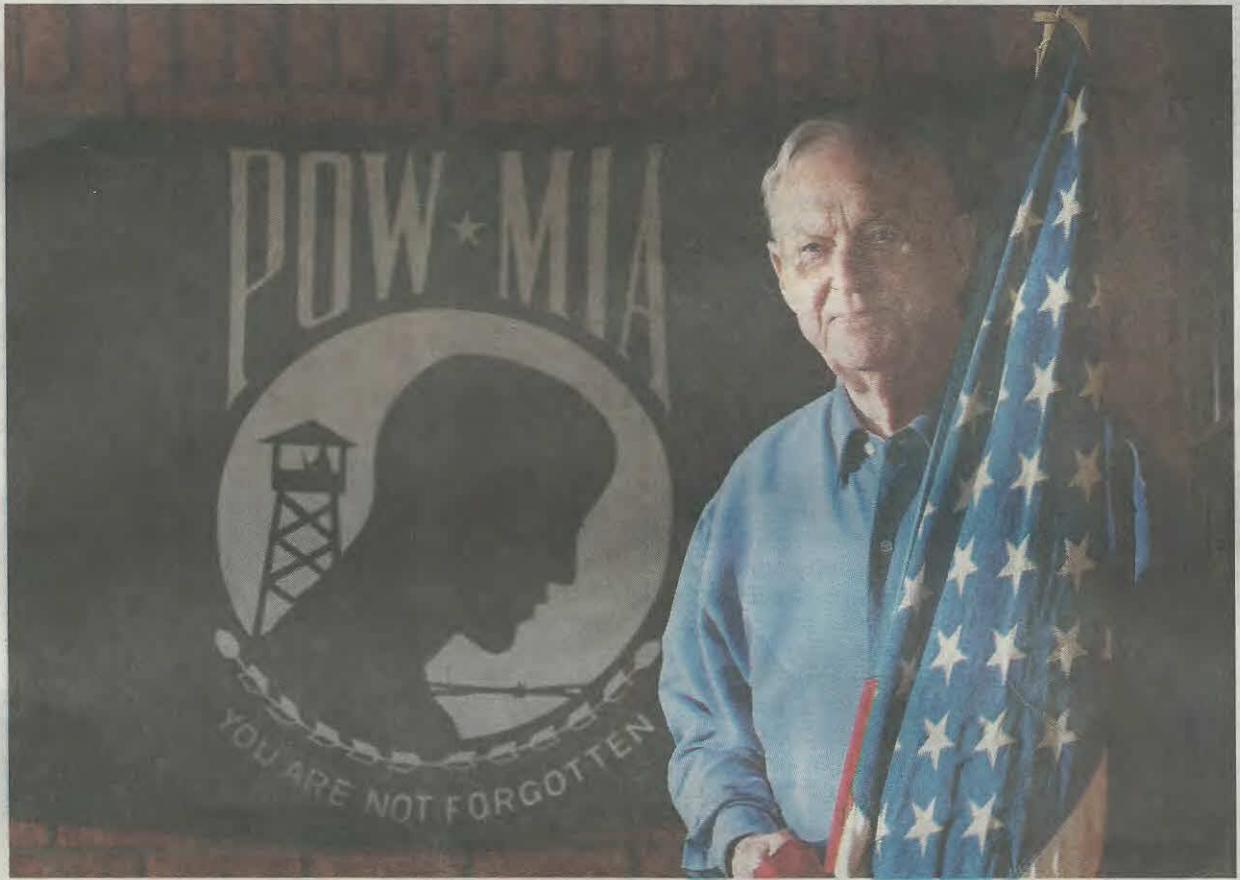


American POW keeps promise — 70 years later



Brandon Wade

World War II veteran and former POW Leroy Williamson, 93, shows his patriotism at his home in Denton.

Texan finally gets to show thanks to those who freed him from Nazis

By Cindy Horswell

Leroy Williamson had waited until his early 90s, when his hair was white and his energy waning, to open up about his war experience.

For many years, he'd kept buried what happened in his 20s as a World War II bomber pilot. His goal had been to acclimate to civilian life as quickly as possible, so he attended college on the GI Bill and raised four children with his bride, Maxine.



Courtesy of Leroy Williamson

Williamson, center, was greeted in Moscow by Russian World War II veterans, including Vladimir Kuts, right, who is also a former POW.

But now his wife had been gone over a decade from complications after hip surgery, and his youngest child was in his 50s. He knew time was

running out.

So at a family gathering in Huntsville, he talked about the war and then surprised them with a question.

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“What’s the chance that I could make a trip to Russia?”

He admitted that a few years earlier he had tried to arrange the journey, but he had never gotten close to even applying for a visa.

A relative agreed to help set things in motion. It would take two years, navigating past countless dead ends, to get it ar-

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Texan greeted warmly by Russian vets

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ranged through negotiations with the State Department, embassy and veterans officials. Yet there still remained the worry that heightened tensions between the United States and Russia — whose relations hadn't been chillier since the Cold War — could at any moment force a cancellation.

By then, Williamson was 93. He did not have an inkling how the Russians would receive him, but he didn't care.

He had a promise to keep.

Plane shot down

On April 8, 1944, Williamson was sent on his 13th bombing run over Germany. He was piloting a B-24 Liberator when the tat-tat-tat of anti-aircraft bullets severed the fuel line, sending his plane into a nosedive. The crew was forced to bail out.

Williamson, with heavy equipment strapped to his back, became stuck in the plane's narrow door as he tried to exit. So he turned his backpack to the door, yanked the rip cord and allowed the chute to suck him into the sky.

As he descended, he tried to maneuver away from the bullets whizzing past but accidentally deflated the chute and went into a free fall.

He landed in a tree, greeted by a "welcoming committee" of Germans.

The winter in the Nazi prison camp was so cold that year that Williamson would save the heavy paper from rare Red Cross parcels to help insulate his worn clothing. The packages also contained Spam, about the only meat he ever got. Mostly, it was a diet of potatoes and rutabagas. He shrank to a 109-pound skeleton and also battled lice, as everyone was forced to wait months between showers.

The guards liked to amuse themselves by urinating on the prisoners' food or releasing vicious dogs to chase them around the barracks.

Williamson tracked those and other details in the diary he kept, writing with an ink powder that he mixed with water.

So Williamson didn't require much prodding when asked to join prisoners who were using their hands, knives and forks to dig a tunnel. The secret entrance lay beneath a wood-burning stove in his barracks. The hole dropped 8 feet below ground, then connected to a path that



Courtesy of Leroy Williamson

Leroy Williamson, in a red vest, stands next to Russian World War II veteran and former POW Vladimir Kuts at the Monument to the Allies during a ceremony in Moscow's Victory Park.

stretched 138 feet and just 10 feet from the fenceline. It became the second-longest escape tunnel of the war, but it was uncovered that September.

The dogs' noses had detected the fresh, damp earth that the prisoners had been removing from the tunnel and trying to discreetly sprinkle around the yard.

Afterward, Williamson feared for his life. He knew that a couple of months earlier, in a different Stalag camp, another tunnel had been uncovered. Hitler had ordered the prisoners involved there, all 51, executed.

But the German commander at Williamson's camp did not want word of the escape effort to reach Berlin. So Williamson's punishment was three days in the "cooler," where he was fed bread and water.

The worst repercussion was knowing that three months had been wasted trying to dig their way out. A feeling of hopelessness settled over the camp, he said.

Yet their liberation was coming.

Soon, bombs were raining down as Allied forces pushed closer to the Fuhrer.

Then on the morning of May 1, 1945, the air raids stopped.

The Germans running the camp vanished into the night, just as the Russians arrived.

The Russian soldiers brought cows with them that they used to feed the prisoners, William-

son recalled, and even carried a machine that made treats that looked like doughnuts.

The POWs were warned not to overeat, as their stomachs had shrunk. Some still made the fatal mistake of eating too much.

The Russians also were accompanied by a dance troupe for entertainment. Female dancers twirled and leaped, while male dancers in bright costumes squatted with folded arms and kicked their legs.

To Williamson, the celebration felt like Christmas as the Russians handed out presents. He still treasures a German Luger and 14-inch ceremonial knife he was given.

Overwhelmed with gratitude, he vowed to one day make a pilgrimage to Russia, to personally thank those who saved him. But after seven decades, he wondered if any of those Russian veterans were even still alive.

'Come too far to quit'

Williamson arrived in Moscow on Sept. 24, after a grueling 16½ hours of travel from his home in Denton. He was accompanied by his youngest son, John, a physician to provide medical assistance if needed, and his sons-in-laws, Jim and Pat Lanier, who'd toured Russia before.

After months of sleuthing, Jim Lanier had tracked down the person who became most instrumental in helping Williamson's dream become reality — Maj.

Rob Patterson, chief of the POW/MIA office at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow.

Patterson was able to locate Vasily Bezugly, who had served in a mortar company of the Russian army that helped liberate Williamson and 9,000 others from the Stalag Luft 1 prison camp in Barth, Germany.

Bezugly, who lives 26 miles outside Moscow in Rayzan, agreed to meet with Williamson. The welcoming party also was to include a couple of other Russian World War II vets, including former Russian POW Vladimir Kuts, who had coincidentally been freed from a German labor camp in Stuttgart by American troops. The Third Reich had taken Kuts from his family's home at age 14 and made him work at the camp for three years.

Unfortunately, just before Williamson boarded the plane for Russia, he learned that the 88-year-old Bezugly had been hospitalized with a heart attack. He would be too ill to see Williamson.

But Williamson decided against canceling his trip, saying he'd "come too far to quit now." He didn't expect much of a reception, maybe a few handshakes from old warriors.

He was stunned when he was greeted by 20 Russians, most in full uniform with medals weighing down their jackets, at the 6,000-acre Victory Park that pays tribute to World War II. A

light mist fell as the presidential honor band played Russia's national anthem.

Williamson and Kuts clenched each other in a bear hug that Williamson joked was so strong he thought he'd have to "ask for help."

After being freed by the Americans, Kuts in turn had saved his rescuers by telling them how to avoid a German SS ambush down the road. He then fought with the American forces, where he was wounded by a German tank shell, before being connected with the Russian troops who eventually brought him home.

Williamson and Kuts then were escorted by an honor guard to lay large wreaths at the base of the Monument to the Allies — a 4,600-foot obelisk with statues representing Allied soldiers. Each then gave a solemn salute.

Afterward, Williamson hand-delivered a Purple Heart to Kuts. It was a replacement medal for the tattered one that Kuts had been awarded long ago and kept pinned to his chest. Williamson also had earned the medal for his bravery.

'Just regular people'

A Russian general in a long leather coat then invited all the veterans to a private lunch. Once everyone was seated, the general asked them to remove their coats and said through an interpreter: "We are not politicians now. We are just regular people who care about each other." There was no talk of Crimea or the Ukraine. Rounds of vodka toasts began.

Williamson gave his Russian hosts gifts that included Texas lapel pins and documents declaring each one to be an honorary citizen of Texas.

He told them how grateful he was to them for liberating the camp, so that he was able to return home to raise a family and work as a FEMA disaster relief director.

He got a roar of laughter when he explained through an interpreter how his Russian liberators went "fishing" by exploding hand grenades in the nearby lake.

Williamson felt overwhelmed emotionally but never broke down. He did get teary-eyed as his speech ended and he implored everyone to never forget the great victory they had achieved together.

"Remember," he said, "that we are all still allies."

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