

"I remember the fall was quiet up there. Even with all the hubbub and noise, I couldn't hear anything," Walker says. When he landed, Walker realized again how lucky he was to be alive. It was then that he realized German planes had been shooting at him during his fall to the ground. He also saw that he had made the jump with his parachute on upside down and backwards.

Walker says he wasn't sure he'd land safely because he had holes in his parachute from the fire aboard the plane and debris flying through the air. He attempted to control his descent by pulling on the shroud lines with his badly burned hands. As fast as he was falling, he might not have survived the jump had he not landed in a tree. He was left dangling with his feet barely touching the ground.

Germans quickly surrounded Walker. A German civilian checked to see if he had a gun which he didn't. He was then turned over to four German lieutenants. One of his captors said, "Well lieutenant, the war's over for you. I just got out of prison camp in England. You won't be as lucky."

Walker rode with the Germans to what he thought was the prison. But the Germans had noticed his severely burned hands and instead took him to a hospital in Ingolstadt, where Catholic nuns cared for him for 17 days. His hands were burned so badly they remained bandaged throughout his eventual imprisonment.

"They left my Aggie ring and wedding ring on though," Walker says, twisting the worn Aggie ring around his finger.

The German soldiers didn't forget about Walker. When he was released from the hospital, they escorted the prisoner of war to the Stalag Luft III compound, Center Camp, 80 miles southeast of Berlin. Walker eventually was reunited with Willen and Capece at the prison camp. They knew their other crew members were dead, and it pained them to think of how — or if — they were buried. Finding food and seeing his family again are what kept Walker's mind occupied during his seven months as a prisoner of war.

"We had to do a lot of uncalled for things, like be counted every day," Walker says. "We were cold and hungry, but it was better than how the Japanese treated their POWs."

Walker kept a logbook throughout his imprisonment in which he listed what he did each day, down to what he ate and his thoughts. He says he read about 100 books while he was a captive, recording the title of each in his logbook. He also kept a record of letters he wrote and received in the logbook. Capece, a budding architect, drew pictures in the logbook of scenes they witnessed at the prison camp and even sketched a plan for a house that Walker wanted to build for his family one day. Along with the descriptions of POWs in the book were descriptions of fictitious prisoners that contained coded information about the POW camp and enemy fortifications. Walker still has his logbook today.

Walker's wife, Nelle, didn't know her husband was being held as a prisoner of war until she received his first letter to her. That letter did not arrive until November, five months after he had been shot down. She still has the telegram from the Red Cross stating that her husband was missing in action. She says since she never heard for certain that he was killed, she kept hoping that he was alive.

In January 1945, Walker was released from the prison. He was repatriated to Switzerland because of the severe burns on his hands. He was one of three or four American soldiers out of 1,500 in the Stalag to be released at that time.

Walker says he felt guilty about his release, so he took down the names and addresses of the next of kin of about 100 soldiers

there and wrote their families to tell them their loved ones were all right.

From Switzerland, Walker went to Washington, D.C., and then to San Antonio, where he was reunited with his parents, wife and daughter Jo Anne. He returned to Texas A & M, where he became an extension range management specialist, the first in the U.S. He retired from the university in 1972 to operate a ranch in Val Verde County.

Even though the war was long over and Walker had made himself comfortable in his new life, thoughts of the crew members who lost their lives kept entering his mind. He still wondered if they had gotten a decent burial. Enter Alfred Wittmann. Wittmann wrote to Walker that he often wondered if there were any survivors of the bomber crash he witnessed as a child. If there were, he wanted them to know he witnessed the burial of the seven men who died in the plane crash.

"I've always wondered why he waited so long to contact us," Walker says. "He never told us why he waited. He's kept silent for more than 50 years, and I guess it played on his mind."

Wittmann wrote a letter to the 484th bomb group in California a few years ago and asked them for information related to the flight, mission and crash of Walker's plane that day. The group provided the names of the survivors. Wittmann contacted Walker, Willen and Capece.

Walker has been corresponding with Wittmann for the past year. By exchanging letters, pictures and tapes, the two have become good friends. Walker has also kept in contact with Willen and Capece and saw Willen for the first time since the war at a POW reunion in 1992.

Walker has made several trips to Germany since the war to see old war sites. About 12 years ago, he hired a German guide to help him find the tree he landed in, but they never located it. He found the hospital where he stayed, which he later discovered is just a few blocks from Wittmann's home.

Other than his memories, Walker's tangible mementos of that period in his life include medals and certificates of merit for his service in the war. An unfriendly reminder is a piece of shrapnel in his left ankle from the guns that shot down his plane.

He's also kept letters he and his wife of 60 years exchanged. A few weeks ago he found a box of letters written to him during the war by his parents that were returned to them unopened.

There are things about World War II that Walker won't talk about, but he says he holds no grudges against Germany. "Germany is a wonderful, beautiful place," he says. "I have no animosity toward the Germans. They're fine people. They were led astray by old Hitler."

And sometimes, instead of wondering why he is alive, Walker decides to just be happy about it instead.

"There's always some fear of what might happen to you. You're determined to make it. I'm happy to be alive."

