

## What Doesn't Kill You

by **Helen Coats**

On June 16, 1944, a pack of cigarettes saved my life.

My grandfather, only twenty-one years old at the time, lost his squadron just outside Budapest after his fortieth mission as a P-38 Lightning fighter pilot. He dipped several hundred feet above a lake to search for his friends—low enough to remove his oxygen mask. He stuck his hand into his flight suit pocket and fished around for something—maybe a stick of Juicy Fruit. He accidentally dislodged his box of Lucky Strikes. It fell to the cockpit floor. As my grandfather leaned down to retrieve his smokes, two Messerschmitts ambushed him from above, shooting directly at the acrylic bubble canopy where his head had been just a second before. The gas tank exploded. Flames engulfed my grandfather's arm. The plane shuddered and groaned as its nose tipped toward the lake.

When pilots ejected from P-38s, they often snapped their backs, struck by the plane's twin booms. Not my grandfather. He launched above the wreckage and cleared the water below. His parachute barely had time to slow his descent. So many things should have killed him—the sulfurous rain of debris, the bone-jarring impact, the thicket of wooden spikes bristling not fifty feet away. But he survived.

The Nazis sent him to Stalag Luft III, the air force prison camp featured in the movie, *The Great Escape*. There was no escape for my grandfather. Instead, there were gray days. Days when disease settled on the camp like falling ash. Days that smelled of earth and mildew and ten thousand unwashed men, their ears tuned for news, any news, of rescue.

None came.

I only see my grandfather once a year. He lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan, about eleven hours from my house. Shadows of his imprisonment cling to the walls. A Purple Heart and Distinguished Flying Cross and other medals I cannot name glimmer from a hanging display case in the basement. The last piece of his P-38 Lightning's ruptured engine greets visitors in the foyer. But my grandfather rarely talks about these in front of me. He's quick to peer over the top of his morning game of solitaire or daily crossword puzzle and dismiss his time in Stalag Luft III as little more than an episode of *Hogan's Heroes*.

And in a few, small ways, this is true. Since the guards at Stalag Luft III were all former pilots, they held a grudging respect for their captive counterparts, an attitude not found in countless other prisoner-of-war camps. The security was just lax enough that my grandfather and his friends managed to smuggle in a radio to listen to BBC news. But I do not believe for one second that his situation was as comfortable as he claims.

My grandfather spent his first few weeks as a prisoner-of-war in solitary confinement. He kept his mind busy reliving lessons the nuns taught him at Catholic school. His dry tongue rasped over Bible verses and prayers and Shakespeare. Later, when the food ran out, my grandfather learned to stomach spiders. I wonder if he preferred to swallow them whole, or pick their legs off one by one, counting the days since his last meal.

One time, the Nazis stripped my grandfather naked in an interrogation chamber and saw that he was circumcised. The room rippled with their cries of "Jew, Jew." They raised their guns. He raised his hands. He said, "No, Roman Catholic." A translator repeated his words. The Germans didn't believe him, but a priest convinced an officer to check his dog tags. He confirmed his Christian faith. The Nazis backed away and lowered their weapons. Little did any of them know his mother was half-Polish, half-Jewish.

In winter, 1945, the Germans and their prisoners marched away from Stalag Luft III and the approaching Soviet forces. Rumors flickered down the line. Some of the prisoners believed that the Nazis were taking them to death camps as a last-ditch attempt to wound the unstoppable Allies. Angered voices rose from the crowd in English, French,

and other languages, but the Germans pressed them onward. In all the commotion, no one noticed as my grandfather and his friend slipped away and hid in a ditch by the side of the road. One row of Germans passed by. Then another. The two watched as the captives and prisoners slid away into the distance. Thousands of men melted into a single column— a dark snake winding its way north.

I often wonder what would have happened if my grandfather had tried to escape earlier, if he would have been shot. In March of 1944, just three months before my grandfather's initial capture, seventy-six men fled Stalag Luft III. Seventy-three were recaptured. And of those seventy-three, fifty were executed. The more I think about it, the more I am astounded by the sheer number of times my grandfather could have died and didn't. He could have crashed in that lake and drowned. And what if he hadn't crashed at all? What if he had flown on, only to be killed later in some air battle over Berlin?

But he hadn't. He made it home, his burns faded, a Purple Heart in his pocket. He returned to his wife. To raise a family. To name and feed and teach a little girl, who, in 1998, became my mother. My mother, who passed down my grandfather's eyes to me. His eyes that never needed glasses, so that even at ninety-three he can read the timer on the kitchen stove a room away.

Now, when I stand in the checkout line at Wal-Mart, I look at the shelves of cigarettes behind the counter. Marlboros and Winstons, Camels and Newports. I will never smoke them. I know they are deadly, like the fire my grandfather faced on June 16, 1944. But when I see them, I feel only gratitude.

Gunfire and smoke and cigarettes. In spite of this—because of this—here I am.

We all survived.



**Helen Coats** is currently enrolled as a Liberal Arts major at Purdue University. Her fiction is forthcoming in *One Teen Story* and *Toasted Cheese*. In her spare time, she keeps a research blog on film scores and storytelling ([www.thecreditsconductor.wordpress.com](http://www.thecreditsconductor.wordpress.com)) and tweets at @HelenJackets.