

Memories still fresh for former POW

By Janene Scully
Associate Editor

After being a German prisoner during World War II, Robert “Bob” Rivers made two promises to himself six decades ago: He would never again be without food or live in the cold.

In the six decades since, he's kept both, the 90-year-old Orcutt resident said.

Rivers will be the special guest of honor at today's Veterans Day ceremony, which begins at 11 a.m. at the Santa Maria Cemetery.

His time as a prisoner of war was long ago, but remains fresh today.

“I think about it all the time because it made me a different person in that I made a vow that I was never going to go hungry again or live where it was cold and I've succeeded in that,” said Rivers, who was a captain when he left the military in 1946. “I have the feeling right now that I don't care what happens, it won't be as bad. Everything's downhill now.”

After the military, he returned to the Central Coast to study agriculture at Cal Poly and later started his own pig farm and cattle ranch. He and his wife, Elinor, had been married six decades when she died in June.

Rivers became enamored with flying at a young age while growing up in Santa Maria. He said he was a mascot of the Hancock College of Aeronautics in Santa Maria, where he recalled fueling the airplane of a pilot he later learned was pioneer aviator Amelia Earhart.

In 1939 he joined the Army Air Corps (it later became the Army Air Forces) and then went through pilot training. He wound up among a group of U.S. military members in the 4th Fighter Squadron assigned to fly British Spitfire fighter planes.

But the day of Jan. 3, 1943, changed his life.

“We just made the mistake of flying over a German airfield,” Rivers said matter-of-factly. “And they took a dim view of that.”

Rivers and two other Spitfire pilots were shot down, crash landing in North Africa.

“It wasn't good. I was captured right away.”

He initially thought his captors were French soldiers, until they drew closer and a dispirited Rivers saw the Nazi symbol.

“The guys that captured me were real friendly,” he said, adding his captors shared their hot food with him. “They weren't aggressive.”

When his captors slept, Rivers made a bid for freedom, not realizing a guard was posted outside. He was captured again, and they took his shoes to ensure he didn't try again.

The next day he and other captives were shipped to Tunis before being sent to Sicily, Italy, and Munich, Germany, where they were put on a train to Frankfurt, Germany, arriving there Jan. 29. That's where he was interrogated for the first time.

“They used all kinds of tricks to interrogate, but nothing brutal. No torture, just mental stuff,” he said, explaining guards turned off the heat and kept windows open despite the fact it was winter in Germany.

They also put him on a 21-day diet of bread and water.

Later the captives were sent to Poland, 50 men packed into railcars designed to hold fewer people. After a short stay at a POW camp, the POWs became severely ill with dysentery when they were fed dried fruit from Turkey. Despite this, they were loaded onto railcars for a three-day ride without food or water.

“You can imagine what a mess it was. It was the worst part of my experience,” Rivers said. “It’s something I didn’t like to even talk about until I read another fellow’s story and he commented on it.”

Rivers only began talking about it about five years ago, he added

“It wasn’t a good time of my life,” he said.

They arrived at the new stalag in Sagan, Poland, and were immediately given showers.

The prisoners weren’t entirely cut off from the outside world, as they had access to contraband radio that relayed the BBC broadcast twice a day.

“Of course we couldn’t talk about what was going on because we didn’t want them to know what we knew,” he said.

The enterprising Rivers made do while in captivity.

“One thing I did learn how to do is to make sure I had enough to eat somehow,” he said.

He also started a small garden, giving him the chance grow vegetables.

Red Cross rations, actually Army-issued supplies, were “really good - if you got enough of them.”

With Russian troops nearing the stalag at Sagan, the prisoners endured a 90-mile march to Dresden, where they were put on another railcar.

“That was one of the coldest winters, too, in Germany, when they had us on the march,” said Rivers, who still suffers “chilblains” in his feet and fingers from being in the extreme cold. “Really, I didn’t suffer too much on the march, except getting cold.”

Since he didn’t smoke, Rivers said he used the cigarettes provided in his rations to trade for food, securing bread from civilians along the route.

“It helped a lot to be able to have that extra food,” said Rivers, who weighed 154 pounds when he was captured; but had dropped to 125 by the time he got out.

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