

De Wolf's B-17 crew poses for a photo during the war before one of their bombing missions. Their plane was shot down while making a bomb run on the German-French border.

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BY GREG GEISSMAN



discovers monument to prison camp

Bill De Wolf took an interesting trip into his past this year as he visited a spot which might have been forgotten to all but a few who resided there.

De Wolf and his B17 crew were shot down on March 26, 1944 over the German border during World War II. Some of the crew managed to bail out of the aircraft but their long descent was easily seen by German forces and were taken into custody as prisoners of war.

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When De Wolf and his wife Anne along with their two granddaughters Angela and Margaret Brown were on a cruise vacation of the Scandinavian capitals and St. Petersburg, Russia last summer when De Wolf noticed one of the stops was Warnemunde, Germany.

Bill explained that he remembered Warnemunde being close to Barth and decided to investigate the prison camp that he had been held in.

"We hired a taxi driver named Jurgen Wahl who had been born just about the time that I was released from the camp," said De Wolf. "He didn't know anything

about it so we asked him to find someone my age who might remember it."

"He talked to an older lady who stopped another younger woman. She then said she knew where the site was and told Jurgen to follow her."

The woman led the group outside of

Barth until they reached a large rock which had been transformed into a monument with a bronze plaque on each side. On the plaques was a message written in German and English detailing the memory of the camp and its inhabitants.

"I felt when I saw the monument, that

it was marvelous that the people of Barth would do this for the people in the camp," said De Wolf.

He and his crew had been on a mission bombing Pas de Calais on the coast of France when an .88 millimeter shell tore through the large fuel tank on the bomber. De Wolf said he looked back toward the bomb bay door and it looked like a furnace with fire streaming up out of it. He was co-pilot at the time on his 16th trip into enemy territory which had included three missions into Berlin itself. The average before being shot down according to De Wolf was 7 missions. He and the pilot were able to escape the front of the aircraft along with a few others from the crew.

Despite its being shot down, De Wolf has great respect for the bomber he flew.

"It is the finest airplane ever built and it was tough," he said.

De Wolf remembered back to what life in a WWII prison camp was like and explained what he did to pass the time waiting for his release.

"I was never made to suffer in the camp," he said. "Since I was a commissioned officer, I was not allowed to be worked with the non-comms."

"One of the main problems was over-



This display case holds the thousands of hours worth of casting which was done by Bill De Wolf while interned in a German prison camp. He used the lead from food canisters to craft the insignia.

coming the boredom of day after day in the prison."

De Wolf quickly found an answer to alleviating the monotonous schedule of the internment.

"I built a wooden box, filled half with some of the sandy soil that was all over and made a hole in the top," he explained. "I took the lead seals from our food parcels and melted them down. I could only get a few drops of lead from each."

After many seals were melted, De Wolf began casting them into shapes which he saw around him. He started with an insignia on another officers uniform and soon he was casting replicas of all of the medals, insignia and sights that he saw around him, both German and allied.

"I had never done any casting before that, I just picked it up while I was in camp," he said.

One thing that De Wolf lost in camp was weight due to the lack of food in the German military at the time.

"It was routine for the fighter escorts of the U.S. bombers to take out German supply trains on their way back to base," said De Wolf. "This made it nearly impossible to transport food packages from Switzerland to the various prison camps."

"When I went into the camp I weighed 170 pounds and when I left I was down to 116 pounds."

De Wolf feels the experience taught him how to take one day at a time since there was nothing much to do but he feels it was still memorable.

"I have never forgotten any of it," he said.

When De Wolf and other Americans were released, the prison camp had grown to over 10,000 men.

Another thing that De Wolf feels he took from the experience is learning to be satisfied with what life gives a person.

"You never know how lucky you are," he explained after detailing how while he was in the camp, his roommate from training who he had envied for being able to go back to the states after only six months had been killed on a mission.

De Wolf explained that the trip was a good experience for all of the family members who went because



Bill stands next to the monument which marks the site of the prison camp where he was a prisoner of war. The plaque is a dedication to the soldiers who were kept there from the nearby town of Barth.

they got to see a part of his life.

"They were thrilled to get a little of the past history of their grandpa," he concluded.

When De Wolf returned home from his trip he sent

letters to other members of the 306th bomb division which he was a part of stationed out of England during the war. He told what he had seen so that everyone could remember a part of the war and a part of his life.