

Presence of Christ sustained WWII POW from East Texas

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LONGVIEW—Seated in the rear of a B-24 aircraft, 19-year-old Puett Willcox should have been afraid of what was ahead, but the assurance of Christ's presence brought him peace in the midst of war.

On May 10, 1944, Willcox and nine other crewmen were flying out of Italy toward Austria, the last of 1,000 planes in their squadron to leave the base.

Vision of Christ

The young gunner from Longview sat stunned and speechless as the aircraft quickly gained altitude. He had seen a vision, one that would shape the rest of his life.

"We were rolling down the runway, and there were four of us in the back of the airplane sitting up against the bulkhead," he said. "Ten feet behind us were two windows open. There wasn't any glass in them, but there were machine guns sticking out of them.

"Halfway down the runway, Jesus appeared about 10 feet away between these windows. I have a hard time describing this because it was so beautiful. His robe was a beautiful white. If you can say white is beautiful, you can imagine.

"His eyes were so soothing. I don't remember if they were green or red or blue or what, just soothing. And he said, 'Something terrible is going to happen, but I'm going to take care of you.' And it seemed time slowed way down. It seemed like this was 10 or 15 minutes, but it takes less than 10 or 15 seconds to get off the ground in those takeoff runs. And then he was

gone.”

Shot down and captured

Six hours later, after 29 minutes of air combat, German cannon fire slammed into Willcox’s aircraft at 28,000 feet. The plane split in half and exploded while he was still putting on his parachute, knocking him unconscious.



Puett Wilcox, decorated veteran of World War II and the Korean conflict, is a resident at Buckner Westminster Place in Longview. (Photo/Elizabeth Arnold/Buckner) Willcox woke up upside down, hanging off the wing of the plane, with control cables and ammunition tangled around his legs, spiraling toward the ground at hundreds of miles an hour. He was the last of his crew out of the aircraft.

After several seconds of free falling, Willcox kicked loose, released his parachute and landed, only to be taken captive by German soldiers and declared a prisoner of war.

Willcox would remain a POW for 357 days.

Honored as last surviving WWII POW in East Texas

Willcox, now 92 and legally blind, is believed to be the last surviving World War II POW in East Texas. In October, Rep. Louie Gohmert honored Willcox

for his service with a special medal presentation at Buckner Westminster Place, where Willcox is a resident.



Puett Willcox received multiple medals and citations for his service in World War II and the Korean War, including the Purple Heart. (Photo/Elizabeth Arnold/Buckner) Willcox received nine awards for service in WWII and the Korean War, including the Purple Heart and an American flag that flew over the U.S. Capitol in his honor. These awards added to honors he had already received.

Although visibly touched by the accolades, Willcox remains humble, just a man who served because he needed to—because he wanted to.

“My dad told me when I was young, ‘Son, you’re going to have a lot of bad things happen to you in your life, and you’re going to have a lot of good things,’” Willcox said. “‘Don’t dwell on the bad things. Forget them. Just remember the good things.’ So that’s the way I do.”

‘The Lord is still taking care of me’

As a POW, Willcox lost 82 pounds. He lived on sauerkraut “soup,” buckets filled with water and dehydrated sauerkraut the men divided among themselves. When the British Second Army liberated Willcox and his fellow prisoners, they were 90 days into a 700-mile death march toward Brussels. He’d seen hundreds of men die through starvation, cold, fatigue and brutality. Even so, Willcox never was afraid.

“I remembered Jesus’ eyes and his voice telling me he was going to take care of me,” Puett said. “I never was frightened or scared the whole time. I’m still not and haven’t been since—frightened or scared of anything. The Lord is still taking care of me.”

Love and forgive

Willcox didn’t harbor resentment against his captors, either. He saw everyone as a child of God, regardless of the letters on their uniform. No matter how much horror he witnessed, no matter how much cruelty, he chose to forgive.

“I remember the Bible saying, ‘Love your enemy as yourself,’ or something like that,” Willcox said. “And to forgive your enemy, so that’s what I do. When they were treating me bad, I’d forgive them.”

Beginning a 63-year journey together

When he finally returned home to Longview in June 1945, Willcox had only one thing on his mind—reuniting with his sweetheart, Dorris Jean Foster. She was working at the local Sears Roebuck at the time, so Willcox, wearing his uniform, took a cab to meet her there soon after arriving home.

“I got right up behind her, she turned around and almost passed out, but I caught her,” Willcox laughed. “We got her squared away, and all these employees were looking over rails and watching everything.”

Four months later, on Oct. 14, 1945, they married at the preacher’s house behind Mobberly Baptist Church. They were married 63 years, three months and three days.

“But who’s counting?” smiled Willcox, his eyes still shining with mischief as he talked about his late bride. “We had a very, very loving life. We spent a lot of time separated because the Air Force and the jobs I had. She raised

the kids and worked, usually at a jewelry counter or Sears Roebuck.”

Continued to serve

After WWII, Willcox re-enlisted in the Air Force and served a total of 25 years. He and Jean had three children and six grandchildren. They moved back to Longview from California in 2004 to be closer to their youngest grandchildren. Today, Willcox shares his experiences freely.

“I am 92 years young, and I believe it is of vast importance for veterans to share their stories so that people know our individual experiences and what happened during those times of war,” Willcox said.

“Many young children don’t have a formal education on these wars in their history books. There is one history book I looked through that only had one sentence devoted to WWII. Other books have a page, maybe two, that discuss the war.”

When Willcox finally received his medals at the October ceremony, tears streamed down his face as American Legion members presented the very colors he fought to defend. The packed crowd gave him a standing ovation and Gohmert, a former captain in the U.S. Army, saluted the honoree. One local mom even brought her homeschooled children to witness the occasion.

‘He’s truly a hero’

“We feel privileged to honor Puett at Buckner Westminster Place,” said Wes Wells, executive director of Buckner Westminster Place. “This ceremony could just as easily be held inside the halls of the U.S. Capitol. Puett’s story is so dynamic and compelling that it should be made into a movie. He’s truly a hero.”

Willcox addressed the crowd, sharing stories with poignant clarity, pausing

between sentences to get the details just right. His words were simple and without airs, the man himself the humble star. As Willcox looked for the right closing remarks, the microphone shook in his hands, his eyes watered and his voice choked. Finally, after dotting his eyes with a tissue, he said in 10 words what he'd experienced in a lifetime.

"Teach your children history," he said. "And teach them about the Lord."