

WWII prisoner of war recalls capture, redemption

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DUNDALK - U.S. Army Air Corps Corporal Leo Wojciechowski had just unloaded bombs targeting the Blechhamer synthetic oil refinery on the Nazi-occupied Czech-Polish border when he felt his B-24 shudder.

Anti-aircraft fire had struck the nose-gunner's plane during the Aug. 7, 1944, mission, causing it to lose speed and altitude as gasoline flooded the rear of the compromised aircraft.

Wojciechowski and the nine other crewmembers had only one option: jump. It was a fateful step that would ultimately lead to more than a year of harrowing experiences inside prisoner of war camps for Wojciechowski - and, ultimately, a deepening of his Catholic faith.

Sitting inside his Dundalk home a few weeks before he was to take part in a Sept. 20 ceremony at the Pentagon honoring U.S. prisoners of war, Wojciechowski, 88, reflected on his memories of war and redemption.

When he launched himself out of his plane so many decades ago, Wojciechowski hit his head - briefly getting knocked out. The then-parishioner of Holy Rosary in Fells Point awakened to discover himself floating beneath a parachute toward a large clover patch in Czechoslovakia, 400 miles inside enemy lines.

"I was terrified," said Wojciechowski, now a white-haired parishioner of Sacred Heart of Mary in Graceland Park. "I had a 45 with me, and I thought that if anyone saw me with a gun, they're going to shoot me. You are at their mercy."

The airman tossed his weapon in a ditch before an angry farmer approached him with a pitchfork and spoke in German.

"He looked at my dog tags and saw that I was Catholic," Wojciechowski said. "He took my holster off and smacked me across the face with it. He said he couldn't understand Catholics bombing Catholics."



Leo Wojciechowski of the U.S. Army Air Corps earned a Purple Heart and other medals during the Second World War. He and other prisoners of war were to be honored in a ceremony at the Pentagon Sept. 20.

(Tom McCarthy Jr. | CR Staff)

Wojciechowski's bombardier landed nearby and was soon standing alongside the nose-gunner when two Gestapo agents appeared to interrogate them. Although Wojciechowski spoke Polish, he pretended not to understand when questioned in the language.

One of the agents tied the Americans' hands behind their backs and laid them side-by-side in a field.

"He got in the Volkswagen and started driving real fast like they were going to ride over us," Wojciechowski remembered. "I started screaming and hollering and kicking my feet, and they stopped within a foot of us."

After being jailed and sent to a Frankfurt interrogation center, Wojciechowski was transported to a prisoner of war camp in Luxembourg called Stalag Luft VI.

"They were so unorganized that it was pretty rough trying to get food," he remembered. "It was a horrible experience for about three weeks."

Wojciechowski was transferred to Stalag Luft IV in northern Poland, where he was placed on kitchen duty peeling potatoes. It was there he met a Scottish priest who had been captured after his plane was shot down while he was accompanying British airmen on a mission. The priest celebrated Mass every week for the prisoners of war and offered them support.

Wojciechowski promised God he would never miss Sunday Mass if the Lord would deliver him from the enemy. He prayed the rosary and wrote to his Baltimore girlfriend, Thelma (who would later become his wife of 66 years and counting), asking her to pray for him.

"I was happy that Bo?e spared me," said Wojciechowski, using the Polish word for God. "I guess I must have been blessed because Bo?e was looking out for me."

Wojciechowski spent time in Stalag Luft I in Germany, ultimately being liberated in the spring of 1945.

While Wojciechowski's memories of his war-time experiences are clear, he recalls nothing of what may be his most significant act.

According to Morton Gollin, navigator on Wojciechowski's downed B24, Wojciechowski pulled him back into the plane after Gollin's parachute got snagged on a lip of the nose-wheel door when he tried to jump.

"There's no question in my mind that he saved my life," said Gollin, 91, in a telephone interview from his home in California.

That fateful mission, which took off from an air base in Italy, was the first Gollin had served with Wojciechowski's crew. As an officer, protocol demanded that Gollin should have let Wojciechowski jump first.

"Happily, I wasn't very cognizant of protocol," Gollin said with a laugh. "Had I

allowed Leo to go first, I would have gone down with the plane.”

Gollin said he is eternally grateful to Wojciechowski and has written him notes of appreciation.

Wojciechowski acknowledged it’s possible he forgot about the incident when he was knocked unconscious. Or, he said, there may be a divine explanation.

“Maybe Bo?e is telling me to forget about it,” said Wojciechowski, noting that the kind act was not meant to be remembered.



*Leo Wojciechowski, who left the Army with a sergeant’s rank,
said, “We tried to do as much as we could to stop the Nazis.”
(Courtesy Leo Wojciechowski)*

Gently cradling a Purple Heart and other medals he earned in the war, Wojciechowski, who left the Army with a sergeant’s rank, balked at the suggestion that he is a hero.

“We tried to do as much as we could to stop the Nazis,” he said in a soft voice. “We felt duty-bound to do the best we could for our country.”

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