

2 phone calls track down a hero

By Alex P. Dobish of The Journal Staff

As luck would have it, the second phone call located the right Joseph Krebs.

"Sure," he said, "I was in the Air Corps in 1944. Yep, I'm the same guy who landed on Jersey Island. Who wants to know?"

The answer is Margaret J. Ginns, a British researcher for the Channel Islands Review, a historical research publication. Ginns wrote to the Greater Milwaukee Convention and Visitors Bureau for help in locating Krebs. The bureau turned the request over to The Milwaukee Journal.

Ginns wanted to find Krebs because the British Island of Jersey, 12 miles off the western coast of Normandy, is having an anniversary party next May to celebrate its liberation from German occupation during World War II.

Krebs, Ginns wrote, had engine trouble while flying over the island on Feb. 8, 1944, and bailed out. He was taken prisoner by the Germans and later transferred to the Continent. She learned about Krebs from an older Jersey inhabitant.

Ginns didn't make any offers, but some former US servicemen have been guests of European communities during their 40th anniversary liberation celebrations, beginning with D-Day on June 6.

At any rate, the second listing in the Milwaukee-area telephone book for a J. Krebs was for Joseph M. Krebs Jr.

Krebs, 63, a retired pilot for the Outboard Marine Corp., said he and his wife, Rosemary, were pleased that someone was interested in what happened to him 40 years ago. Moreover, this war story has a happy ending.

Krebs' eight days of internment on Jersey began when he tried to get his P-51 fighter back to England. It had been damaged while escorting bombers on a raid over Frankfurt, Germany.

"There were 80 mph winds," he said. "It was stormy. I had 30 gallons of gasoline left, enough to get halfway across the English Channel. The Germans were sending up anti-aircraft fire. The engine was sputtering. So, I bailed out."

Area man reminded of his war adventure

As he descended, hanging helplessly in his parachute harness, the Germans tried to shoot him down, he said.

Lucky to be alive

"I was probably the only one who ever came down on that island alive," he said. "That's what happened to all airmen, the residents said. The Germans shot them while they were parachuting onto the island. I don't know why I stayed alive."

He landed during a gale in which winds dragged him over treetops, fields and stone fences, breaking bones in his neck and shoulder.

He had landed on a lonely island, about 10 miles long and five miles wide, that had been taken from the British in 1940. The island had been heavily fortified by the Germans against an Allied invasion attempt.

The Allies, as it turned out, left Jersey alone, invading Normandy from the north instead.

British civilians wanted to help Krebs escape but were suspicious that he was a German spy, he recalled. However, a British teenager, Belza Turner, tried to help him.

Belza even baked him a cake for his 21st birthday, using cracker crumbs for dough and toothpaste for baking powder. She didn't have the customary ingredients because of shortages.

Interrogated by Germans

Before any escape plans could be completed, however, the Germans whisked Krebs away to the mainland to interrogate him about P-51 fighter planes, which only recently had been introduced into the war.

But before he left, he gave Belza his Air Corps class ring and his silk flying scarf to thank her for her kindness.

Eventually, Krebs ended up at Stalag No. 1 near the Baltic Sea. In the summer of 1945, he was freed by Soviet troops and returned home in a historic airlift of about 13,000 US prisoners. He was discharged from the service in 1950. He



Joseph Krebs

joined the National Guard and Air Force Reserve, retiring as a lieutenant colonel in 1971.

He was not forgotten. After the war, Belza and her family moved to Montreal, Quebec, where she married Reginald Greene. In 1963, the Greenes moved to Toronto and became acquainted with the members of the Roy McQueen family. The late Roy McQueen, who lived in Antigo, was Krebs' uncle. Thus Belza and Krebs were brought together again.

Returned the ring

A few years back, Krebs flew to Toronto to visit Belza, who returned his old Air Corps ring, which she had kept all those years. She didn't have his scarf.

After Krebs had been taken from Jersey by his captors, Belza and a friend tried to escape from the island. They rigged a raft and set sail for England. Expecting to make the trip in about 12 hours, they took no food or water. They got within sight of England when the wind shifted and they were blown off course.

They improvised a sail that saved their lives — out of Krebs' six-by-three-foot silk scarf.

After three days, they managed to get back to Jersey.

"If it hadn't been for the scarf, Belza told me, they would have drifted farther and farther out into the Channel and died from starvation and exposure," Krebs said.

The Germans kept the scarf.