



JAMES P. JAMES

D-DAY PARATROOPER HELD AS A P.O.W.

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Although it happened more than 60 years ago, James P. James remembered it like it was yesterday. After facing multiple near-death experiences as a Prisoner of War, not much could erase the traumatic times he faced.

James, a United States Army Veteran, served as a paratrooper during World War II. He found out just 10 days prior that he'd be jumping out of a plane during D-Day, the Allied Invasion of Normandy on June 6, 1944.

In March 2005, he spoke at-length to the Wisconsin Veterans Museum as part of its collection of oral history interviews.

Joining the Airborne

James, of North Fond du Lac, spent just one year in high school before opting to work in local shoe shops, earning a living as opposed to going to school.

In February 1943, he received the life-changing news that he'd been drafted into the military, and it was off to Mineral Wells, Texas for 13 weeks of basic training. Soon, he was encouraged to join the Airborne, and committed largely because of the pay increase and the excitement level of the line of work. One month of training later, James was jumping out

of C-47 aircraft in preparation for combat missions.

While going through jump training in Alliance, Nebraska, James joined the 507th Infantry Regiment. Once passing through the training, he and his fellow soldiers found themselves onboard a ship in the Pacific Ocean, training to fight. Before they knew it, they were abroad in England and then Ireland, training to be part of the largest amphibious attack in history.

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Aside from a few live-fire exercises, James said that his battalion didn't do much more than eat while stationed in Ireland.

“They fed us until we couldn't eat no more,” he said during his interview. “There was 10 days of food on the tables, all you want to eat, any time you want to eat. They were fattening us up, that was the thing.”

They didn't know it at the time, but those meals were the last full ones that James and his battalion had for nearly one year.

The D-Day Operation

On the day of the operation, James and his battalion loaded up the plane and got ready to jump early in the morning – around 1:30 a.m. As the plane hovered thousands of feet over the Normandy area, James and the rest of the crew prepared for the leap of their lives. All the practice jumps and training led up to this moment, and adrenaline set in once the door flew open.

James lined up and got mentally prepared to jump, but the plane encountered massive enemy gunfire. James said that he heard a loud noise in front of him and saw a fellow soldier get shot in the head before being pushed out of the plane.

James was the eighth person to make the jump with a close friend, Pfeifer, being the ninth. After jumping, James looked back to see the plane plummeting down nose-first with its engines on fire.



U.S. Department of Defense photo

Allied air forces perform close air support over the battle field, similar to the support they played on D-Day.

“We saw the plane, we watched it,” he said. “It went down and it blew right up. Seven guys never got out of the plane and the same with the plane crew.”

Once he pulled his parachute and approached the ground, James hit another snag and got caught in a tree. Realizing he was lucky to be alive, James cut himself down and was ecstatic to see Pfeifer alive and nearby. The two regained their composure and looked around in the pitch dark for the rest of the crew. They made contact with just one other, nicknamed “Laddy,” and started digging holes out of instinct.

“Why we dug them holes, I don’t know, but we dug holes anyway,” James said.

After hours of searching, daylight struck and it was met with sudden bursts of gunfire in the distance. Screams in a foreign language could be heard, and the Americans were ordered to surrender.

“They came from the other side, about 30 or 35 of them,” James said. “‘Hande hoch,’ they said. That means, ‘hands up.’”

Life as a Prisoner of War

The three paratroopers were captured and ordered

to walk about an hour until reaching a barn. James said about 350 Americans were being held by the Germans inside the building in uncomfortable conditions.

One day, the hundreds of American prisoners were ordered to walk all the way to Paris. But they encountered serious trouble on the trek when multiple American B-47 airplanes began strafing them, unaware they were American prisoners.

James said those strafing runs killed 28 Americans and nine German guards as they marched on. Yet again, James said he was lucky to be alive, running toward the woods when two paratroopers at his sides were each struck and killed.

“They both got killed and I got their blood,” he said. “There were so many bullets spaced so far apart and they got two guys on each side of me ... God was with me all the way.”

Along with the other prisoners still alive, James helped bury the deceased. He said that he encountered a man that was still alive despite being shot in the head. The man handed James his wristwatch, saying: “Take the wristwatch and give it to my wife if you ever get back.”

The man was found dead the next morning and the watch was gone, and those survivors continued onward toward Paris. After reaching their destination, they were packed into railroad cars – about 60 per car. They were ordered to sit still for about three days with very little food or water. On the fourth day, with the Americans bombing the bridges on the train’s pathway, they started to walk again.

“It was a million-dollar experience, but I wouldn’t take a million to go through it again.”



James estimated the walk from Paris into Germany took about three months. After finally reaching Mühlberg, Germany, James said that he was weighed and placed into one of three camps with about 100 others. Over those months of being held captive, James said he went from 160 pounds to just 97 and saw death in his future.

“I was thinking of when will the war be over?” James said. “Will I make it home?”

James and other prisoners were ordered to hard labor, cutting trees down until injuring his wrist one day. He was transported to another German city with guards where he was examined. His injured wrist eventually healed, but James was ordered to be a cook instead of continuing with the tree-cutting labor.

Prisoners were fed at the bare minimum, and loafs of bread were filled with sawdust. James said he and others were warned not to consume the bread, but some were starving and had no other options. Once the bread mixed with water, they were found dead the next day.

An Improbable Rescue

On May 7, 1945, after 11 months being held in captivity, James and the other American prisoners finally had a semblance of optimism that they were going to survive.

“We saw the Germans running with no guns or nothing,” James said. “They start running for the hills, the Czechoslovakian hills. And we couldn’t

figure out what was going on.”

James said that the Germans dumped all their guns and ammunition in bathrooms and left everything but radios. They noticed the town was eerily quiet, with no German soldiers in sight, and marched toward the South. Eventually, they approached the American line and were greeted by fellow Allied soldiers.

“The first thing we asked for was cigarettes,” James said.

The hundreds of prisoners were finally free and transferred to Lucky Strike Camp in France, where they were fed, bathed and realized they were going to make it home. They stayed there about 30 days before landing back at Camp Kilmer in New Jersey – the same place James and his battalion took off for Europe.

Coming Back Home

After a few months, James arrived back in North Fond du Lac, where his family anxiously awaited his return home. Once back, he met and fell in love with Dimetra Christopolis, getting married in 1946. They were married for 20 years until she died in 1966. In 1970, James got remarried to Mary Rasmussen.

For 35 years after his military service, James worked for Chicago Northwestern Railroad as an engineer, retiring in 1981. He’d always been a fan of sports (baseball and football in particular) and loved to bowl and fish with friends. He remained involved with the military in his later years, speaking at several local high schools about his experiences and joining Veterans Service Organizations such as Veterans of Foreign Wars and Disabled American Veterans.

When asked during his WVM interview about his military service during WWII, James said: “It was a million-dollar experience, but I wouldn’t take a million to go through it again.”

James died June 14, 2014 at the age of 91. He was survived by his son (Peter), his daughter (Frances) and his stepson (Russell). He lived long enough to enjoy the company of his five grandchildren and four great-grandchildren and was laid to rest in Markesan.

“He set an example of strength and courage to everyone he met and he touched their hearts,” his obituary said.

