

“I WON THE BATTLE” A WWII POW MEMOIR

By:David Yatsko

**John Yatsko's
World War Two
&
Prisoner Of War
Memoirs**

8th Air Force



715th Bomb Squadron



448th Bomb Group



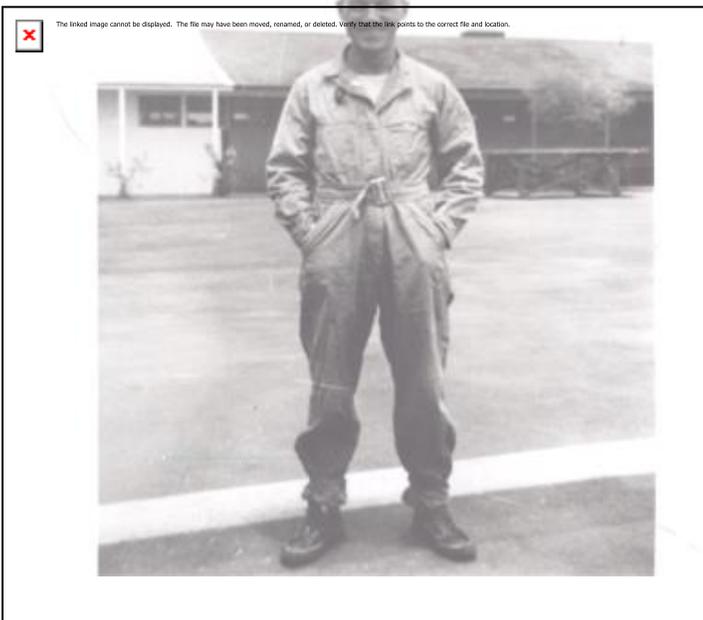
Introduction

The title of this work comes from my father John A. Yatsko. Growing up with my two sisters, Laura and Helen, we were introduced to many things that were learned by John during his time as a B-24 Crew Member and a Prisoner of War and passed on to us children. For example, when a Prisoner of War was lucky enough to get a Red Cross package from home and wanted to share possibly some cake with his fellow POW's, they would have one of the fellows cut up the cake, say, into 8 equal pieces. Then this same fellow would turn around and they would hold up a piece of cake behind him and ask, "Who gets this piece?" He couldn't see the piece and would specify one of the POW's. You could be sure that the fellow cutting up the cake would make sure that each piece was as equal as possible. John took this idea and would use it on us children. He would bring home some candy or other treats for us and show them to us. Then he would turn one of us around and hold up the treat behind our head and ask, "Who gets this piece?". We had the opportunity to say "Mine" or "Laura's" or "Helen's". Looking back on it now, I would say it was perfectly fair.

During my adult years, when I would go over to visit Dad and Mom, John would often ask me, "Son, how goes the battle? Are you winning?" The times that I would hesitate or mumble something, Dad would ask me, "Look, are you at least one step ahead of yesterday?" Almost all of the time I would say, "Yes". Then Dad would tell me, "Since you're moving in the right direction, what's the problem?" And that certainly put it all in to perspective. John had a very positive attitude during his time of internment. He would often tell me, "David, if I got up in the morning and saw the sun come up, I was better off that day than the day before. I survived another day". So when I have what seems like a bad day, when I would awake the next day, I would think of Dad's words and say to myself, "I'm better off than yesterday. God gave me another day to solve my problems. I'm winning the battle just like Dad did as a Prisoner of War".

Indoctrination & Training

Upon the involvement of The United States into World War II, John Yatsko first tried to join the service. At this time he was unemployed and this looked like as good a time as any to join. At this time he was not accepted for indoctrination. During the following few months, John found work. As luck would have it, NOW is when the service decided that they needed John. His Serial Number is 35351914. He was first trained as a P-38 Mechanic. He trained at the Glendale, California Curtis Tech School. Upon graduation he was assigned to Muroc airfield located in Mojave, California. With the dismal conditions there according to John, including wind, blowing sand, heat, snakes and living out of a tent (the Texans loved it), he asked for and received a transfer to Aerial Gunnery School.





John with some of his buddies at
Curtis Wright Technical School
in Glendale, California

Bomber Training

John was assigned to the Eighth Air Force, Second Air Division, 448th Bomb Group, 715th Bomb Squadron. He was trained as a top turret gunner on a Consolidated B-24 Bomber.



During training one time they were learning how to navigate to and from an imaginary target and another plane got its' information 180 degrees off. So instead of going with the flow they were going against it. John said everybody in their plane looked out the window to see another B-24 coming straight at them. To this day he said he's alive because of his pilot. Most pilots when they see danger, their first instinct is to pull back on the stick and go up. Well that's what the other plane did. John said he doesn't know

why his pilot pushed the stick forward but they went just under the other plane.

John Yatsko during training at Pocatello, Idaho

Another time when they were training at Pocatello, Idaho, they flew over Yellowstone and the pilot saw Old Faithful Geyser go off. He told the navigator to plot a course that would bring them back there whenever Old Faithful goes off. When they got back the pilot brought the plane down low enough to fly through Old Faithful when it went off. Since Yellowstone was closed during the war there was only a skeleton force of Park Rangers to patrol it. They were going so low and fast that none of the Rangers was able to get their serial number. When they got back to base the camp commander assembled all the crews that were out that afternoon and ripped them all up one side and down the other. Of course nobody would squeal on anybody even though everybody knew who it was.

Piccadilly Pete, B-24H-10-FO 42-52118 of the 20th CBW's 448th BG, 712nd BS, April 1944.



B-24 H

The above B-24 Model H depicts the plane John flew in. It shows the colors and tail markings of the planes in his group. The 448th Bomb Group carried the usual white disc on the upper starboard wingtip and on the tail surfaces with a capital "I" within this disc in insignia blue. The Group did not conform to normal practice and adopted a squadron symbol to surround their aircraft's call-letter on the lower half of the fin painted in deep yellow to conform to the call-letter:

712 th Squadron	-triangle
713 th Squadron	- circle
714 th Squadron	- square
715 th Squadron	- diamond

In May 1944 the outer surfaces of the tail were painted deep yellow with a black diagonal band with the call-letter and symbol superimposed on this band (as shown on the B-24H below). The letter and symbol was also carried on the inner sides of the fin. Later a large call-letter only was used on the inner fin. Squadron letters were grey on olive drab and black on silver. Later in the war many 448th machines flew without squadron code letters. Squadron codes were:

712 th Squadron	"CT"
713 th Squadron	"IG"
714 th Squadron	"EI"
715 th Squadron	"IO"





John at Seething Airfield, England



John in his flight suit



John Yatsko at Seething, England near Norwich

Incarceration

On the day he was shot down, John started off pretty good. They had their plane bombed and gassed up and they took their place in line for takeoff. As they were rolling down the runway and reached the point of no return on takeoff, the crew looked out the window at one of the wings and saw that somebody forgot to put on the gas cap on one of the fuel tanks and safety wire the lid shut. So now with all that negative lift on the wings, the gas was just being sucked out and into the waist windows and filling the plane with fumes. They had to turn back and John thought that when they were going to land that he was going to go up in a ball of flames and bombs bursting. When they got back there was a back up plane ready to go. The pilot asked the crew if they wanted to use it and everybody said OK even though they had their doubts. After taking off, instead of being in the middle of the combat box formation, they had to take up Ass End Charlie at the tail end of the group. The German fighters like to hit the formations from either head on attacks or getting you from the rear. So when they got over Germany near the Eastern Front they got jumped. John said that he thinks an ME 109 was coming at him from the front so he opened up on him. When he flew over, John swung the turret around and was going to try to get him from the back. It was then that he looked up and realized the German had shot off the Plexiglas canopy and he was getting hit in the face with a 250-mph wind. His oxygen mask was blown off by the wind and when he had problems unbuckling the turret safety belt he started to pass out from lack of oxygen. It was then that the Pilot gave the bail out signal and came back and found John slumped over in the turret. He unbuckled him and slapped on an emergency oxygen bottle and John came to and helped the Pilot get the remaining crew members out and then he went out himself. The Co-Pilot and Ball Turret Gunner were killed on this mission. The Co-Pilot was found on the ground at Halen and it was presumed as chute failure and the Ball Turret Gunner went down with the plane.

Internment

After John left the plane, he says that as you are falling it's true, you put your hands out and you can steer yourself around by turning your hands slightly. He was told that if you had to bail out, as you were falling you were supposed to look at the ground. Then if you could, you tried to make out a horse, cow, vehicle or something about that size. That should tell you that you are about 1,000 feet in altitude and then you can pull your chute. You didn't want to be higher because then fighters might get you or people on the ground would have time to get a bead on you and shoot you while you were coming down. Now when he was going through basic training, whenever John had his chest chute on, he would practice grabbing the D-Ring with his right hand near his left shoulder. Now during training you were taught to keep your chute straps tight around your body. But during his time in England, John found out from the veterans that for comfort during combat, you would keep the straps a little loose. Now as he's falling he could see that he was coming down near the edge of a forest. He thought "Great", I can maybe get into the forest and maybe make it back to England. So he reaches for the D-Ring and now with the loose straps, the chest pack is flopping all over the place and he has a devil of a time finding the D-Ring before he can pull it. He finally pulls the ring and the chute opens and it was then he said he realized the most beautiful silence. When you're falling with open ears there is so much noise then when the chute opens it's so calm and quiet.

So now John is coming down near the forest and he lands. It took him a long time to get out of his harness because something got stuck in the quick release mechanism. By now the German soldiers came up in a motorcycle and sidecar and took over. The Germans had parts of their army that all they did was follow bomber formations on the ground and captured any airmen that bailed out if they could get to them. Now that the Germans have John, he's standing there with his hands up and being watched by the guards and some civilians. Some of the young guards are

searching John for anything that they can get off him. They are taking the cigarettes, chocolate bars etc. But they are having some trouble with some of the pockets. You see during combat some of the pockets on the flyers' suits are safety wired shut and these guards are having a time getting them opened. So one of

the civilians got impatient and walked over and grabbed

John's pocket and just ripped it open. This scared him a little. So now the young guards are finished with searching him and are starting to mill around waiting for a truck to arrive. But now an older guard who appeared to be in charge, with one of those burp guns that you see in the movies (I think they are called Schmeiser Machine Pistols) comes up and pokes John in the back and motions him to walk over behind one of the farm houses. When he and the guard get around to the back and out of sight of the other guards and civilians John sees that there is a kind of a bluff behind the house. So now the thought is going through his head "Damn, he's going to execute me right here!!!" He thought, "With all that I went through, I would have preferred to have been killed during combat rather than get shot in the back." So as he was struggling with the thought of maybe overpowering the guard, the guard poked him in the back with the machine gun and got him to turn around. Now the guard started to search him further and didn't want the others to see what's going on. You see not only did the flyers have regular pockets with stuff in them, they also had hidden pockets with escape maps, spare money and other survival stuff stitched into the pockets. This older guard knew this and didn't want the other young guards to find this out. So after searching John and getting this hidden stuff and putting it into his pockets, he marched him back around to the front and by this time some trucks are arriving with other downed flyers. He got on one of the trucks and was taken to the German Interrogation Center and then his first POW camp. John was held prisoner for 15 months, from Feb. 21, 1944 to April 29, 1945.

When John was brought to the Interrogation Center he was locked in a room with other Flyers that had been shot down and captured that day. Some of these men were British Flyers, who had been in conflict with the Germans for about 2 years already. The Brits knew what was going on and what to expect from the Germans. The Germans would put Flyers into this room and put a guard outside. They did their best to fake the Flyers into believing that this guard didn't speak English. But in fact he could. The Germans were hoping that while the Flyers were getting to know each other, they might slip up and give up some information that might be useful to them. But the Brits knew better. The Brits let John in on the secret of the guard and asked John to help them screw around with the Germans. Of course John was only happy to oblige being somewhat of a rascal himself. The Flyers started talking a little loud and then would say, "OK John, Fred's out the window give me a hand getting Dave

out. If we hurry we can get a few more of us out the window before the Germans figure out what we're doing." About this time the guard would come storming through the door and then realize that he had been fooled and the Flyers knew he could speak English all along. You see there were no windows at all! The only way in or out of the room was through the door. The guard was looking at the POW's lying on the floor with their arms behind their heads and smiling and winking at him!!

John was shot down in February so the weather was quite cold. When they arrived at their first POW camp the Flyers found that the bunks that they were given by their captors had nothing but wood slats to sleep on and they weren't given much to sleep on or under. The men in his barracks asked the Germans if there was anything that they could give them to sleep on. The Germans came back later and gave them something to sleep on. BODY BAGS!! The Germans told them "One way or another, you're going to use them." The POW's tried sleeping on them and did the best they could. Well with Necessity being the Mother Of Invention, the light bulb went off in John's head. The next night when the fellows were going to bed, John started to crawl into his Body Bag. His buddies thought he was crazy and a little macabre considering the meaning of the bag. You see, after looking over his bag carefully John saw that Body Bags are made so that body fluids wouldn't leak out after death. They were air and liquid tight. So John's idea worked out. It kept body heat in the bag. He said it was warmer in the bag than out of it. After a few days, all of his buddies in his barracks were sleeping in their bags too.

Personal hygiene obviously was a problem with POW's. You never know what you have until it's gone. John says that after a while you really start missing a shower. About the only shower that you could get was when it rained. If it wasn't too cold out, you just took your soap and went outside of your barracks and stood under the eaves and showered under the water that ran off the roof. On July 29, 1944 during a rainstorm John and a few buddies stripped and went under the eave of the hut to shower.

While showering John remembers hearing a loud crack and looked up just in time to see a lightning bolt come down just over his head and strike a British POW killing him. John figured his luck was running pretty good.

Speaking of soap, this item was found by the POW's to be useful in another way. Sometimes a POW would just have enough of being behind the barbed wire and could use some time in the infirmary. Or maybe the Escape Committee would need some information and could possibly overhear this information in the infirmary. The POW's found out that sticking a bar of soap in each armpit would elevate your body temperature where it looked like you were running a fever. They would complain to the Germans and would be put in the hospital until your temperature came down.

During his stay at Stalag Luft 6, which was located near a German Fighter training base, the German Trainees knew that their Stalag contained flyers from England. So to piss off the Prisoners the Trainees would buzz the POW's and wig wag their wings at them. This is like saying "Up Yours". John said that they would stand in the middle of the compound and give them the middle finger salute back to them. Some of the POW's would be yelling out "Crash you Son Of A Bitch" and that's what happened one-day. The German pilot lost power at the bottom of his dive and augered into the ground and blew up in a ball of flames. All the POW's started cheering and clapping and this brought out the German Camp Commandant and John said the veins in his neck just about popped out as he yelled at the POW's and they were forced to stay in their barracks for a few days with no privileges.

John was shot down near the Russian Front and near the end of the war the Russians were pushing towards Central Germany. At this time the Germans were going to keep the POW's for possible bargaining chips. So they started to march the POW's towards Central Germany. On the way they would usually commandeer a farmhouse and keep the POW's in the barn til morning. All farms usually had potato fields and they would have Russian prisoners cook up potatoes for the POW's. John's ration during this time was about a boiled potato a day. So on this one time he's standing in line for his potato and he looks down in a manure pile (all farms had one) and he sees a piece of string. So he bends down and picks it up and it's the end piece of a sausage. Sausages were hung with a piece of string on the end and when you want to eat it you just cut off the end. So John says on the end of this string is a piece of meat about the size of the tip of your little finger. So when you haven't had meat for almost a year this looks like a side of beef. So he brushes off the manure and pops it into his mouth. He said he felt like he was in heaven. It was then that about 5 guys on either side of him

start sniffing and could smell the spiced meat he was chewing and

asked if they could just smell it. So John said the light bulb went off in his head. So he took the meat out of his mouth and would fold it up into a piece of paper and save it for chewing later. He kept it for months and would let other guys smell or chew it for about 5 minutes and trade them for a couple of cigarettes or food for this time. He said you wouldn't believe what guys would trade for!!

Another time when John was standing in line for his boiled potato he struck up a conversation with one of the Russian prisoners. At this time John was fairly fluent in the Slovak language as well as English. He found out that the Russian language and Slovak were close enough that both men could understand the gist of a conversation. John was telling the Russian about America and all the wonderful things there and the Russian was telling John about Russia. The Russian was so grateful to hear about America that he told John that when he got to him for the potato to hold open his pants pocket when the German guard wasn't looking and he would give him an extra potato. So John and the cook timed it just right and the cook placed the extra potato in John's pocket. It was then that John realized that it was a **BOILED** potato!!! John said it started burning his leg but in his mind he thought, "If you think I'm going to let the Germans know about the extra potato, you're wrong". So he bit his tongue and let the tears come down his face until it cooled off and had his extra potato.

During this time of internment, John came to realize that it's Governments that have wars not individuals. One incident came to mind to him about this. As he was being shipped from one Stalag to another, the POWs would be transported by train in boxcars. Since this was nearing the end of the war, the Germans were using all their able bodied men to fight the battles. This left the guarding of the POWs to men who were unable to go to the fighting fronts. As John was being transferred one time, he recalled that some friendly debates would start between the POWs and the guards about which Air Force was better. Even though there was a language barrier, they were still able to communicate somewhat. The POWs would talk about the P-51 Mustang and P-38 Lightning and the German guards would say "Nein-Nein, Meshersmicht 109 or Folke Wulf 190." One time on the train a POW had a cigarette that he lit up and they noticed that the guard was leaning over and smelling the smoke, looking very interested. So the American offered him some of the cigarette.

He took a few drags and seemed very appreciative. Some time later

the train stopped to let the POWs have a relief period. When they got back into the boxcar the German guard got in and it looked like he had something under his overcoat. When the train started up, he brought out a small bucket of beer from under his coat and offered it to the POWs.

American Humor

John has always said that "You can beat an American to within an inch of his life, but give him a few minutes to recuperate and somehow he will make a joke about it!" This brings to mind the time he was being marched from a ship on the infamous "Heydigrug Run." After being unloaded from the ship the POWs were shackled one to another and forced to run to Stalag Luft 4. The POWs were pretty undernourished and weak after so much time in captivity and the German guards were not as weak. So when a POW couldn't run any more or tripped, naturally as he was falling he would take a few buddies down on either side of him. The German guards had bayonets on their rifles and dogs on leashes. Any prisoner on the ground was poked and prodded with the bayonets to get up and if they were too slow the guards would have the dogs start biting them. So now John just couldn't take it any more and he fell down. As his buddies were trying to get him up the guard is poking him and yelling at his dog. When John looks up, here is this dog about an inch from his face with the guard trying to do everything to get the dog to bite. To this day, John still doesn't know why that dog didn't bite him. Maybe the dog finally had enough of that kind of activity. So now John's buddies get him up and they finish the run to the camp. When they got there the POWs just flopped to the ground in front in exhaustion. After catching their breath after a few minutes, one of John's buddies yells out to him. "Hey, Yats. Why didn't you bite that son of a bitch dog in the face." All his buddies started cracking up and it took a few minutes for all the laughter to die down.

When John was getting ready to go overseas to England, he and his sister devised a code system that was to be used in their letters to each other since the Germans would be censoring his mail. If the letter started out "Dear ---" then it was a regular letter. If the letter started out "Hello ---" then it was a coded letter. There were 26 words that John and his sister decided would be coded and that each word would stand for a letter of the alphabet. John would then try to compose a letter so that the code words could be deciphered in the proper order into a message of a few words that would let the family back home know how he was doing, where he was or where he was going.

The POW's had a radio in the camp. The Germans forbade this and if they were caught with it there would be severe consequences. The POW's devised a way to make sure that if caught then they wouldn't lose too much. What they would do is after using the radio, it would be disassembled into as many pieces as possible and distributed out to the fellows. That way if the Germans found a part they couldn't be really sure if there was a radio and the POW's would only have to find another part to complete the radio.

The Germans would forbid the POW's from knowing anything that was going on in the world especially anything that came in from radio broadcasts. Just like in the movies radio broadcasts from England sometimes would contain coded messages to the POW's. The men would know when there were coded messages and when there was just regular information.

There was one man in the camp who had a very good memory and would listen to regular broadcasts and remember as much as he could. Then after the radio was broken down, he would go to various barracks and report to the POW's what he had heard and what was going on in the world and the war. The Germans were always trying to catch this man as most of his reports were given at night when he would sneak out of his barracks and go on his rounds. The Germans pretty well knew who he was and what he was doing but just couldn't catch him in the act. On his rounds to the various barracks, there would be POW's posted at most of the vantagepoints in the barracks who were lookouts for any Germans trying to find him. Once in a while the lookouts spotted some ferrets coming and would sound some kind of signal. As the Germans were coming in some of the POW's would start some kind

of fight using a ruse such as cheating at cards or somebody

stealing cigarettes or something. The POW's would put on a pretty convincing fight and the Germans would have to stop it. It always worked and the broadcaster would make his getaway.

During his time as a POW, John was always trying to figure out an escape or helping out somebody else with one. If a POW wanted to escape he was asked to bring his plan to an Escape Committee. This Committee would evaluate the plan to see if it would work or not, help with diversions, help with clothes, food or money that might be needed. If the escapee made it out of the camp then the rest of the fellows left in camp would try to make the German POW count come out so that he wouldn't be missed. In the morning the POW's were told to stand in the order that is illustrated below.

Row	1	2	3	4	5
	1	1	1	1	1
	2	2	2	2	2
	3	3	3	3	3
	4	4	4	4	4
	5	5	5	5	5
	6	6	6	6	6
	7	7	7	7	7
	8	8	8	8	8
	9	9	9	9	9
	10	10	X	10	10

The German guard would now start with Row 1 and count 1,2,3,etc. At the end of Row 1 he would look down and enter a 10 count into his book. Then he would count Row 2. When he would look down into his book to write the count down, the POW in Row 2, position 10 would step over to his right into the empty spot in Row 3 where the Green X is located and tries to be counted twice. Sometimes it would work and sometimes it didn't. When it worked then it would give the escapee an extra 24 hours to get away.

The Allied Forces were always trying to find ways to help the

POWs with escapes. One thing the POWs needed was information but the problem was how to get this information to them. Here was an unusual solution to a problem. How to get escape maps to the POWs. The Allies would send 78 rpm records to the POWs. The Germans would play the records to listen to see if there were any hidden messages or information for the POWs. After they were unable to find anything they would give the records to the POWs. However the Prisoners knew what was going on. They were able to split the record into two disk halves and inside there would be a silk escape map or other information for them.

John was liberated on April 29th, 1945. That day with the war obviously over the Allies had a British Officer parachute into the camp and meet with the German Camp Commander. Upon their meeting the German Commander inquired of the British Officer that he was ready to sit down and discuss surrender terms. The British Officer told him in no uncertain terms that there would be no discussion and that he shall turn over command of the camp to him and that he immediately surrender his weapon. About this time the German Commander realized his situation and complied with all demands.

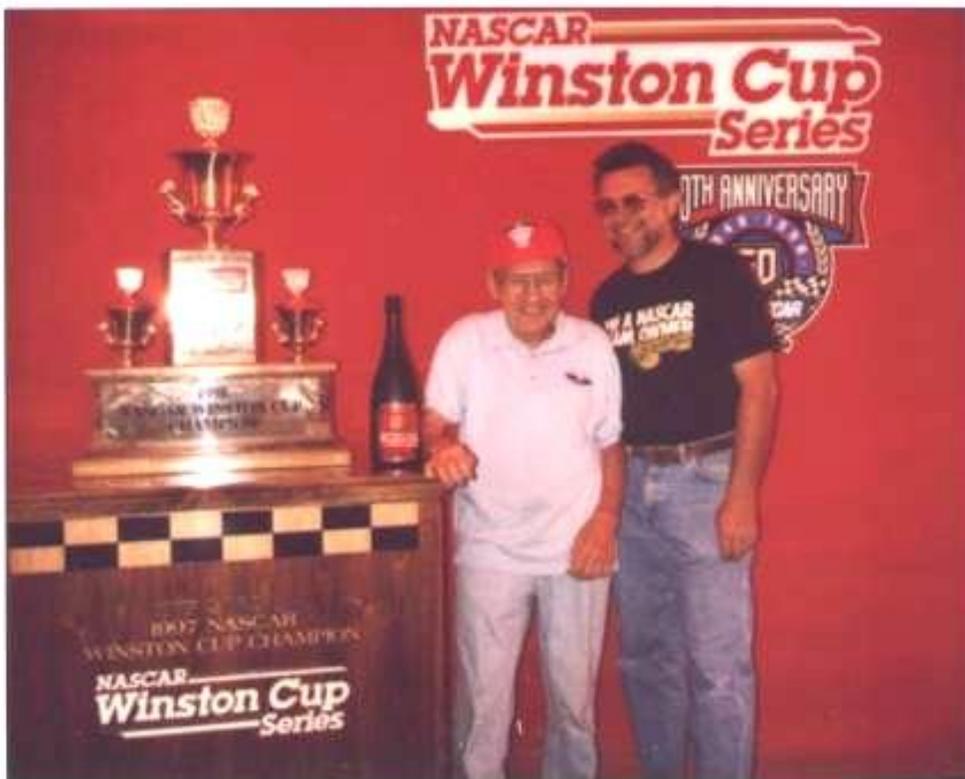
John remembered that as they were being liberated, some of the POW's who had some rather harsh memories of the German guards were about to exact some revenge on these guards as they were leaving. John remembers that when the British Officer got wind of their plans, had assembled all the liberated POW's and told them that "We are not like them. We are going to walk out of this camp with our heads held high, no revenge and letting the world know what kind of integrity Allied Prisoners had." And that's just what we did, John says.



John with fellow POW, Steve Swidirski, "The Masked Marvel" from Stalag Luft 4 National POW Convention, Tucson, Arizona, 2001



John with his son, David
National POW Convention, Tucson 2001



John and David enjoying their favorite
past time together:

NASCAR Auto Racing
at Fontana Raceway



John and his wife of 58 years, Laura.
John is 92 and Laura is 86

John folded his wings on January 31, 2006 at the
age of 95

He is buried at Mission Catholic Cemetery
Mission Hills, California

His memorial services included a Catholic Mass
assisted by his chapter of the Knights of
Columbus, an American Flag on his casket that had
flown over the US Capitol, an Air Force Honor
Guard, a 7 gun salute and taps



John A. Yatsko

1911 † 2006

Devoted Husband - Beloved Father
WWII Veteran AX/POW

