

2 LT William Bernard Korber

1919 – 1996

EARLY YEARS, MISSIONS, AND CAPTURE

William “Bill” Bernard Korber was born on 8 October 1919 in Pueblo, Colorado. His father, a locomotive engineer on the Rio Grande, decided to move the family to St. Charles Mesa Water District in Pueblo during the Great Depression as this option would enable them to grow enough food to feed his family of eight members. Bill remembers graduating from Central High in 1937 and enlisting in the Cavalry at Ft. Bliss 15 months prior to Pearl Harbor, later transferring to the Army Air Corps to begin his training as a pilot. An article written by Jerry Miller, based on Bill’s wartime diary and shared by his brother, John, offered a private perspective into Korber’s reflections and actions as a POW in enemy territory. In addition to the article’s written contents, several photos of Bill enhanced his first-hand accounts: one by a plane he called “His Sweetheart” at Will Rogers Air Field in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and a second, dressed in a Cavalry uniform.

The Korber family was well represented in the Armed Forces, as two brothers, Leo and Don, also served during WWII. A third brother, John, was too young during this time frame but later served in the Navy.

During the North African Campaign, 2Lt Korber flew many missions against the Desert Fox, Field Marshall Rommel. His unit strafed and bombed enemy positions before the official start of the Sicilian Campaign and later, he flew in support of ground troops. Korber was flying an A-36, a modified P-51 dive bomber. On his 13th mission on 21 July 1943, his plane was hit with a 40 millimeter. *“As I strafed a truck, ground flak (ack ack) made a hit on the underside of the engine and commenced smoking.”* He bailed out and became a member of the Caterpillar Club, a title reserved for those who parachute to safety. *“It’s the one time you thank God for the silkworm.”*

Korber was burned slightly when he popped open the canopy. *“My sunglasses protected my eyes, thank God.”* Landing on the side of a rocky mountain, his knee was lacerated, his uniform was torn, and one boot of a special pair of pull-on mosquito boots bought in Casablanca went missing.

“Instead of heading south to friendly territory, I tried to find that doggone boot on that rocky Sicilian terrain. Right shortly I’m looking at several German burp pistols and the well-known greeting of the Krauts, ‘For you the war is over.’”

Escorted to nearby tanks, Korber was amazed when offered water and candy. He reciprocated with cigarettes and Spearmint gum and was treated for his injuries by a German doctor. *“The respect and courtesy I received from those front-line German soldiers as a captured officer really surprised me. They gave me a couple of good salutes when I expected to be shot.”*

After interrogations by a German officer only led to replies of name, rank, serial number, Korber and other captured American officers were moved by trucks, boxcars and rail coaches to a newly designated American Ground Forces Camp in Shubin, Poland. The date was 10 August 1943.

Unaware that their son, Bill, was even alive, his parents received the first telegram on 14 August 1943. It stated that he was "*missing in action*". The second one, which arrived about three weeks later, contained the message that he was alive, but was a Prisoner of War of the Germans.

OFLAG 64

2LT Korber kept a wartime diary of his experiences from September 1943 until September 1944. After settling in to the daily camp routine, he used his diary to record what he observed, heard, and experienced. For example, on 10 September, he wrote, "*The Red Cross has distributed new G.I. clothing and blankets, books, musical instruments, etc. making us almost better cared for than our German Guards.*" The importance of Red Cross food parcels, combined with food provided by the Germans and fresh produce grown by Kriegies in their own established garden, increased the quality and quantity of needed nourishment, but most Kriegies lost weight, an average of 40 pounds per man by the end of the war. The following is a diary note dated January 21, 1944: "*Happy parcel from home today. Mom really sent just the right stuff. The package left Pueblo Sept.28. It looked like it had been thru a Berlin bombing.*" Mail Call, whether letter or package, was a much anticipated and cherished morale builder throughout the camp. Diary renderings also included notes on scheduled activities such as sport, classes, lectures, and theatre presentations (he was in *Brother Orchard* and several others), camp walks for exercise and special holiday celebrations.

According to Miller's article, however, not all entries reflected the lighter side of camp life. Korber did mention the interrogation that took place in Novena, Berlin, shortly after their arrival, but did not offer details except that all 19 American officers returned safely to Oflag 64. Concern about the "*shocking number of Russians deaths*" when in the hands of German troops compared to those of American POWs appeared on several pages. Korber's views concerning his Catholic faith were also subjects of interest and were interspaced with statements on barracks' discussions (some confrontational) and propaganda messages dispersed by the Germans.

"*June 6 – Tues. The great day.*" Although this short message implied great importance to the D-Day landings, most later diary entries made reference only to the world inside Oflag 64. Miller states that in mid-July 1944, comments appeared about the nearness of Russian troops and on July 29, "*Last night the boys claimed to have seen bomb flashes SW of here...*", then those about the war stopped.

The last diary entry was on September 1, 1944. It was about a show put on by the POWs, the last written item a performed song, "*Ma, I don't want a*

sweater, I want a sweater girl". No reason was given to indicate that this would be the ultimate entry.

Korber kept the diary through the rest of his encampment, his homecoming, and for years after his release, until it was passed to his brother, John. It was initially hand-written on shorthand pads. Later he had it typed: forty-one, single spaced pages.

If Bill Korber had continued writing his diary, entries would possibly have included the forced march out of Oflag 64 and the terrible conditions they endured until freed at Moosburg, Germany, on April 29, eight days before Germany surrendered. Five weeks later the ex-POWs boarded a ship at La Havre, France, bound for the U.S.A. Bill shared his voyage with civilians and he remembered eating a fancy meal. A lady at his table did not eat her dessert. He wanted to ask her for it, but he didn't.

Making his way back to Pueblo, Korber returned to his place of employment before the war, Forman's, then served as a bookkeeper at the Colorado State Penitentiary. While working there, he was recalled to the Air Force during the Korean War on 13 March 1951, but did not fly. Discharged as a Captain on 14 September 1954, he was employed at Warren Air Force base in Cheyenne, Wyoming, his home base until his death. *"Over the years, he attended several reunions of Oflag 64 survivors, including one held in Colorado Springs in 1992."*

William "Bill" Korber died on 3 February 1996 and was buried in Mount Olive Cemetery, Cheyenne, Wyoming. His wife, Evelyn, was buried beside him in 2018.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Interviewed by Jerry Drake on Flag Day, 14 June 1967, in Cheyenne, William Korber was asked about his experiences as a POW. He stated that it gave him a greater appreciation for this nation and when he talked about the flag, it's with a reverent tone. *"Let's love it, let's respect it, let's perpetuate it and let's live up to its standards."* He did. William flew his American flag proudly on Flag Day and on many other days throughout the year. He also visited schools and gave insightful talks about the importance of American legacies like our flag.

MEMORIAL SERVICE AND MISSION-X

This separate document is located in William Korber's Oflag 64 file.

THE LAST PATROL was a memorial ceremony, held on 22 September 1992. Its purpose was to remember American POWs, their service, and those who are still Missing in Action and/or Unaccounted For.

The following account was presented by ex-POW William Korber at the service.

Soon after my arrival at Oflag 64 in Schubin, Poland I got inducted into the Mission-X operation, a Top-Secret activity which resulted in intelligence data coming into and going out of the camp by clandestine means. Some of us became Code Users (CU's) arranging for radio tubes to come inside softballs, a radio antenna encased in the leg of a ping-pong table.

One of the American German-speaking officers even obtained the grids for a V1, V2 launching facility from an Unteroffizier who noted the devastation his family was suffering while home on leave. We sent the grids to Military Intelligence in Washington where they ricocheted them back to England, culminating in a night bombing raid that badly damaged the launching facility.

Participating in this counterintelligence activity gave us a further sense of purpose and accomplishment in continuing to give the enemy a bad time. We were awarded the Bronze Star but were cautioned to remain silent about it. Many of us participants feel that this type of function was the forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and could have potential applications in future conflicts and hostage taking situations. Options unlimited!

However, Floyd Schumaker [Lloyd R. Shoemaker], a stateside decoder and operative in Washington D.C. decided to write a book in 1984 with permission of proper authority. This book, The Escape Factory, released this Top Secret information that we POWs had kept silent for forty years. We wryly noted that future prisoners wouldn't get letter writing privileges or be allowed any reception of recreational equipment or reading material. At least, that's our opinion.

CITATION FOR BRONZE STAR MEDAL

Second Lieutenant William B. Korber, while held prisoner by Germany, at great personal risk, performed duties which resulted in valuable information reaching the War Department. His service was also of vital importance to his fellow prisoners of war.

21 August 1945

Second Lieutenant William B. Korber

AAF Redistribution Station No. 3

Santa Monica, California

My Dear Lieutenant Korber,

Word has just been received at this headquarters by the direction of the President, the Bronze Star Medal has been awarded you by the War Department.

It has been a source of inspiration to me to learn of your heroic achievement while a prisoner of war in Germany, which has merited this award. Your enviable record of service to your country must be a source of pride to you.

I have requested that the Commanding Officer, AAF Redistribution Station No. 3, to make the necessary arrangements to present this decoration to you. He will communicate with you shortly to make plans for this presentation.

Sincerely yours,

William E. Shedd

Major General, U.S. Army

Commanding

Captain Korber was also awarded the Purple Heart and the POW Medal.

SOURCES

Pueblo Historical Society Monthly Newsletter, The Pueblo Lore

March 2012; "A Prisoner's Diary" by Jerry Miller

Cheyenne Tribune Eagle, Flag Day, 14 June 1967

"Former POW Korber Knows Flag Worth Fighting For" by Kerry Drake, Sunday Editor.

Biography written by Kriegy Research Group writer Ann C. Rogers