

# Seeing war buddies of '43 again

Honey Bear stood next to me in the swaying boxcar staring through a steel-grated aperture at the magnificent Brenner Pass scenery.

"I wish my wife was here," he said wistfully.

"What?" I demanded.

It happened to be the fall of 1943, the boxcar was jammed with about 30 other smelly men, and we were all on our way to POW camps in Germany.

"I just can't enjoy something beautiful unless she's with me," Honey Bear said.

We went our separate ways not long after that, Honey Bear to Oflag 64 and I to Stalag Luft III. I never saw him again. Until the middle of this month. In a room at the Union Plaza Hotel in Las Vegas. There was a nice view from the window, and he could enjoy it because his wife was there with him.

Arthur (Honey Bear) Bryant was in Las Vegas for the biennial convocation of Father Stanley Brach's flock. As you may know by now, Padre Brach is an ex-military chaplain whose unofficial wartime parish was a POW camp at Chieti, Italy, and later, when the Germans split us up, Oflag 64 in Szubin, Poland. The Las Vegas gathering was intended for Oflag 64 veterans, but I horned in to visit with the padre.

When we met for lunch at the Union Plaza's Center Stage restaurant (Padre didn't care, but I wanted their best for the occasion), we hugged a lot. We'd corresponded some over the years and spoken on the phone just recently, but we hadn't seen one another for the 41 years since I'd belonged to his Chieti parish (you didn't have to be Catholic, and still don't, to be one of the padre's own). He's aged like the rest of us and is a bit frail (he's mending from a

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serious illness), but I recognized him immediately.

We spent most of the afternoon and part of the evening together, but there was also time for remember-whenning with some other Chieti alumni — Honey Bear, Don Waful, Lewis Lowe and Tom Holt, with their wives. There is a reason for giving their names, which mean nothing to you. Not long after the war I sat down and typed up everything I could remember about the POW years, including the following thumbnail descriptions:

"Bryant, a pudgy little tank officer who seemed about to burst out of his skin and whom we called Honey Bear because of his fondness for sugar. His friend, Don, a pleasant, sandy-haired tank officer who could play the trombone and spent most of his time composing letters to his fiancée; Lew, a big, slow, quiet signals officer who never had much to say . . . a ranger named Tim (our nickname for Tom Holt) who was studying for a career in opera . . . he whistled extraordinarily well and could do whole symphonies. He was so wrapped up in his music that often, when he mounted his stool to make his top bunk, he would hiss through his teeth imitating a string section as he conducted with graceful flourishes of his arms and much head-swaying . . . a

big man with a huge chest whose fierce expression and manner of speaking belied his almost-prin nature."

Honey Bear is now trim and fit, so much so I didn't come close to recognizing him, and, of course, no longer viewing beautiful vistas without his wife. Waful, much the same after all these years, still plays trombone, and with three different groups, but has no letters to compose to a fiancée because he's many years married. Lowe is still big and quiet and, which I failed to record in those old notes, gentle. Tim is still a big man with a huge chest. At the Union Plaza bash, I saw him first at a table with Waful. After he crushed me a little against that huge chest and I got my breath back, I asked, "Remember how you used to whistle through your teeth and conduct the symphony orchestra?"

"See? See?" Waful cried triumphantly, pointing a finger at his wife and Tim's. "You didn't believe me when I told you he did that!"

When I mentioned to another Oflag 64-er, Houston's John T. Jones Jr., what a coincidence it was for him and Amon Carter Jr., from another noted Texas family, to have been in the same German POW camp, he said that wasn't all: They had also been at the University of Texas together. But there was one major difference in their otherwise-parallel lives he said he never tired of pointing out to Carter.

"I'd tell him, 'I was captured by Germans. You were captured by Arabs and sold to Germans.'"

I had to leave before the big banquet Saturday night, but maybe Padre Brach or Honey Bear or somebody will tell me what I missed and where we're meeting two years from now.