didn't take me long to get involved and by the 29th of April, I was ready to make my own attempt. My partner was George Walker.

Walker may have been involved with (the escape committee) as a mapmaker, but I'm not sure about that. I had met him in camp, just as I had many other people. He was a big, heavy set guy; tall with dark hair. Walker's home town was Spartanburg, South Carolina and he spoke with a real southern drawl.

As I remember it, George first approached me. To get away from the rest of the crowd, we'd meet on the edge of the "Playing field". Sitting there in the scrub grass and looking out over the field, we'd start talking about escapes: How? When? Where? I spoke some Russian and some French, so we decided to head up North through Estonia and Latvia into Russia."

The escape committee figured that the Germans would never expect an attempt to go through the barbed wire near the front gate, ten feet from their barracks. The plan was to do something bold and unexpected. Each day six prisoners were allowed to go through the gates from the American lager into the supply area and over to the Red Cross parcel building. They would pull out a wooden flatbed cart loaded with empty boxes, dump them and return with fresh supplies. A deliberate accumulation of empty boxes was stacked up.

"It seemed that six guys went out, but there were actually seven. A little guy named **Robinson**, who was a ball turret gunner, got into one of the boxes, inside the compound. When we arrived at the Red Cross shack, the guards were deliberately distracted. While their attention was on this commotion, Walker jumped away and hid down between the boxes. Robinson was back on the wagon in a box, so he leapt off and took Walker's place. Six guys pulled the wagon in and six guys pulled the wagon back.

On the second run from camp, I was up front, pulling the wagon. Robinson was in a box. We went over to the shed, created another distraction and I hopped behind the empty crates. Again Robinson leapt off the wagon, and he took my place. The Krauts counted six prisoners and they returned to the compound.

That left George and me hidden in the Vorlager. We wore what was left of our GI issue; our leather flight jackets and some pants, a sweater and a homemade cap, some kriegie had knit. We were not really covered...just standing behind the shed, surrounded by those empty boxes. There were guards all around us and occasionally I would nudge him and point at them. During the afternoon we stayed in absolute stillness. It was devastating to feel each minute go by, and be trapped within your own thoughts. Late in the afternoon it started to get chilly and the sun slipped away. As the searchlights came on, the guys in camp returned to their barracks, for evening meals. Then we really felt alone out there. Walker was getting jumpy.

I'd say we were behind that shed from two or three in the afternoon, until late that night, well after midnight. We were bidding our time, but you couldn't sleep under those

conditions. It's not so much the cold, but the fact that you're alert to the point where it's painful. Every sound is a nerve -wracking, horrifying possibility of being discovered and maybe being shot. When the time came for us to make our move, away from the boxes, Walker wanted to blow. He didn't want to go: "Let's not do it! Look at those guards walking outside the perimeter, this is crazy...We haven't got a chance!"

By this time, I was all tensed up and ready. Any change in plans would have been disastrous. There was no way to get back into the compound. We would have had to wait until the morning to surrender, in broad daylight, and hope the Germans would take us back in. I wouldn't hear of it. "We're here, we can't go back. We have the wire cutters with us and the maps; it's all right. We can make it!"

Timing is a critical element of success. On April 29th, the forces of history converged on the open sandy stretch before Jurist and Walker. During the first two weeks of April, Adolph Hitler shattered the long standing tradition that "honored" escape attempts as the "duty" of a captured soldier. The Great Escape had taken place on March 24, at Stalag Luft 3, another Airmen's camp. Hitler's reaction was: "We must set an example". Fifty British officers were recaptured and executed. The entire German system was on alert and the Nazi mechanisms for state terror were extended to Allied prisoners.

Precisely at the moment that Jurist and Walker were waiting for their chance to break out, the Abwehr was rounding up the British Escape Committee in the next compound. They had set up an incredible network; with men operating outside of camp... a British Sergeant had even made it home to England! Up to now, everything had seemed possible.

"We pushed the boxes aside, got down and started crawling. I went out and George was right behind me. We headed towards the first line of barbed wire. It was grueling work, but we kept going until we were about 25 feet from the trench in front of the main gate. The Red Cross sheds were just dark shapes behind us. A guard was pacing back and forth, just outside the fence, and the lights were sweeping the area. By this time the sentry was very familiar with, and attuned to the rhythm of the night.

As he passed by, he looked in. He looked right at us; it was a sandy area, so we had very little cover. Suddenly he tensed and spun around, as if to say " Ah -Ha". We just froze. He got upset, the way all the krauts did, screaming and shouting: Raus, Raus, and Raus!" The minute he started shouting, I told Walker: "Don't F-ing move!" Otherwise were dead. Just lie still- Don't move!"

That son of a bitch fires. Shot right at us, not over our heads. At that point, I got up on my knees and in mixed German, I said: Schiesen nichts!!! Kameraden...don't Shoot! Don't Shoot!" George was behind me, lying flat. The bastard shot again, so we hugged the ground. "Where can we go...What's he shooting for?" We asked ourselves. It was pure panic. Sure enough, the main gate opens up and the dogs come in. They found us and started tearing at us. After some time, a guard comes up on us. I could only see his boots and legs standing beside us... nothing more. All around was screaming and barking and more soldiers coming into the Vorlager?

Someone pulled the dogs away, and Walker made a move. I didn't know what was happening; I was trying to understand. He got up and was killed, on the spot. The guy who shot Walker must have thought I was killed by shots from the perimeter guard. We were still inside the camp. He figured there would be an investigation! It was cold blooded murder."

Standing in that grove of birches, **Claude Watkins** was certain he was in the same spot that Whetstone and Cournoyer had stood, fifty years earlier.

"It occurred to me that something of a line existed from my first experiences as a PW to that moment. I did twenty years' active duty with the Air Force and 18 more as a civilian with HQ Air Force. All but a few of those years, were devoted to matters of avoiding or surviving captivity. Returning to look for some of my fellow prisoners seemed like another natural step on that line; but it was really a tough call. In my judgment, it would be impossible to segregate only the American graves, from all the others."

After WW II there were 78,000 individuals whose remains were not recovered (and 8500 "Unknown Soldiers"). During the five-year period between 1946 and 1951, Graves Registration and Mortuary Affairs made an extraordinary effort to locate and identify all those who died in the War. Attempts were made to go into Eastern Europe, when it was possible. For each case, there is a file containing the board's action about the recovery or lack of it. Their criteria was clear: Is the location based on fact or assumption? Whenever possible, the task is to disinter, identify and return the remains. Where identification is not possible, no marker should be placed.

That is the dilemma in the case of George Walker. It is possible to re-open a file, if new facts warrant it. With Claude Watkins' trip back to Heydekrug and inquiries by concerned parties, Mortuary Affairs will informally review the file. The resolution does not seem promising, but a Memorial Ceremony at the site is planned for September 18, 1993. Representatives of the Lithuanian and U.S. Air force, former PW's, and the townspeople will participate.

Half a world away from his home, the Baltic wind still rustles the birches over three Americans. Perhaps the placing of a wreath will show that, although the men are out of sight, they're not yet, out of mind.

Author's note: It was determined that location of the remains of the 3 American airmen buried at Luft 6, could not be determined with the required degree of certainty.