

White Bear Lake woman writes book about uncle's escape from Nazi-occupied France



Barbara and Jim Wojcik sit in their White Bear Lake home Thursday, July 29, 2021 talking about a book they wrote together about Barbara's uncle, James "Bud" Wilschke and his six-month ordeal behind enemy lines in WWII. Wilschke was a pilot who was shot down over German-occupied France in 1943 and had to cross the Pyrenees mountain range on foot, hiding from Nazis and living on the generosity and cleverness of the French people. Barbara holds a piece of Wilschke's parachute. (Deanna Weniger / Pioneer Press)

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Bud Wilschke's plane was on fire and the only way out was down.

The 23-year-old kid from Chicago bailed out of the falling wreckage of his B-17 Flying Fortress and struggled with his parachute. It was his first real jump and he was headed straight into Nazi-occupied France.

That leap of desperation was the beginning of a six-month trial of wits in 1943 as Wilschke and another surviving buddy hid out in attics, barns and hay wagons, helped by a network of French folks across the country and over the Pyrenees mountain range to freedom.

Wilschke survived the war (despite being declared KIA), married his waiting sweetheart and said nary a peep to his family about his ordeal. He locked it away, sharing only a brief sentence on occasion, such as "I hiked over the Pyrenees to escape the Nazis."

A CHILDHOOD MEMORY

It was that bullet point that lodged in White Bear Lake resident Barbara Wojcik's mind. During a book club meeting in 2015, a member's comment on a World War II book about an airman who escaped France the same way resurrected a childhood memory about something her uncle had once said.





James "Bud" Wilschke was just 23 when his B-17F Flying Fortress was shot down over German-occupied France in 1943. (Courtesy of the Wilschke family)

"One of my book club members said (of the author), 'Oh, she made that up. Oh, that's just too phenomenal. That couldn't have happened,'" Barbara recalled. "And then that's all I could think about the rest of the book club was, what was that story?"

Getting the story, which she and her husband Jim recently published, became a five-year obsession with an unfortunate deadline. Just as she started researching what would become "Bud's Jacket," she was diagnosed with breast cancer and given only a handful of years to live.



"I got to the point where I really couldn't write or do anything anymore," she said last week, sitting in her sun room and speaking with short, measured breaths. "Jim took over and I said, 'We've got to get this out the door. We've got to get this done.'"

The couple will do their first public book signing from 10 to 11:30 a.m. Friday, Aug. 6, the anniversary of the day the United States dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, essentially ending WWII. They'll be at [Lake Country Booksellers in White Bear Lake](#). After that, they've been booked for a few speaking engagements, one at the Minnesota History Center's group the [Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table](#), a Zoom interview with Chicago media and another with a Holocaust museum in Illinois.

A BOX OF MEMORIES

"I didn't want Bud's story to be lost like so many are," she said. "They get put in a box and the box gets passed down to grandchildren or whomever or nobody. Sometimes the boxes get thrown out. And I didn't want the story to be lost."

Other than a foggy memory, it was essentially a box of Bud's old stuff that gave Barbara a place to start.

Bud had died in 2001. His wife, Rosemary, also had passed. Barbara's dad, who was Rosemary's brother, had died as well. The children of Bud and Rosemary knew very little of Bud's ordeal, telling Barbara that he rarely talked about it, and if he did, it was just bits and pieces.

Barbara, who before retirement worked as a grant coordinator, and Jim, who is a psychologist, were no strangers to research projects, but the thought of piecing together a story without the benefit of speaking to Bud himself was a bit daunting.

PIECING TOGETHER BUD'S STORY

They soon found out that while Bud may not have shared his story with his children, he shared it plenty with others along the way. There were numerous newspaper stories in the Chicago Sun of Bud's survival, his marriage to Rosemary and his trip to France to revisit the villages in Brittany. There were handwritten letters from Bud and his buddy Bob Neil that helped Barbara understand the feelings and thoughts of the men. There were interviews from French villagers who helped hide them.





White Bear Lake residents Barbara and Jim Wojcik had their book about her uncle James “Bud” Wilschke’s six-month ordeal behind enemy lines in 1943 published in English and French so she could share it with the French families that helped Wilschke evade capture by the Nazis. (Deanna Weniger / Pioneer Press)

Barbara soon realized WWII has been studied inside and out. If there’s information on a specific bombing run or battle, somebody’s written a book or put up a Facebook page on it. Her dedication to getting the details right can be seen all the way through the 166-page book with maps, timelines, military movements, even passages from the U.S. military’s “classified escape and evasion instructions.”

And while she wanted to include the specifics, she also wanted the narrative to be told like a story that would interest the younger generation.

“I have two nephews who, at the time, were in middle school,” she said. “I was thinking, how could I write this so that they would want to read this story about a young man not much older than themselves?”

RETRACING BUD’S STEPS IN FRANCE

Barbara soon came to a point in her research where she knew a lot about the American side of the story, but not as much about the French side. When she found out there was a monument in France with her uncle’s name on it, she knew she would need to see it in person.





Barbara and Jim Wojcik sit in their White Bear Lake home Thursday, July 29, 2021 talking about a book they wrote together about Barbara's uncle, James "Bud" Wilschke and his six-month ordeal behind enemy lines in WWII. They look through a scrapbook of their trip to France where they met some of the people whose families helped to hide Wilschke from the Nazis. (Deanna Weniger / Pioneer Press)

"It was a little idea in which I said, I think we can go to France and go visit the monument," she said. "It just snowballed from there."

A group of 11 family members retraced Bud's steps in 2017 for over two weeks. They saw the mill where he had to change clothes with the workmen in order to walk past the Nazis and into a waiting truck. They saw the barn where Bud's first rescuer hid him under some hay while Nazis searched the area for the American flyers they'd seen falling from the sky. They saw the church where Bud and Bob hid in the attic and frightened the caretaker's daughter when she saw a lit match flickering in the attic window.

They drove up the Pyrenees where Bud and Bob nearly froze to death walking over the mountains. They saw the Spanish prison where the men were kept after crossing the border until American diplomats could get them home. And they met some of the descendants from the 27 families that had put their own lives in danger by helping Bud and Bob hide from the Nazis.

All along the way, they were greeted with ceremonies and parades from grateful French citizens.



"It was a wonderful trip," Barbara said, even though she had gotten her cancer diagnosis just before leaving. That information motivated her to finish the book.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE JACKET

So, why is it called "Bud's Jacket"?



Jim Wilschke Jr. stands beside his father, James "Bud" Wilschke's jacket worn in 1943 when he was a pilot in WWII. The Wilschke's relative, White Bear Lake resident Barbara Wojcik, wrote a book about Wilschke senior's six-month ordeal behind enemy lines called "Bud's Jacket" which was published in 2020. (Courtesy of the Wilschke family)

In 1983, unsettled by bad memories and troubled by survivor's guilt, Bud decided to take a trip back to France to purge his welling emotions so he could remember the brave and friendly folks who helped him survive.

As he approached the farm where he had landed so long ago, the family brought out a gift for him, wrapped like a sacred relic. It was the flying jacket he'd worn that day in 1943 that he'd had to leave behind in order to blend in with the French. They'd kept it safe for him all these years. Bud buried his face in the jacket and wept.

That jacket, now a preserved family heirloom, was a tangible reminder of Bud's six months on the run and the people who safeguarded his escape.



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