

CHICAGO

'Big mystery box' revealed South Side man's long-secret World War II near-death odyssey

James 'Bud' Wilschke's WWII escapes are detailed in 'Bud's Jacket,' a book by his niece, who recounts his bailing from a burning plane, hiding from the Nazis for 6 months.

By Stefano Esposito | Jul 16, 2021, 5:30am CDT



James "Bud" Wilschke had to eject after his B-17 bomber was fired on during World War II. But he survived and, with help, stayed hidden from the Nazis for six months. He wrote about his wartime ordeal but stashed that in a "big mystery box" that his family didn't discover until after his death. | Provided

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As the B-17 bomber lumbered toward the west coast of France, Jim Wilschke crouched in the plane's plexiglass nose, preparing to drop a 5,000-pound payload on a pen of Nazi U-boats — including one that would become a star attraction at the Museum of Science and Industry.

The Flying Fortress was at the rear of the U.S. air squadron. It was a precarious position to be in even in the best of times because it made it an easy target for German fighter planes.

Then, one of the aircraft's four engines died. The plane began to lag behind.

Like jackals pouncing on a wounded antelope, the Germans swooped in. Machine-gun fire and cannon shells tore through the fuselage, the plane filled with smoke, and soon the bailout alarm sounded.

Wilschke, a native South Sider, grabbed his parachute. He squeezed through an escape hatch. And he jumped.

The story of what happened during the next six months — of Wilschke's and another American airman's life on the run in Nazi-occupied France — was one that almost no one heard. These were Wilschke's secrets, tucked away in a "big mystery box" and rarely spoken of, maybe for the same reason it took him nearly 40 years to board another plane.

Now, that long-secret story has been turned into a book, "Bud's Jacket," written by his niece Barbara Wojcik, originally from Hinsdale and now living in Minnesota.

Wojcik traveled to France to meet many of the families who concealed her uncle — in the back of a hay wagon, in attics, barns and a dugout hidden deep in the woods.



Barbara Wojcik with her husband Jim Wojcik, who helped her finish the book after her cancer spread. | Provided

And she did so just after she'd been diagnosed with breast cancer, which since has spread to her brain and lungs. The cancer spurred her to finish the book, which she did with the help of her husband Jim Wojcik.

“I wouldn't say it was a good thing, but it really did say, ‘Hey, we've got to get this thing out the door, or it's never going to get done,’ ” she says.

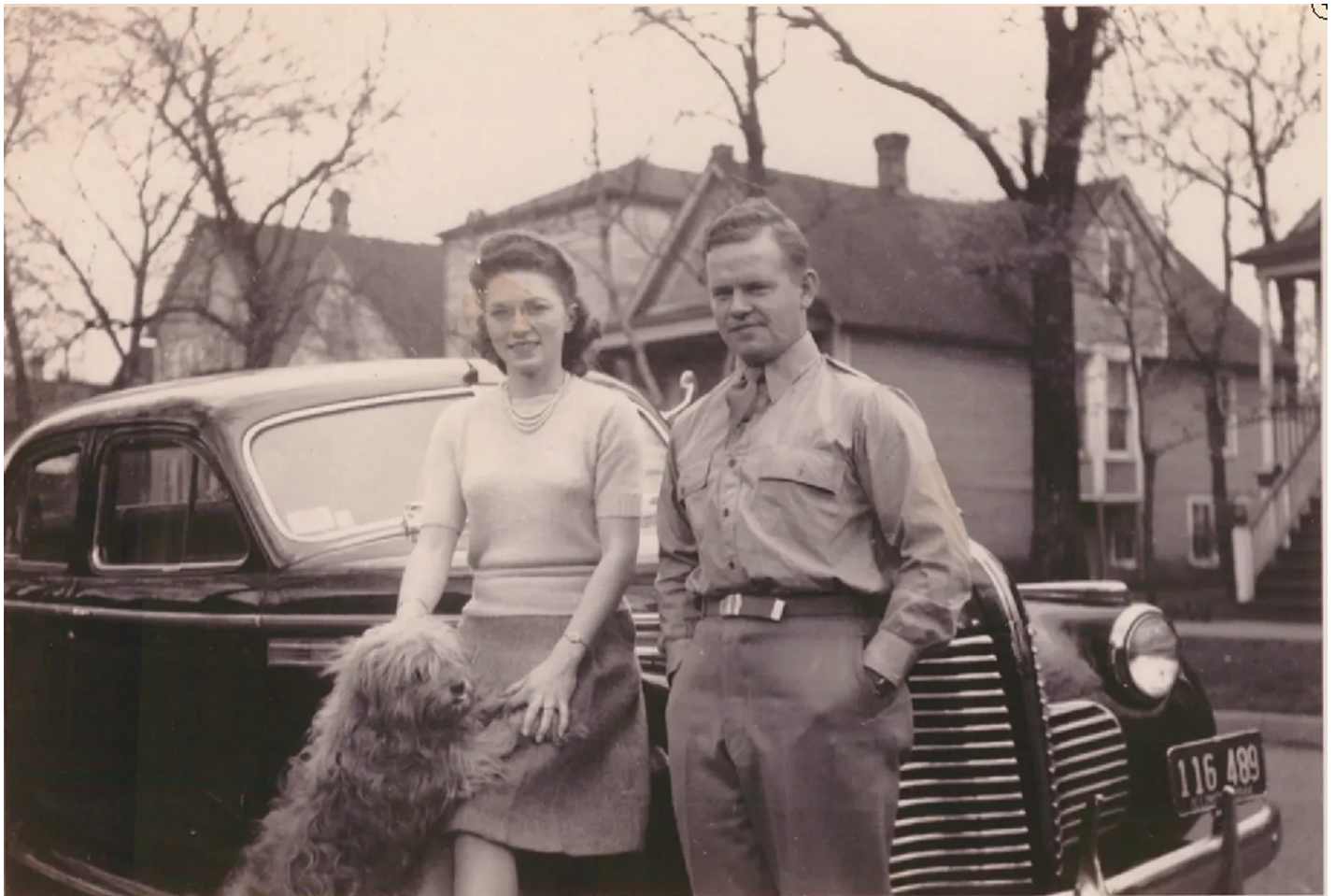
James “Bud” Wilschke was a stocky kid who played center on the Hirsch High School football team. He spent summers flipping hamburgers and working as a Chicago parks lifeguard on Lake Michigan.



A young James "Bud" Wilschke in his summer days as a lifeguard. | Provided

And he danced the jitterbug with Rosemary Crandell, his sweetheart.

Before leaving for Europe and the war, he proposed. But they didn't get married, according to Wojcik, because he worried about leaving his young bride a widow.



Young Rosemary and James "Bud" Wilschke in 1944. | Provided

Wojcik unearthed Wilschke's story — much of it, anyway — from the box that the war hero left his son Jim when he died in 2001.

"I never heard a thing about it," says Jim Wilschke, 74, who lives in Geneva.

The son was only too happy to hand over the box for Wojcik to root through. In it, she found old wartime photographs and newspaper clippings from the era, among things.

She also found the long-held secrets of how he nearly died and of how he survived.

After Bud Wilschke bailed out of the burning plane on May 17, 1943, he dropped into a field in northern France, hit his head on a fence post and passed out. When he came to, he found himself staring down the barrel of a shotgun.

"He asked me whether I was German or English," Wilschke wrote in the official "escape and evasion" report he would later file for the U.S. government. "When I told him that I

was American, he seemed very happy. ... He led me to a barn some distance away and gave me some cider. Then he put me in a wagon, covered me with straw and left.”

Of the 10 crew members aboard Wilschke’s B-17, just four survived. Two were immediately captured by German soldiers. They were held for the rest of the war in prisoner-of-war camps.



A plaque in France listing who from James “Bud” Wilschke’s squadron were killed, got captured or avoided capture. | Provided

The French farmer who discovered Wilschke exchanged his American flight uniform for civilian clothes.

Over time, through whispered conversations, Wilschke learned that Bob Neil, the aircraft’s radio man, also survived. The French helpers brought the two men together

again, fed them and kept them hidden from the Germans — aid that put them at great risk.



A French farmhouse where James “Bud” Wilschke hid in a loft after he bailed from his B-17 bomber on May 17, 1943. | Provided

“All males who come to the aid, either directly or indirectly, of the crews or enemy aircraft coming down in parachutes, or having made a forced landing, helps in their escape, hides them or comes to their aid in any fashion, will be shot on the spot,” read a German notice posted around France at the time.

Wilschke and Neil spent the next six months trekking across France, often at night — sometimes walking 20 miles or more in a day.

Neil spoke a little French. So it was his job to find food.

Wilschke read maps. So he helped them on their journey south in search of the Pyrenees, where they hoped to cross into neutral Spain.

“To the best of my recollection, we stayed with 27 families during our six-month stay,” Wilschke wrote.

The Americans were frequently right under the Nazis’ noses. One time, Wojcik writes, they were hiding in a hay cart when a German officer stopped the driver and asked for a ride. He was about to hop in the back when the driver urged him to come up front because, he said, the hay was full of spiders.

Back in Chicago, Wilschke’s fiancée received a letter about the B-17 bailout from an officer in Wilschke’s squadron.

“This is a hard letter for me to write and I know just as hard for you to receive. ... I know all ten parachutes opened, which means all the crew got down to the ground alright,” Allan P. Walker wrote.



A newspaper report listed James Wilschke among the missing in action in World War II.

Officially considered missing in action, Wilschke couldn't risk writing to his fiancée to let her know he was alive.

“The chance of that being intercepted [made it] too dangerous,” Wojcik said.

In November 1943, Wilschke and Neil — along with four other Americans, some Jewish, some French soldiers — hiked the ice-scabbed trails of the Pyrenees and on into Spain, where they were jailed for several weeks before being released and making it to England.

Wilschke sent Rosemary a telegraph. It read simply: “Write me at my old APO” — Army Post Office address — “and set the wedding for February — Jim.”



James "Bud" Wilschke (left) and Bob Neil. | Provided

Wilschke and Neil, who was from Providence, Rhode Island, each returned to a hero's welcome. In a city desperate for some good news, Wilschke's imminent wedding made all of the Chicago newspapers.

"Air Hero Returns to Get his Girl," read The Chicago Sun headline Jan. 17, 1944.

THE CHICAGO SUN

SECOND SECTION

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OL BUDGET ASKS 13,000



AIR HERO RETURNS TO GET HIS GIRL

Lt. James Wilschke and his bride, the former Rosemary Crandall, just after their wedding Saturday at St. Francis De Paula Church, 78th and Dobson sts. Lt. Wilschke, 23-

year-old bombardier, had to bail out over enemy territory in Europe last May and was missing for seven months. He finally worked his way through enemy lines back to Brit

This photo from the wedding of Lt. James "Bud" Wilschke and Rosemary Crandall made the front page of The Chicago Sun on Jan. 17, 1944.



Rosemary and James "Bud" Wilschke. | Provided

The couple raised five children on the South Side and later in Clarendon Hills. Wilschke went to work for Illinois Bell, staying with the phone company for 30 years.

After his own personal tickertape parade, Neil was at a bar in Rhode Island, where he made a vow, according to his daughter Linda Hollis, 74, who lives in Cape Coral, Florida.

“ ‘I’m going to marry the first girl I dance with,’ which happened to be my mother,” Hollis says.

He spent the rest of his life dealing with “survivor’s guilt,” according to Hollis. Only when he’d had a drink or two did the story about his time in France trickle out, she says.



James "Bud" Wilschke and Rosemary Wilschke. | Provided

In May 1983, Wilschke finally got on a plane, with his wife, to go to France for the 40th anniversary of his year in hiding.

He returned to the places he'd once known.

To the field where he'd landed after bailing out.

To the place where he'd been hidden in a cart, where he'd had a shotgun pointed at his face.

The farmer he met that day was no longer alive.

But his son still lived in the farmhouse. He told Wilschke he had a surprise gift for him.

The son handed Wilschke, who was in his 60s then, his original flight jacket.



James "Bud" Wilschke's original flight jacket was lost for decades after the South Side airman bailed out of his burning B-17 bomber and hid from the Nazis for six months during World War II. When he finally returned to France and to the farm where he was rescued, the son of the farmer had a surprise waiting for him: his jacket. | Provided

It brought Wilschke to tears, Wojcik writes.

Wilschke moved in retirement to Pompano Beach, Florida, north of Fort Lauderdale. He died at his home there on Oct. 1, 2001.



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