FREE PREVIEW

A YANK IN STALIN'S ARMY

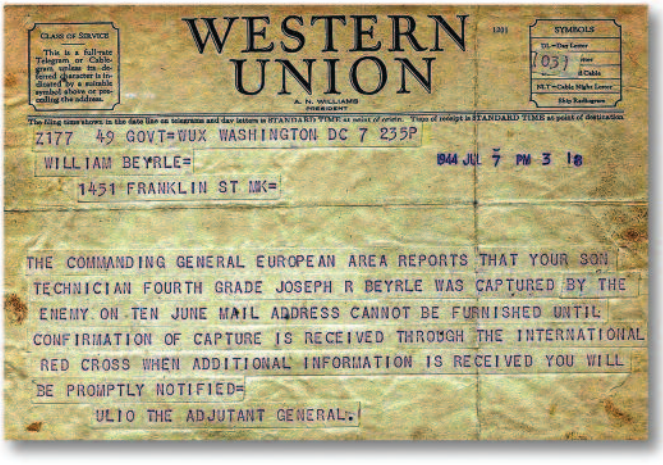
Captured GI Joe Beyrle didn't escape from a stalag just to sit on the sidelines. So, he joined a passing Soviet unit and fought the Germans.

by Tom Huntington

FROM HIS SPOT IN A HAYLOFT, American paratrooper Joe Beyrle watched as Russian soldiers cautiously advanced across the Polish fields and toward the farm where he was hiding. He saw the soldiers approach the adjacent farmhouse and summon the old German couple who lived there. The Russians gunned down the man and woman, then cut up their bodies and fed them to their pigs. Beyrle remained hidden. That night he heard the sound of arriving tanks, and dawn broke to reveal a Russian tank battalion. He decided it was time to make a move, so he stumbled out from the barn holding up a pack of cigarettes, international currency in wartime. "*Americanski Tovarish*," he called out: American comrade.

That's how Joe Beyrle (pronounced BUY-er-lee), an escapee from a German prison camp, joined the Soviet army and became one of the few Americans to fight for both the United States and the Soviet Union during World War II. He fought with his new allies for about a month as they slugged their way across Poland before a severe wound sent him on a circuitous odyssey back to his hometown in Michigan, which had already held his funeral.

Muskegon was the place, home of Saint Joseph High School, from which Beyrle had graduated in 1942 with an offer of a track scholarship to Notre Dame. Beyrle turned down the Fighting Irish to join the paratroopers and became a technical sergeant in the 101st Airborne Division. In September 1943 his unit, I Company of the 506th Parachute Infantry's 3rd Battalion, boarded Britain's HMS *Samaria* for an uneventful journey across the Atlantic to England. There, the paratroopers underwent extensive training for the impending invasion of Europe. On two occasions in April and May 1944, Beyrle loaded up with heavy bandoliers of gold coins and leapt into the darkness from airplanes over occupied France to make a delivery to Free French forces and then sneak back to England by plane.



WESTERN UNION

CLASS OF SERVICE

SYMBOLS

Z177 49 GOVT=WUX WASHINGTON DC 7 235P

WILLIAM BEYRLE=

1451 FRANKLIN ST MK=

1944 JUL 7 PM 3 18

THE COMMANDING GENERAL EUROPEAN AREA REPORTS THAT YOUR SON TECHNICIAN FOURTH GRADE JOSEPH R BEYRLE WAS CAPTURED BY THE ENEMY ON TEN JUNE MAIL ADDRESS CANNOT BE FURNISHED UNTIL CONFIRMATION OF CAPTURE IS RECEIVED THROUGH THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS WHEN ADDITIONAL INFORMATION IS RECEIVED YOU WILL BE PROMPTLY NOTIFIED=

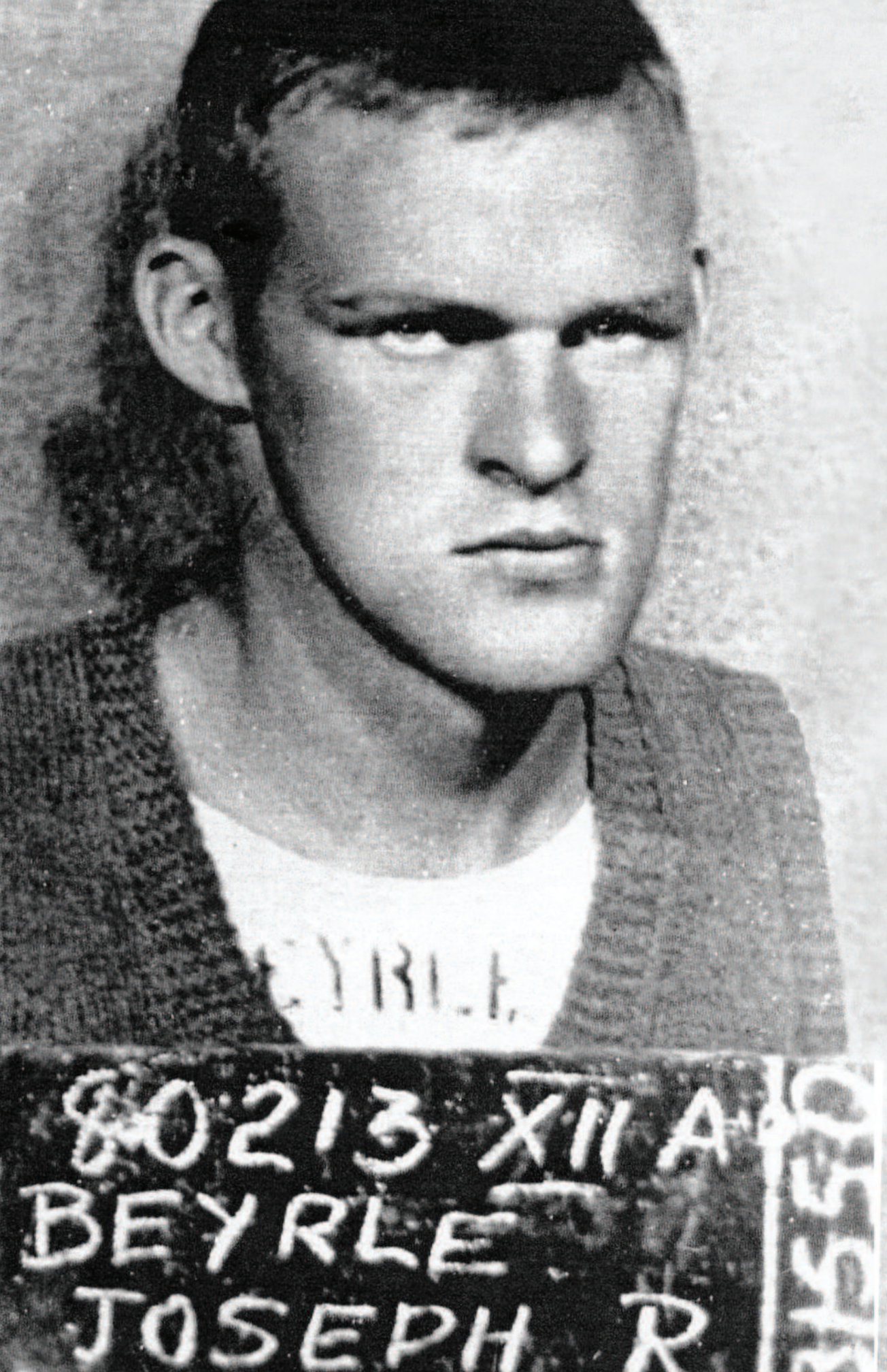
ULIO THE ADJUTANT GENERAL.

In the early hours of June 6, Beyrle made his third jump into occupied France, this time along with the thousands of American and British paratroopers who comprised the aerial spearhead of the Normandy Invasion. Beyrle landed on the roof of a church in the town of Saint-Côme-du-Mont and plunged into a scene of chaos and confusion. Separated

WWII SOVIET HAT BADGE COURTESY OF NATALLIA BELIAKOVA

ALL IMAGES THIS STORY COURTESY OF JOHN BEYRLE, UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED

In July 1944, the parents of paratrooper Joseph R. Beyrle received a telegram (above) at their Muskegon, Michigan, home saying he was captured. He was indeed a prisoner of war, captured by the Germans after parachuting into France in the wee hours of the Normandy Invasion's D-Day, June 6, 1944. His POW mug shot (opposite) shows a justifiably angry young man. That anger would earn him a beating when he insulted a German officer who interrogated him. But it would also motivate him to attempt escape at every turn.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A YANK IN STALIN'S ARMY

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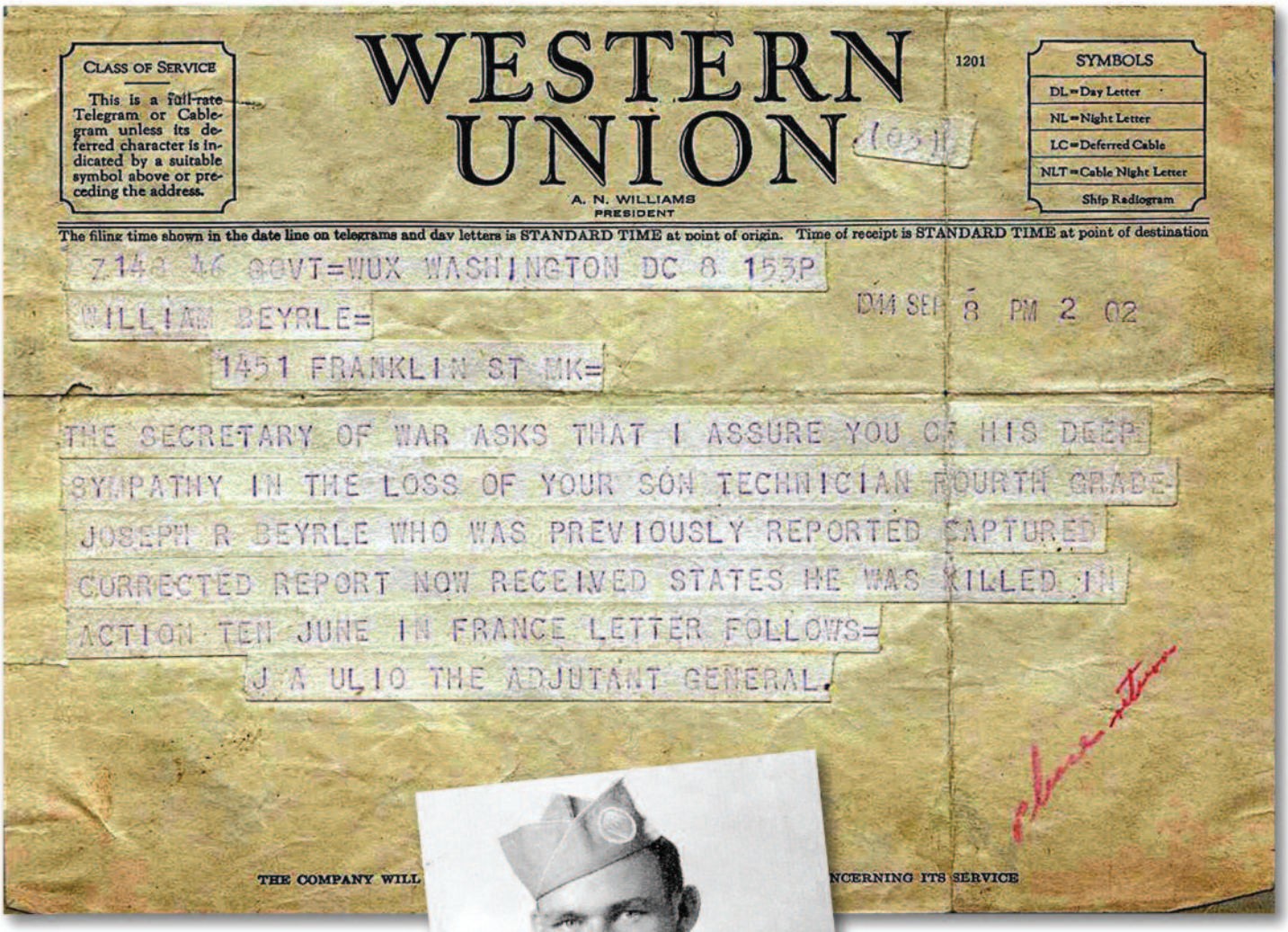


CLASS OF SERVICE

This is a full-rate Telegram or Cablegram unless its deferred character is indicated by a suitable symbol above or preceding the address.

WESTERN UNION

1201

SYMBOLS

DL = Day Letter
NL = Night Letter
LC = Deferred Cable
NLT = Cable Night Letter
Ship Radiogram

A. N. WILLIAMS
PRESIDENT

The filing time shown in the date line on telegrams and day letters is STANDARD TIME at point of origin. Time of receipt is STANDARD TIME at point of destination

7148 46 GOVT=WUX WASHINGTON DC 8 153P

WILLIAM BEYRLE=

1451 FRANKLIN ST MK=

DM SEP 8 PM 2 02

THE SECRETARY OF WAR ASKS THAT I ASSURE YOU OF HIS DEEP SYMPATHY IN THE LOSS OF YOUR SON TECHNICIAN FOURTH GRADE JOSEPH R BEYRLE WHO WAS PREVIOUSLY REPORTED CAPTURED CORRECTED REPORT NOW RECEIVED STATES HE WAS KILLED IN ACTION TEN JUNE IN FRANCE LETTER FOLLOWS=

J A ULIO THE ADJUTANT GENERAL.

THE COMPANY WILL ... NCERNING ITS SERVICE

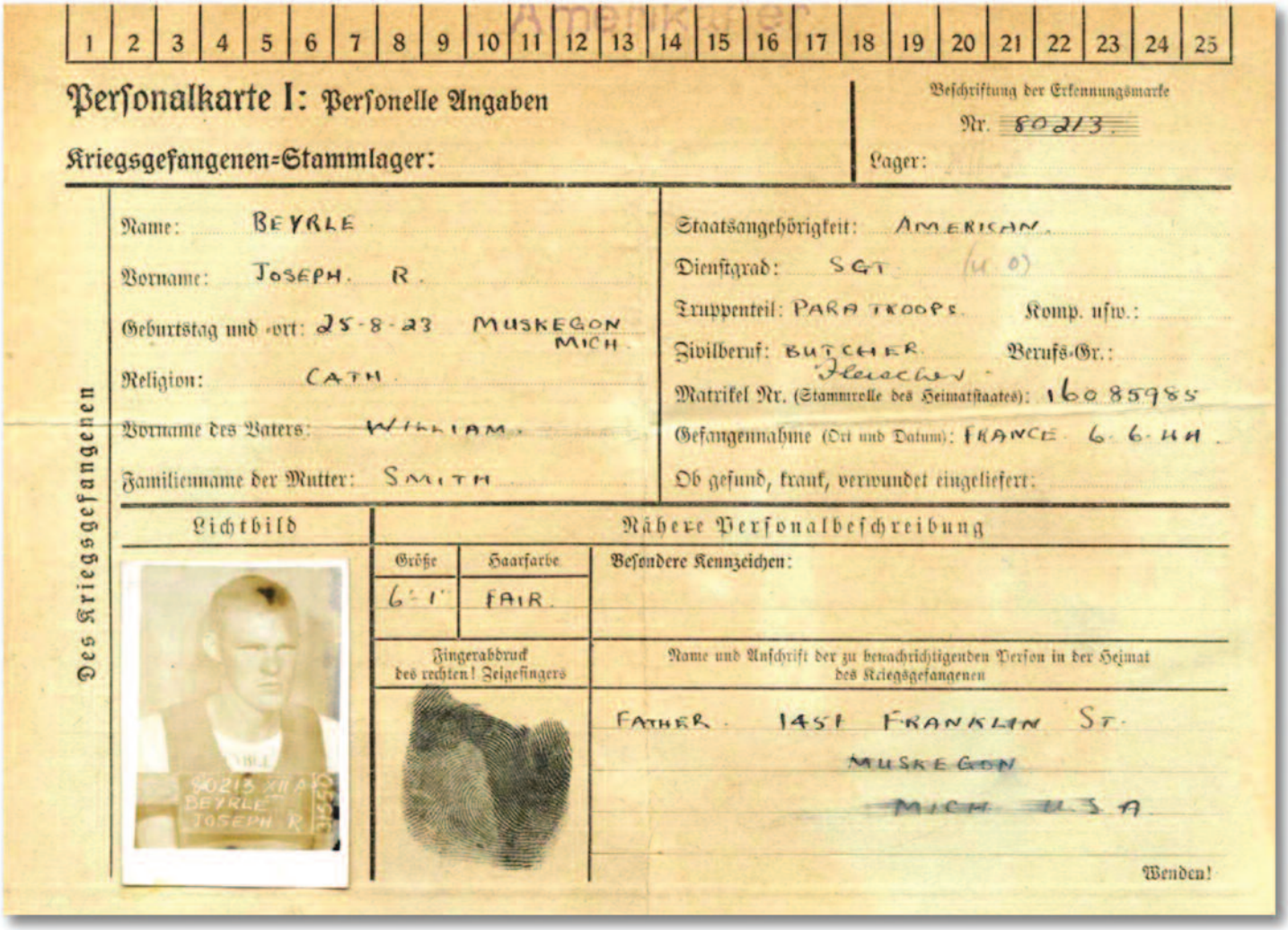
from his unit and on his own for the next 20 hours, he used his demolitions skills to blow up a power plant, but later blundered into a German machine-gun position and was taken prisoner. He managed to escape during an artillery barrage, but the Germans recaptured him.

At some point, one of Beyrle's captors took his dog tags. A few days later, a German soldier wearing the tags and an American uniform was killed, and US authorities identified the body as Beyrle's. His parents received a telegram with the bad news in September, and they held his funeral in Muskegon at St. Joseph's Church on the 17th. About a month later, Beyrle's father received a phone call from the War Department. The Red Cross had sent word that his son Joe was still alive and was a prisoner of war!

It was best that Beyrle's parents didn't know the details. At an interrogation center in France, the Germans subjected Beyrle to brutal treatment. "Sometime during the questioning I called a German officer a SOB and woke up several days later in a hospital with a big headache and a bashed head," Beyrle later recalled. A German soldier had clubbed him in the head with a rifle butt, fracturing his skull and putting him in a coma for days. The aftereffects of the blow lingered for years.

Once he had recovered enough to move, Beyrle was shuttled on long, hellish journeys in overcrowded boxcars to various stalags. On September 17, 1944—the day of his funeral in Muskegon—he reached Stalag III-C in western Poland. There, when the American prisoners organized themselves into commands and committees, Beyrle joined the escape and security committees. One day he was on a work detail outside the camp—a job for which he volunteered as a means of scouting the local surroundings—when a German guard shot him in the shoulder as he helped other prisoners steal potatoes from a farmer's wagon. Beyrle successfully hid his wound from his captors and had a fellow prisoner tend to it.

Beyrle became determined to escape. In November 1944 he and two other men whose names he remembered as Brewer and Quinn used cigarettes to bribe a guard to look the other way as they cut a gap in the wire fence and slipped through. Once outside they climbed aboard a boxcar on a passing train. But instead of heading east, deeper into Poland and closer to the advancing Russians,



Personalkarte I: Personelle Angaben

Kriegsgefangenen-Stammlager:

Beschriftung der Erkennungsmarke
Nr. 80213
Lager:

Des Kriegsgefangenen

Name: BEYRLE
Vorname: JOSEPH R.
Geburtstag und -ort: 25-8-23 MUSKEGON MICH.
Religion: CATH.
Vorname des Vaters: WILLIAM.
Familienname der Mutter: SMITH

Staatsangehörigkeit: AMERICAN.
Dienstgrad: SGT (U.S.)
Truppenteil: PARA TROOPS. Komp. usw.:
Zivilberuf: BUTCHER. Berufs-Gr.:
Fleischer
Matrikel Nr. (Stammrolle des Heimatstaates): 16085985
Gefangennahme (Ort und Datum): FRANCE 6.6.44.
Ob gesund, krank, verwundet eingeliefert:

Lichtbild

Nähere Personalbeschreibung

Größe	Haarfarbe
6'1"	FAIR.

Besondere Kennzeichen:

Fingerabdruck des rechten Zeigefingers

Name und Anschrift der zu benachrichtigenden Person in der Heimat des Kriegsgefangenen

FATHER. 1451 FRANKLIN ST.
MUSKEGON
MICH. U.S.A.

Wenden!

the boxcar ended up attached to a train that went west, into Berlin, where it stopped in a huge, almost deserted railyard. Beyrle approached a yard worker who reluctantly agreed to help. He took the three Americans into Berlin under cover of darkness and brought them to a house. While the escapees were in the basement, a group of armed men stormed in. They beat the three men mercilessly, then dragged them off to Gestapo headquarters.

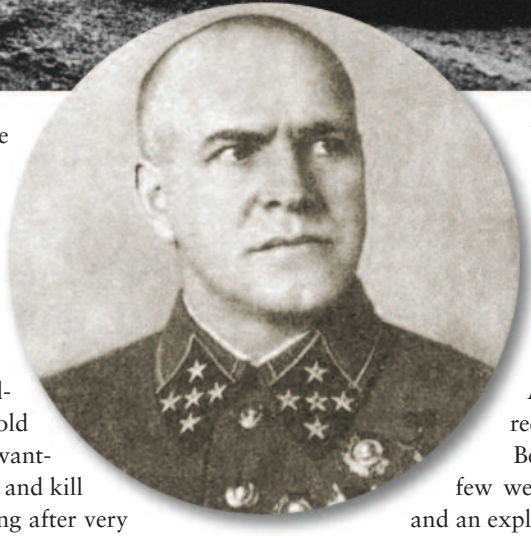
The Gestapo knew exactly how to inflict the maximum amount of pain without killing their prisoners. "We were interrogated, tortured, kicked, knocked around, walked on, hung up by our arms backwards, hit with whips, clubs, and rifle butts," Beyrle recalled. "When you thought they could do no more, they would think of other ways to torture you. When you would slip into semi-consciousness, they would start again. This went on for days at a time and then they would dump you into a cold, dark cell, with no sanitary facilities and dirty from a previous occupant." Back in his filthy cell, Beyrle prayed for death.

Death didn't come. Instead, a German army officer arrived and insisted that the three prisoners fell under the army's jurisdiction. After a tense standoff the Gestapo released the Americans to the army. They were sent back to Stalag III-C and placed in solitary confinement in tiny, cramped cells in the freezing cold. Fortunately, the Red Cross made a surprise inspection of the camp and forced an end to their punishment. Beyrle resumed the monotonous life of a POW, but began thinking about escaping again.

Beyrle, Quinn, and Brewer made a second escape attempt in January. This time they used the distraction of a staged fight to hide in some empty barrels on a farmer's cart. The wagon overturned just outside the camp, and the three escapees crawled out of the barrels as guards began shooting. Brewer and Quinn died in the hail of gunfire; Beyrle managed to scramble into the shelter of nearby woods and into an icy stream he knew would hide his scent from pursuing guard dogs. After living on the run for a week, he heard the rumble of war to the east: he was closing in on the Russians as the Russians were closing in on him!

Another telegram (opposite, top) brought Beyrle's parents crushing news in September 1944: your son is dead. Heartbroken, they attended his funeral on the 17th. But Beyrle—seen here in 1943 (opposite, inset) as a technician fourth grade at Ramsbury, England—was alive, if not well. The US military had misidentified the body of a German infiltrator killed wearing an American uniform and Beyrle's dog tags, and had reported Beyrle as dead. But on the day of his funeral, Beyrle was arriving at Stalag III-C near the village of Alt-Drewitz (Drzewice) in western Poland, as his family learned in October. An identification card (above), listing his personal information, was made at Stalag XII-A, where his mug shot was taken.

CORBIS



The Russian tank battalion Beyrle encountered was participating in the Soviets' fierce and brutal westward advance toward Berlin under Marshall of the Soviet Union Georgy Konstantinovich Zhukov. The battalion was equipped with American Sherman tanks and was commanded by a woman whom Beyrle met at the farm after he emerged from hiding. He knew her only as "the Major." "I told her that I was an escaped US POW and I wanted to join them and go to Berlin with them and kill Nazis," he remembered. "The next morning after very heavy artillery saturation of the area to our west, we left the farm and headed west. There I was, an American escaped POW on an American Sherman tank, with a woman tank commander!"

Shortly after Beyrle joined, the Soviets got into a firefight with a column of vehicles and men. Beyrle learned later that the men had been prisoners the Germans were evacuating from Stalag III-C. The battalion reached the camp a day later. The Russians had their American comrade use his demolitions expertise to blow open the commandant's safe. The Russians scrambled for the jewelry, watches, and other valuables inside. Beyrle scooped up American and Canadian currency. He also recovered his own POW file.

Beyrle had been with the battalion for just a few weeks when German dive-bombers attacked and an explosion blew Beyrle off his tank. He regained consciousness with a severe wound to his groin and ended up in a grim Russian field hospital in Poland. One day Marshall Zhukov himself visited the wounded and stopped to chat with Beyrle through an interpreter, asking if there was anything he could do for him. "I told him I had lost all of my army identifica-

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Escaping from Stalag III-C was Beyrle's obsession. A misadventure landed him in Berlin in a Gestapo hellhole, then back at the stalag. But a January 1945 escape attempt worked. He fled east until he met approaching Soviet forces, like these tanks covered with infantrymen (top). The woman commander of a Soviet tank battalion allowed him to join her unit on its drive to Berlin. Along the way, however, a serious wound put Beyrle out of action. Soviet Marshall Georgy Zhukov (above) noticed him in a field hospital, and gave him a pass to help him get home.

tion and could he help," Beyrle said. "He spoke to his aide and left. The next day I received a letter, in Russian, that I was told identified me as an American US Army paratrooper and ordering help to get me to Moscow. Two days later, I started east in a Russian convoy of wounded towards Lodz, Poland." Eventually Beyrle made his way to Warsaw and had his wounds treated in a convent he found amid the rubble. From there a Russian hospital train took him to Moscow, and a Russian colonel brought him to the American embassy. The officer left Beyrle there, but took Zhukov's pass.

The Americans received Beyrle with suspicion. Their records still had him listed as dead, so for two days he waited at the Hotel Metropol with an armed marine guard while embassy officials, suspecting that he might be a Nazi infiltrator, waited to confirm his identity. Feverish, Beyrle even tried to overpower the guard so he could rejoin the Russians. "I was no match for him in my condition," he said.

Finally, with his identity confirmed, Beyrle embarked on a long trek home—a journey that took him through Odessa to Turkey and on to Egypt. From Port Said he traveled to Naples for more medical care. Finally, he boarded HMS *Samaria*, the same vessel that had taken him to England in 1943, and headed for home. He reached Muskegon on April 21, 1945. On September 14, 1946, the same priest who had conducted his funeral mass celebrated a much happier ceremony at the same church: Beyrle's wedding.

Beyrle's youngest son, John, is now the US ambassador to Russia, but he says his career track developed independently of his father's experiences. For John and his two siblings, the interesting part of their father's story had always been that he was erroneously reported killed in action. John recalls articles on the "miraculous resurrection of Joe Beyrle, married in the same church by the same priest who had done his funeral mass" in his dad's scrapbook. "We knew that he had been, in some way, liberated by the Russians at the end of the war and was fighting for the Russians," John says, "but he didn't really talk about it that much, like a lot of veterans. I think he found it impossible to describe what he'd gone through."

In 1979, John was in the Soviet Union working on a US exhibit there, and he called his father from Moscow's Hotel Metropol. John recalls, "He said, 'Oh, I stayed there. That's where they put me for a couple of nights when they were establishing my identity.'" Father and son talked a little bit about it over the phone, and John later obtained a visa so his father could visit. An article on Beyrle's experiences later appeared in the Soviet equivalent of *Life* magazine. "That was kind of the breakout story that put a lot of the details on the record," John says.

In 1994, Beyrle received recognition for his WWII service with the Soviet Red Army from Russian Federation President Boris Yeltsin, who presented him with four medals. On a later visit to Russia, Beyrle proudly wore his Soviet medals on one side of his vest and his US medals on the other (above).

In 1992, while John was stationed at the American embassy in Vienna, he and his father visited Poland to find out whether anything remained of Stalag III-C. They found the general location and asked an older resident they encountered whether he knew where the camp was. "He took us there," John says, "and you talk about ghosts. I get goose bumps thinking about it now." The Polish had placed a small marker at the site, but there was little else to indicate that a bleak prison camp had once stood there. When the Beyrles asked the local man where the railroad was, he pointed. Just then, father and son heard the sounds of a train off in the distance, like an eerie echo from the past.

As an ambassador, John was able to track down Russian records of his father's hospitalization, but hasn't been able to identify the major who commanded the tank battalion. Most if not all of the unit's members probably perished during the bloody campaign for Berlin. In fact, John believes that had his father not been wounded, he, too, would have died in the assault. He hopes someday to identify the major and perhaps even find an archive somewhere that holds the pass his father received from Zhukov.

Joe Beyrle lived long enough to see that his experiences were not forgotten. In 1994 he attended a ceremony at the White House, where Russian President Boris Yeltsin presented him with medals, an event John said was his father's proudest moment. Four years later, author Thomas H. Taylor published *The Simple Sounds of Freedom*, a book about Beyrle's experiences. Beyrle was preparing to deliver an annual talk to middle school students when he died on December 12, 2004, at the age of 81. He was in Toccoa, Georgia, where he had trained to be a paratrooper.

Starting on February 23, Russians will get an opportunity to learn about the American who fought alongside their soldiers, when an exhibit about Beyrle opens in St. Petersburg. The display will later travel to Moscow and other cities in the former Soviet Union. It will contain artifacts and records from the Beyrle family that tell the story of "a hero of two nations" and his long and arduous odyssey through a world at war. ★

Tom Huntington, *an author and editor who resides in Camp Hill, Pennsylvania, is a contributing editor of* America in WWII.

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