

ONE MISSION PROVIDED  
HARROWING WAR EXPERIENCE  
FOR WWII VET

*Text and photos by  
Thomas Reznich/ Houghton Lake Resorter.*

## One mission provided harrowing war experience for WWII vet

By Thomas Reznich



**A LOT OF WAR IN ONE MISSION** Walter Drogt, 87, sits in the front room of his home on Huntington Road, Houghton Lake, recently, wearing a ball cap emblazoned with the image of a B-17 Flying Fortress bomber, the type of plane he served on during WWII. Although Drogt's combat career consisted of only one mission, the harrowing experience, which included being wounded, captured by the Germans and "marched" over 800 miles as a prisoner of war, made it an important factor in shaping the rest of his life so far. (Photo by Thomas Reznich) On Aug. 7, 1944, about 14 months after graduating from Central Lake High School, 18-year-old Walter Drogt was finally on his way into battle.

He had joined the Army Air Corps right after graduation, but had to wait until his birthday on Dec. 25, when he turned 18, to enter the service. After basic training at Jefferson Barracks, MO, he had been sent for gunnery training at Kingman, AZ, Lincoln, NB and Rapid City, SD, where he had been trained as a turret gunner on a B-17.



**DROGT IN 1944** Walter Drogt, then 18, poses for a photo before being sent to Italy to serve as a waist gunner on a B-17 Bomber with the Army Air

Corps' 15th Air Force. Now, as one of the 10-man crew aboard a B-17 nicknamed "Amazing Mazie," Drog was on his first combat mission, which also turned out to be his last.

Taking off from Foggia, Italy, the target was an industrial area in Blechhammer, Germany, but while the bomber group was still over the Adriatic Sea, they were attacked by German fighter planes.

Amazing Mazie was hit and her outboard right engine was knocked out, but her pilot, who was on his 50th mission, pressed on. Drog, who started the flight as the left waist gunner on the Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress, had been hit in the leg by shrapnel during the attack.



WALT AND MILLIE Drog is pictured with his girlfriend Millie Dewey before being sent to Italy in 1944. The couple was married on June 25, 1946 in Detroit. The plane successfully dropped its payload, but was struck by flack over the target, this time losing the right inboard engine.

With two engines still running on their left wing, they were still flying, but couldn't keep up with the group of bombers, and had to strike off on their own. They had headed northwest, "and there we ran into a flock of them (German Messerschmitt 109 fighters)," said Drog.

He had moved to the top turret position on the plane with the help of the co-pilot, and said he was pretty sure he had hit a German fighter plane that was being chased by a couple of American fighters, but that it was not damaged enough to go down.

A short time later, Drog saw a 109 coming in head-on and straight at him, and was hit simultaneously in both arms, with a bullet lodged in his right forearm.



THE STORY OF STALAG LUFT IV A pamphlet

advertising a publication on the German prisoner of war camp known as Stalag Luft IV includes a drawing of the type of barracks the prisoners were housed in until they were put on the march to keep them away from advancing allied forces in the winter of 1945. After working his way out of the turret, he realized that due to his injury, he could not get a sure grip on the rip cord of his parachute with his right hand, so he said he grabbed it with both and “dived out the first door on the left side of the plane.”

While floating to earth, he said he looked up and saw Amazing Mazie bank to the right, then go down and crash into a hillside. He later found out that the entire crew had made it out of the plane and had landed safely, although he is not sure that they all made it home.



STILL ALIVE! A story published in the Central Lake

Torch on Oct. 12, 1944 confirmed that Drogd was a prisoner of war. A story on Aug. 24 had reported him missing in action. When Drogd landed, he found himself 20 feet off the ground, dangling by parachute cords from a tree in a heavily wooded area. With two injured arms “I had a hell of a time trying to get out of there,” said Drogd, who said he eventually “wiggled out and landed on my feet.”

While attempting to walk to safety, Drogd said that as he was walking up a trail through the woods, he “came around a corner and there was a guy right in front of me, aiming a gun at me. All I could do was put my hands up,” as much as he could with his shot-up arms. Drogd said the German soldier fired over his head to underline the seriousness of the situation.

Other German soldiers joined the one who had captured Drogt and forced him to take them to where he had landed. After interrogating him for a while, they took him to a nearby vehicle which proceeded to a town, where they made a stop at a beer garden “to show off their prisoner.”



NOTABLE SERVICE Drogt's dress jacket from the Army Air Corps has his gunner's wings pinned to it, along with a European Theatre ribbon with four Battle Stars, a Purple Heart Medal and the Prisoner of War Medal. Drogt said he found himself sitting between two German soldiers in the beer garden, who he said talked for a long time before asking him if he'd like a beer.

“I told them I wasn't much of a drinker,” but when they put a beer in front of him, “it made me smile to see the beer,” said Drogt.

However, with both arms injured, he found he could not pick it up, and one of his captors had to do it for him. After sharing a pitcher or so, Drogt said he “wound up in a jail cell.”

“They came and looked at my arms, then took me to a hospital in Vienna,” said Drogt. Two days later he was moved to a hospital in Budapest, Hungary, which he said was a beautiful city. After two weeks in the hospital, he was taken to a prisoner-of-war camp in Gross Tychow, Pomerania (now Tychowo, Poland) called Luft Stalag IV.

Conditions at the camp were not the best and the prisoners, who by an International Red Cross Count in January, 1945, numbered 8,033 Americans, 820 British, 60 Polish, five Czech, two French and one Norwegian, were malnourished, eating mostly potatoes and kholrabi, along with bread that had a high sawdust content.

But, things got considerably worse when the prisoners of Luft Stalag IV were put on the march as the Soviet Red Army closed in.

January and February of 1945 were among the coldest winter months in the 20th century in Europe, with blizzard conditions and temperatures dipping down to 13 below zero. Temperatures below freezing persisted until the middle of March.

The prisoners kept marching every day, changing directions when they got too close to British forces, then again when they got too close to Russian forces, as the Germans tried to keep them from being liberated.

Drogt said he remembered some of the German guards as being older men, in their 40's or 50's, who seemed to look at their prisoners with some sympathy, probably having sons of their own who were at war. Other guards treated the prisoners harshly.

The prisoners were rarely fed during what became known as "The March," and had to scavenge to survive. Disease was rampant among them, and many lost at least a third of their body weight. Many died from disease or injury, or were killed by their captors during the march.

Drogt, who suffered from dysentery and malnutrition, said he lost between 25 and 40 pounds over the three months of marching, by the end of which, he and his compatriots had walked over 800 miles.

Back home at Central Lake, Drogt's family and friends, including his girlfriend Millie Dewey, were going through the anguish of waiting for information on his whereabouts and condition.

In the Aug. 24, 1944, edition of the Central Lake Torch, it was reported that Drogt's parents, Henry and Altha, had "received word from Washington D.C. that their son, Pfc. Walter Drogt, has been missing in action over Germany since August 7."

On Oct. 12, 1944, the paper reported that through a short-wave German broadcast, residents on the east coast had learned that their son was a prisoner of war. According to the report "Monday afternoon, 26 letters and cards were received (by the Drochts in Central Lake) from people in eastern states who had heard the broadcast Friday and were kind enough to notify Walt's parents."

The same article reported that Drogt had been promoted to sergeant, "which was expected after he reached foreign duty."

Drogt said that in February, 1945, while he and his fellow prisoners were on the march, he "was not too concerned about dying" from the cold or disease or malnutrition. "I was a little concerned with the strength of the defenses" held by the German guards, and was more worried about dying in a battle to be liberated.

Drogt counted himself lucky because he and others in his unit of prisoners had been given coats which helped keep them warm, although he still suffered frostbite in his hands and feet, a malady that still bothers him 68 years later. Near the end of the march, as allied forces closed in, Drogt remembered how the prisoners had probably saved the life of one of the German soldiers who had guarded them.

He said the soldier was on a motorcycle and was heading toward the British until the prisoners stopped him and told him he'd better go the other way. On May 4, 1945, Droggt was liberated by British soldiers and was soon on his way to Belgium, where he received treatment. He said he felt much better by the time the troop ship Admiral W.S. Benson pulled into view of the Statue of Liberty on June 11.

Droggt returned home in the middle of June, and was then sent to Florida in August for re-assignment. After his discharge from the Army Air Corps, Droggt married Millie on June 25, 1946, at the Detroit City Court House. He said his brother Bill and sister-in-law Wanda stood up for their wedding and, that after having dinner, the couple's honeymoon included attending a Detroit Tigers baseball game.

In fall of 1946, Droggt started college at Central Michigan University, where he earned Bachelor of Science degrees in English and mathematics, and later earned a master's degree in mathematics from CMU. He started his teaching career at Hesperia, where he taught for three years, then he, Millie and their four children moved to Houghton Lake where he began teaching at Houghton Lake High School. Droggt taught English and math for 33 years at Houghton Lake, retiring in 1982, and Millie worked for many years in the school lunch program.

The Droggt's fifth child, Eric, who was born at Houghton Lake, also became a math teacher at Houghton Lake High School, where he is now in his 34th year.

Walt and Millie have remained active through most of their retirement, although the wounds, illness and malnutrition he experienced during WWII have consistently caused problems for him over the years. At the age of 87, Walt has slowed down considerably, and stays home most of the time, with frequent visits from his five children, 12 grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.