

# THE QUODDY TIDES

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## Veteran remembers concentration camp ordeal by Susan Esposito

A 90-year-old Royal Air Force veteran who lives in St. Andrews will be a special guest on Sunday, April 1, for a screening of the documentary, *Lost Airmen of Buchenwald*, which will begin at 7:30 p.m. in the W.C. O'Neill Arena theatre.

James Stewart was one of 168 airmen from Allied countries who were captured in Paris by the Gestapo, falsely accused of being "terrorists and saboteurs" and imprisoned in the Buchenwald concentration camp in the waning months of World War II. Stewart and six other survivors, including the film director's grandfather, E.C. Freeman, and squadron leader Phil Lamason, were interviewed for the film.

Stewart was born in Scotland and joined the British army in September 1939 when volunteers were needed. Following that tour of duty, he joined the Royal Air Force in 1942 and trained as a pilot, flying single-engine Hurricanes and Hawker Typhoons.

"Just before D-Day, on Saturday, May 13, eight of us in Typhoons scrambled off [RAF] Desborough on the south coast of England," he recalls of his flight into occupied France that day. "The Germans used eighty-eights, which was a very excellent anti-aircraft weapon and, all of a sudden, 'Bang!'"

The airman was somewhere between Les Andelys and Paris when he parachuted from his plane. "I landed on the ground and made a dash for the woods and laid down low," he recalls. "My aircraft made one big smoking hole, so the Germans came, but they didn't see me, and they went one way and I went the other."

Stewart met a Frenchman he thought he could trust and told him he was a British citizen. Then he was taken to the home of a farmer "who put me up for two weeks." After making it safely into Paris by train, Stewart found himself with other Allied airmen "in the hands of an opposition group, and we went from house to house."

On July 8, 1944, Stewart thought he was going to escape to England, "but, unfortunately, I ran right into a German trap and spent a very uncomfortable stay with them." The Allied airmen had been issued false papers and were dressed as civilians to help them escape, so when a traitorous member of the French Resistance betrayed them to the Germans, they were rounded up as spies and thrown into Fresnes Prison outside Paris.

On the morning of August 15, as the liberating Allied forces approached Paris, Stewart recalls, "The 168 of us were stuck in boxcars with 3,000 others to be taken to Buchenwald. We were this big mistake."

"The French Resistance tried to stop that train by blowing up one of the tunnels," recalls Stewart. "The Resistance had hoped that this would block the exit of the train but, unfortunately, I think there was a cattle train on the other side of the tunnel, and the Germans cleared that one out."

When the airmen reached Buchenwald they saw a concentration camp filled with 45,000 walking skeletons and guards armed with whips and German shepherds.

"It was a horrible experience," says Stewart of his three-month stay in

Buchenwald. "Two of us actually perished."

During their first three weeks at the camp, the airmen were shaven and forced to sleep outside with no shoes or shelter in a quarantined area called Little Camp where prisoners received the least food and worst treatment. When they were moved, it was to overcrowded huts where they had to sleep on wooden shelves.

"Jews were a small part of it," explains Stewart of the work camp. The camp held Jews, non-Jewish Poles and Slovenes, and religious and political prisoners and many different peoples from all over Europe and Russia. "They had one block -- 22. People had to do dreadful manual tasks. Slave labor."

Buchenwald had a top secret satellite labor camp called Mittelbau-Dora where inmates made B-1 and B-2 rockets. "They were worked to death," says Stewart of the 20,000 inmates who died there.

"It was awfully hard to see the things going on there, but I felt 'There's always hope,'" he recalls. "We were obviously looking after each other, and having a military background had a lot to do with that."

"Our squadron leader, Phil Lamason, was a wonderful unsung hero," stresses Stewart of the New Zealander who held the airmen together. "When the Germans wanted us to work in Mittelbau-Dora, he refused, saying we were prisoners of war and we weren't making weapons to use on our own people."

It was through the efforts of a determined Lamason that word got out to the Luftwaffe of the Allied airmen's captivity, and, seven days before their scheduled execution, 156 of the 166 survivors were transferred to a prisoner-of-war camp.

On October 19, 10 of the Allied airmen were too sick to travel, but the others were taken to Stalag 3. Although their status had finally been changed to prisoner-of-war, Stewart says, "That was no fun neither."

After the war, Stewart and his wife and three-year-old son moved from Great Britain to Canada, where he found work as an accountant at Connors Brothers in Blacks Harbour. Through the years, he was able to reconnect with many of the men with whom he shared the concentration camp horrors of Buchenwald.

While they were imprisoned, the 168 airmen formed the KLB (Koncentration Lager Buchenwald) Club, which helped establish solidarity and gave them a sense of purpose and order. In 1979, Stewart was one of four Canadians who made the first serious attempt to track down all the club members. "We started the ball rolling and began corresponding back and forth." Only 28 of the survivors were not found.

Stewart was interviewed in 1994 for the National Film Board of Canada's documentary, *Buchenwald: The Lucky Ones*, and, at the invitation of German authorities, he attended the 65th anniversary of the liberation of Buchenwald and Mittelbau-Dora in April 2010.

He has no animosity toward the German people, blaming his wartime treatment on "the political system" of that time. "People can be swayed. I have no qualms whatsoever about the Germans."

"We've got it made here," says the Buchenwald survivor of his life in Charlotte County. "People don't realize it. We really don't see the truth."

"Life goes on."

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