

## Prisoner 1573

World War II veteran recounts his time as a German POW and the covert government plan to free him.

[Photos and Story By Aaron Stern/The Connection](#)

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Wilbur Blaine "Bill" Sharpe was Prisoner 1573 when he was held by the Germans during World War II at Oflag 64, a prison camp for commissioned officers. Now an Ashburn resident, Sharpe will be featured in an upcoming television documentary about a covert U.S. government operation that smuggled equipment into such camps to help POWs plan and execute escapes.

The edge of the German POW camp Oflag 64 was a place of constant activity from the summer of 1943 into the winter of 1945. One building served as a makeshift chapel for the American military officers interred at the camp by the German army, and another building was the site of constant rehearsals for a ragtag theater company. Nearby a ball field buzzed with imprisoned officers trying to outwit and outpitch one another in spirited baseball games cheered on by their comrades-in-arms.

It was there, along the sidelines of those games, that perhaps the Germans would have noticed what was going on.

Those onlookers.

They cheered vigorously, yet if one looked closer it might have been seen that their pantlegs, curiously plump as they approached the field, were loose against their gaunt bodies as they turned and walked away from the dusty field. They walked to the nearby latrine and when they walked back to the ball field their pants again bulged ever so slightly.

Wilbur "Bill" Sharpe often was one of those onlookers.

Inside their trousers were false pantlegs of burlap, closed at the bottom with a string, and stuffed with the dirt dug from a secret tunnel that led from beneath the latrine towards the perimeter fence of Oflag 64. Sharpe and others would cheer their baseball-playing mates, jump up and down, and surreptitiously loose the strings at the bottom of their pants and shake their legs empty of dirt onto the ratty field.

"Six or eight guys can move an awful lot of dirt in a short time that way," Sharpe said.

SHARPE SPENT 19 months at Oflag 64 in Schubin, Poland. Captured in North Africa with the other members of the U.S. Army's 17th Field Artillery Battalion on Valentine's Day, 1943 at the Faid Pass, Battle of Kasserine, 2nd Lieutenant Sharpe and his fellow soldiers were able to destroy their weapons before being taken by the forces of the so-called "Desert Fox," legendary German General Erwin Rommel.

"He got us. We were captured by the best," said Sharpe. "He was a genius."

They were transported briefly to a POW camp filled with British officers captured at the 1940 Battle of Dunkirk, then to Oflag 64, a camp for commissioned officers that,

by the standards set forth by the Geneva Conventions, was far less brutal than POW camps for enlisted men.

The officers there were not permitted to perform manual labor and they had books to read. They had enough musical instruments to form a 16-piece band, enough equipment for their baseball games, and through agreements between the Red Cross and the YMCA, officers at such camps were able to send and receive mail from home, said Sharpe. They didn't eat much — meals consisted of watery soup and sour bread and by the time he was liberated Sharpe weighed just 96 lbs., far shy of the 150 lbs. he was captured with — but care packages from the Red Cross rationed between bunkmates to make them last longer got them through.

"If it weren't for the Red Cross I wouldn't be here today," Sharpe said.

It was one of those letters from home that tipped off Sharpe that something was afoot at Oflag 64. The letter came from a supposed relative who shared Sharpe's last name that Sharpe had never met or even heard of. The letter, it turned out, wasn't for Sharpe at all, but for one of the higher-ranking imprisoned officers, and it wasn't from a long lost relative either. It was from a covert government operation called MIS-X.

According to correspondence between Sharpe and the producer of an upcoming National Geographic Channel documentary, MIS-X was an ultra-secretive U.S. Intelligence subgroup that funneled information and equipment to the prisoners of the German POW camps to aid in their potential escapes.

What Sharpe knows is that indeed some packages did contain hidden equipment. The handle of a hairbrush, for instance, could contain compass needles, maps, and German currency. The correspondence between Sharpe and the National Geographic producer alludes to guns that were obtained by the upper echelon officers held at Oflag 64 but Sharpe said that neither from his personal knowledge nor through conversations with the scant remaining survivors that he has kept in touch with can he verify that that ever took place.

What he does know is that through the combined efforts of MIS-X — the existence of which Sharpe said was not declassified until within the last five years — and the covert operations of the imprisoned Americans, escape from Oflag 64 loomed within grasp but was never attained. Sharpe, just 20 at the time he was captured, was not in the loop of sensitive information or escape plans but he said that only one attempt at escape was ever made. The few who made it under the fence were soon recaptured by the Germans and spent 45 days in solitary confinement, giving pause to future escape plans.

Yet the Germans still did not detect the tunnel, Sharpe said. They did not find its entrance in the deep pit below the toilets. They did not find the missing slats of bed frames that supported the tunnel, nor did they notice missing mattresses whose burlap covers were torn and sewn into the clandestine dirt carrying tubes.

"They even came to our [theater] programs and we were digging right under them at the time," said Sharpe.

OTHER ATTEMPTS to escape were planned but never executed. Then, in January of 1945 with the Russian military bearing down on the German occupation Sharpe and his comrades were marched out of Oflag 64 by the retreating Germans. They marched for eight days through the snow-covered country side, bedding at night in abandoned barns, sleeping against one another for warmth. On the morning of the ninth day, Sharpe and two of his fellow officers didn't report for rollcall to march, hiding out instead in the haymow they had slept in the night before. The Russians were advancing too quickly for the Germans to search for them and left without the three soldiers.

Upon meeting with the Russian forces Sharpe and company were not immediately transferred to American forces. Instead, said Sharpe, they were stripped of their belongings and forced into service with the Russian infantry. Sharpe supposes

that what he saw in that next month is not indicative of Russians today, but still he holds a grudge. He witnessed German civilians killed and raped, their homes looted by Russian soldiers as they advanced towards Berlin.

"They were miserable people," Sharpe said of the Russians.

Eventually Sharpe and his friends stole a Russian Jeep and made it to the rear of the Russian ranks where they found sympathetic officers and were eventually transferred back to American hands.

AFTER THE WAR Sharpe returned to his native Indiana where he met and married his wife, Mary. He remained in the Army Reserve then returned to action in the Korean War, where he said he fired the first combat salvo of the conflict from his 8-inch Howitzer battery. He returned home in 1952 after six months of service.

Sharpe then left the Army with the rank of Captain and spent the next 50 years working in retail. He and Mary moved to the Washington, D.C. area and Sharpe went to work for Kay Jewelers before opening up new stores for the expanding Woodward & Lothrop department chain as it grew through Maryland and Virginia. He retired, finally, in 2001 after working first for Burberry, opening their first D.C. store, and then Charles Schwartz & Son Jewelers.

"His fuse was getting short," said Mary Sharpe as they sat in their new condo at the Ashby Ponds Retirement Living Facility in Ashburn earlier this week. They moved there from Bethesda, Md. late last year after selling the home they had lived in for 48 years.

While Bill Sharpe was out doing the retail work, Mary stayed at home raising their daughter and keeping the home front running smoothly.

"She did all the hard work," Sharpe said.

These days Bill Sharpe keeps in touch with a few remaining from his time in Oflag 64, the memories of which were stirred last November when he was interviewed for the National Geographic special which is slated to air at 9 p.m. on Sunday, Aug. 2. But there aren't many of his old friends from the 17th left, a hard truth that Sharpe, now 87, acknowledged with a small catch in his voice.

"We lose a lot of them every year," he said.



After nearly two years as a German POW in World War II Bill Sharpe served as an artillery officer in the Korean War before returning home and working in retail for the next 50 years. He and his wife of 63 years, Mary Sharpe, now live in the Ashby Ponds Retirement Living facility in Ashburn.

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