

# WWII POWs remembered as heroes by their Tennessee children

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of February 28, 2022)

Carolyn Krause provides this Historically Speaking series of two columns featuring a talk given by Tennessee Supreme Court Justice Sharon Lee on prisoners of war.

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At the most recent meeting of the League of Women Voters (LWV) of Oak Ridge, Tennessee Supreme Court Justice Sharon Lee presented compelling stories of five American soldiers captured and held as prisoners of war (POWs) by the Germans in World War II. One of the soldiers was her father, Charles James Lee. The other four were James Hugh Ross, Harold Leibowitz, David Goldin and Bruce Foster, Sr. All five had children who became lawyers and judges in Tennessee.

Her presentation, entitled "American Heroes with Common Bonds," was inspired by her father's story and the stories of her colleagues – lawyers and judges – who also had fathers who had been captured in Germany during the war. She did considerable research to understand the conditions these POWs endured and the ways their experiences shaped their lives after release. Here is the first of two summaries of Justice Lee's presentation.

When Sharon Lee was six years old, she looked into a closet and pulled out a light blue mug inscribed with a Nazi symbol. She asked her mother, "What's this?" Her mother replied, "Put it back. It's your dad's from the war. We don't talk about the war." So, Sharon never mentioned it again for years but the incident kept alive her curiosity about her dad's war experience.

When he reached his 80s, he first talked about the war in an invited speech to the Kiwanis Club of Madisonville, the county seat of Monroe County. "I went to hear him," Justice Sharon Lee said. "He talked about the long, crowded ride to the prison camp in the cattle car and broke down. I had never seen my dad cry before. After so many years, the thought of this war experience was so painful that he couldn't get through his speech without tears."

During her virtual slide presentation, the justice told the LWV audience about her father and four other POWs she learned about from some of their children – lawyer colleagues of hers. Her father, Charles J. Lee, died less than a year after Justice Lee was appointed in 2008 to the Tennessee Supreme Court. (She was Chief Justice from 2014 until 2016.)

Staff Sgt. Lee, the oldest of eight children who grew up on a farm in Tellico Plains in Monroe County and worked at the Fontana Dam for the Tennessee Valley Authority, joined the Army Air Corps at age 19 in January 1943. He was stationed at a base camp in England where he was trained to serve as a waist gunner and flight engineer on a B-17 Flying Fortress bomber.

"My dad and his crew began flying missions over Germany in a B-17 bomber they nicknamed Smokey Stover," Justice Lee said. "The crew had to fly 25 missions before they could go home. The average number of flights American airmen made before being shot down was five."

On May 12, 1944, the Army Air Corps launched one of the biggest air campaigns of the war in preparation for D-Day. The purpose was to bomb Germany's synfuel production facility, which converted coal to oil for use in making jet fuel. On that day, 935 B-17 bombers flew from London to Germany.

"Of the 26 planes in my dad's squadron, only 12 returned," she said. "This was his sixth and last bombing mission because an enemy fighter aircraft targeted his plane. Dad was shot and suffered wounds to his head, shoulder, back and wrist. With the help of a fellow airman, he was able to bail out of the plane."

After he parachuted to the ground, he was captured by members of the German home guard. He was driven in a truck to a jail in a small town outside of Frankfurt and held in solitary confinement for 10 days; he was never given medical care for his injuries. Then he was transported by train to the newly opened

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prison camp in Poland called Stalag Luft IV, which held nearly 10,000 prisoners. The food they were provided consisted mostly of "a soup made from rotten cabbage and bread made from sawdust," Justice Lee said. "American Red Cross food packages often were not delivered there."

The justice said that each barrack at the camp was designed for 16 prisoners but usually 25 POWs were forced to live there, meaning that some had to sleep on hard wooden floors or bare shavings. "There was very little heat in the barracks. My dad was never given anything to wear. He wore the bloodstained clothes he had on when he was captured. Due to his untreated injuries and battle with hepatitis, he became very sick. He only survived due to the persistence of his fellow prisoners who helped him get up and walk each day."

By late May 1944, the Lee family was notified of his capture by Western Union; a few days earlier, the POW's father Clement Lee had a vivid dream about being in an airplane attacked by three other planes. The family did not know how much Sgt. Lee suffered during the worst part of his incarceration – the 10-day train trip to another prison camp in Barth, Germany.

He was packed with 60 other POWs into a boxcar (also called a cattle car, just like the train cars used to transport Jews and other targeted groups to the concentration and extermination camps). The prisoners had to stand all day and night in cramped conditions. Many suffered from dysentery and other illnesses. They were cold because they had no coats. They had to share a single toilet – a metal container in the middle of the boxcar.

While Lee was imprisoned, his family in Tellico Plains received his medal from Army Air Corps representatives in a somber ceremony. On May 13, 1945, one year and one day after his capture, Staff Sgt. Lee and the other prisoners were liberated by Russian soldiers and taken to France to be flown home.

Lee's first meal was a cheeseburger. He was six feet and three inches tall and weighed only 86 pounds. He was hospitalized in Florida where his starved body learned to eat again. He later acknowledged that food was scarce in Germany during the war; he knew German guards who endured hunger.

"My dad got married, raised a family, ran a trucking company and real estate business, became a general contractor and served as city administrator for Madisonville," Justice Lee said. "For 12 years he was county commissioner for Monroe County. He died on Feb. 27, 2009, when he was 86."

Justice Lee spoke movingly about four other POWs whose children she knows; two of her stories are presented here.

James Hugh Ross of Etowah, Tenn., was a radio operator on a B-17 bomber that was hit by German ground fire and crash landed in the Sahara Desert in November 1942. The crew's assignment had been to bomb a Nazi base on the Mediterranean Sea in North Africa. On his way to a prison camp near Munich, Ross was forced to sleep in an ancient Roman catacomb.

He suffered from cold and very little food (soup made of water and fish heads). After 14 months in captivity, he returned to Etowah and had four children, including a now-retired criminal court judge. Despite losing his eyesight as a result of wartime malnutrition, he was elected tax assessor for McMinn County and served as postmaster of the Etowah post office.

Lt. Harold Leibowitz, a Jewish volunteer for the Army Air Corps from Brooklyn, N.Y., and father of retired Criminal Court Judge Mary Lou Leibowitz of Knoxville, parachuted into a field in Poland. Two engines of his aircraft had caught fire during a bombing run on Sept. 12, 1944, on a synthetic fuel plant in Germany. Polish farmers turned him over to the Nazis.

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At an interrogation camp in Frankfurt, he was forced to wear a dog tag marked with an "H" for Hebrew. He was asked, "Why are you here, Jew? Don't you know what we do to Jews?" He replied, "I am an American soldier fighting for my country."

Liberated with 9000 American airmen by Operation Revival in mid-May of 1945, Lt. Leibowitz came home, raised a family and worked as a special agent with the Internal Revenue Service. He died when he was 86.

In the second and last article in this series, Justice Sharon Lee tells the stories of two more fathers of her colleagues who became upright citizens and fathers after being POWs in Germany during World War II. She will also describe the common bonds of the POWs whose stories she has learned and shared with many.

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Thanks Carolyn. Look for the conclusion of Justice Lee's talk next.



Tennessee Supreme Court Justice Sharon Lee



Airman Charles Lee

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Des Kriegsgefangenen

Vorname des Vaters: Clennit

Familiennamen der Mutter: Lee

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Charles Lee Prisoner of War