

Will's Story  
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**E. WAYNE, M.P.**  
SAINT JOHN



*This is the story of Willis Marsolais as told to Jean De La Croix. It was to be used as his statement, the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March 1999 in front of the Standing Committee hearings on P.O.W.'s at Parliament. He was trying to fight for the rights of all Canadian prisoners of war. Willis did not get to read this due to a lack of time but a copy of his story was given to all committee members. He was promised a return visit as a speaker at the earliest possible opportunity.*

*This is an incredible account of Will's 18 months in SS concentration camps after his capture at the age of 14. It relates to his enlistment, capture, starvation, torture, escape and eventual return to the merchant navy and the war, under penalty of incarceration... "Sail or Jail!".*

*Willis has lived with these horrors for over half a century. He has been able to survive these 54 years with no help, recognition or compensation from his country. He's been able to endure the last 51 years only through the patience, dedication and love of his wife Lorraine.*

## **“Will’s Story”**

I'd like the opportunity to complete this statement without any interruptions and I'll take any questions afterwards.

My name is Willis Marsolais and I live in St-Isodore Ontario, but a long time ago my address was SS concentration camp, Stalag X11. It was somewhere near Limburg Germany on the River Rhine. What I'm about to tell you is my story as a merchant navy, prisoner of war.... a P.O.W.

I joined the merchant navy in the fall of 1942. I wanted to see the world, after all... I was fourteen years old!

I came from a very large family of 15. Three of my brothers were already in the services and ever since I could remember I wanted to follow them and do my “bit”.

I was full of spunk and vinegar and even though I showed my age, the recruitment officer gladly accepted me.

My first trip across was to Hull England. It was so long ago now that I've forgotten that ship's name.

I signed up as a fireman. My job was to keep the ship in full steam by shoveling coal into the mouth of a hungry furnace. Four hours on... eight hours off... four hours on... eight hours off..... Two other men and I would shovel 21 tons of coal in 4 hours to keep 9 fires going, three fires to each man. It was hard work but I didn't mind it, it got me out to sea, out to the war and adventure.

My story really starts when I signed up with the Liberian registered freighter, “The SS Danskie”. We took her out of Liverpool on our way to Canada. We anchored four days off the coast of Dover, then set out for Halifax

We were about three days out when we were suddenly taken over by German raiders. Raiders were very well armed German surface vessels. It's ironic because we were always preparing ourselves for a torpedo from German U-boats (if you can really prepare yourself for that... day after day... night after night.....)

But this came as a total surprise to me... It all seems like a dream now. After all, it was two o'clock in the morning and I was half-asleep "Achtung ! Achtung! All hands on deck. My god! I thought someone must be playing a game on me. I soon realized the reality of it all. When I got topside all hell was braking loose.. I could see the captain, chief mate and the other boys running around frantically. There was crisp firecracker noise cutting through the night air. They turned out to be machine guns.

Suddenly I felt this stinging burning feeling in my right leg. I grabbed on to the railing to stay upright, I was starting to feel faint. Then I was grabbed by the arm and shoved down along the gangplank to the raider ship. I was forced along with the other men to jump into the ship's hold. It was about a twelve-foot drop. I landed on something that felt like sand but it wasn't quite. The chief mate was behind me and saw that I was loosing a lot of blood. He put in a tourniquet on my leg. As he ripped open my pants leg, I could see that the slug had lodged itself into my flesh. Then I realized what we were in..... Salt! We were lying in a hold of salt. Apparently the German raiders always used salt for ballast. I can still remember that first burning sting but it wouldn't be the last time.

We must have been in the hold for days. When the hatch opened I had to be dragged out and carried down the gangplank. I was told to stay aside with the eight other wounded men and ended up in a hospital in Hamburg were I stayed for approximately six weeks.

Although I was handcuffed to my bed and had an armed guard at my door, they were very decent to me. They even showed me the bullet from my leg. I must say I had the best treatment in that hospital ... however that was to be short lived.

Just before my six weeks were up, an SS officer came in with an official looking document and said: "You are being charged with espionage". My god!.... They thought I was a spy! As I understood it, I was being sentenced to death!

I was to dress and get ready. They wasted no time and transferred me to a prison camp that very afternoon.

I was taken by truck and thrown into a cell in a Hamburg prison camp. I was kept in a holding cell in solitary confinement for 6 or 7 weeks. During this period, they questioned me on a regular basis. My only thought was..... at any time, I could be taken out and shot.... day or night.

Then one day, an SS officer came to see me and said: "As of tomorrow, you will be taken to a marine base where you will be held for a period of time". I thought to myself.... Finally, ... I might have a fair trial after all and surely somebody will clear this up!

The next morning, they shackled my hands and feet with my hands behind my back and chained to my feet. I was taken to the marine base. When I got there, a sympathetic SS colonel decided to transfer me to a camp near Belgium. Apparently the camp was smaller and it wouldn't be as bad as the others.

I was shackled again and taken to Stalag X. While being transferred out of that camp I accidentally tripped on an alarm wire and fell down. Fortunately for me, a quick thinking German Officer stopped a guard who was about to baillonnette me in the throat. (I wondered how long before my luck would run out)

When I got to Stalag X, there were 8 other English-speaking prisoners beside myself. I was the youngest at 14 and as far as I know, I was the only Canadian. I stayed there for about 7 months.

For whatever reason, the commandant decided that all the English-speaking prisoners were to be transferred to Stalag X11.

When we arrived, each man was given a complete examination by the camp doctor.

We had to take a cold shower and then we were sprayed down for lice among other things. The whole process was very humiliating.

We were given prison pajamas, a blanket and a small pillow. The bunk beds were made of wood. It was hard but you eventually got use to it.

The camp was overcrowded, with about 400 men to each barracks.

The food was scarce. Needless to say our food rations were very limited.

The weekly rations consisted of:

- one loaf of bread per man
- tea with milk to soak your bread
- and cabbages.

Day after day after day.....

We had to take turns to guard the food because if you didn't, it would disappear.

The nine English speaking men including myself, would rotate to guard our stores on a daily basis. This was the only way we could guarantee that we had food for the next day or the next week. In our camp, it was every man for himself. There were no superior officers to keep order and to submit complaints.

If any Red cross bags ever got through from the outside, the SS always made sure we never saw them.

The first night and many nights after I couldn't sleep because of the horrible smell. The stench in the barracks was beyond belief. There was no running water and only buckets to relieve ourselves. The barracks were locked up from 6 P.M. to 6 A.M. rain or shine, summer or winter. The foul stench was enough to make you vomit.

You shared your bunk with bed bugs, lice, cockroaches and whatever else that happened to crawl on your blanket when you tried to sleep. The bugs were out of control so much, that the barracks and the blankets had to be fumigated every week.

We had a set routine day after day. We had made a ball out of old rags to keep active and to keep our minds occupied, or we'd just go crazy.

One day I met with another prisoner who was only 17 or 18 years old and he told me that he was also charged with espionage. We were both uninformed of the process and preoccupied with worries. What would happen to us? Would we get a lawyer? Was there a judge? etc...

The ray of hope got dimmer and dimmer because in these camps, nobody really cared about our rights. We were on our own.

Time went on when one day I spotted a Red Cross truck. I went over to the guard and asked if I could send a letter through the red cross.

The guard looked at me and said: "No Letters".

I asked him: "Why can't I let my parents know that I am here?"

He answered: "Because you've been charged with espionage".

I said: "What does that mean?"

He said: "You are going to go to court and then you are going to be shot".

"I'll be shot for what?....What did I do?....You know I didn't ask to come here.... They brought me here..... I'm only a boy!.....

I guess he felt sorry for me because he waved me off and said: "Stop worrying about it and everything will be fine".

One morning I was on parade. The men were lined up in 3 or 4 rows as usual. The SS officer was inspecting our group when suddenly someone spit in his face. The last thing I remember, was this massive pain on my skull.

When I came to, I was full of blood and my head was bandaged. I had been blamed for spitting in the officer's face. I guess I must have been close to the culprit.

I was thrown into a compound that had a wooden floor about 4 by 6 and was about 7 feet high. It had no windows and I was in total darkness except for a small 2 or 3 inch hole in the back wall. I had a small hole in the floor to relieve myself. As close as I could figure, I was there for about 21 days.... 21 days with no food....only water.

In the state I was in with malnutrition, I got to the point when I was literally begging them to shoot me:

I was pleading with them:

"Shoot me or kill me..... do something!" I was desperate!

I pled with the guard: "Why don't you take out your revolver and shoot me now?". "I'm dead anyway..... I'm not eating ! You are just giving me water here.....

I asked: "Please give me some paper so I can write a letter to my mother".

He said: "I'm sorry I can't do that." .....

"I knew my mother couldn't do anything!"..... My family didn't even know where I was.

When I was let out, I was brought back to my quarters stripped of all my clothing. I thought... My God! What are they going to do to me now?

I was bent over face down on a bench. My arms were stretched out in front of me and my hands were handcuffed to the front at the bottom of the bench. My feet were chained to the bottom of the other end of the bench so that I was completely stretched out and totally unable to move. From my position I couldn't see anything or anybody but everybody could see me.

I was beaten in front of everybody. I don't know how many were beating me, it could have been one or several taking turns.

They were using a strap and were concentrating around an area about a foot and a half wide along my spine and my rump. My punishment broke just about every vessel along the spine of my back.

I can't say for certain how long I was beaten. Their aim was to beat their victims until they lost consciousness and passed out. The process was very brutal and effective. They did this very often, not only to me.

When the show was over, I was hauled up into my bunk. The vessels of my back were bursting with blood. I had to stay there for 3 days, unable to move.

One of the officers came to me and said: "Sit on your ass and the hum of the strap will come out".

I told him: "Listen....I didn't spit in the Officer's face. I wasn't raised to spit in anybody's face". It must have been someone close to me but it wasn't me.

He said: "I believe you now and I want to apologize for what happened to you but there is nothing I can do about it now. It's too late."

I never did find out who did it.

In the camp, the Russians were really hated by the SS. Every once in a while you could routinely hear bursts of machine gun fire followed by the corpses of Russians being carried out.

In our camp, the padre, who happened to be one of the men in our group, would say mass with us every Sunday. He knew the woman in charge of the Belgian underground or resistance. They would cross the Rhine at night, sneak up to our wire and help take prisoners out. The group consisted of at least 30 well-armed and well-organized men and women.

One Monday morning, the padre told us to stay alert tonight and to be ready when we heard 3 taps near his bed. We knew what he meant. We all anxiously waited in the dark and sure enough, we heard it. TAP, TAP, TAP

The padre told the 9 of us to follow him. We had to sneak under the buildings in order to avoid the searchlights. The resistance group was at the wire. They had a special prearranged signal with a small red light to let us know when they were ready. We made it to the fence and they cut our way through.

At that point I felt as if I was going to die. My heart was pounding so fast, I thought it would burst. I didn't know who these people were but I trusted them totally with my life. At that moment there was no turning back.

From there we crept about 900 yards to the boats on the River Rhine .

To get to the rubber rafts we had to follow a rope in the water. If we saw any Germans, we were told to duck our head under water for as long as necessary and I believed at the time, even if it meant drowning..... Every ones life was at stake, not only the ex-prisoners but the 30 resistance fighters.

We were pulled across the river up to the rubber boat that held 2 people each. Once in Belgium, we had to completely strip and change into fisherman's clothes.

We were kept in a safe house for a week in Holland. The resistance started the healing process by giving us a needle to get the circulation going. They fed us with all kinds of foods with proper nutrients to regain the normal use of our body.

A group of four of us were put on a fishing boat. We dressed as fisherman and we were told to keep silent when German patrol boats went by. They must have done this before because we made it all the way to Kent.

When we got there, I jumped out of the boat and felt like kissing the ground.

During the escape, my right leg had swollen up like a balloon from all the strain and exertion. I stayed in a hospital for over 3 months.

Don't forget I had spent about 6 or 7 weeks in a hospital, 6 or 7 weeks in a holding cell and 18 months in the prison camps Stalag X and X11.

At first I felt hungry and not hungry if you can figure this out..... but everyday I was getting a little stronger and regaining my strength.

When I got out of the hospital, I saw the shipping master. I came back to Canada working aboard the ship "Wentworth Park".

Once in Canada, I thought "they would release me and set me free."

I was forced to join the union as a mariner and I had to sign into the manning pool or I'd be thrown in jail. I had to sign a contract for another 2 years.

I went to see Captain Richards of the manning pool. I was really hoping to get 3 months off to see my family. They didn't have a phone and they still didn't know where I was. Instead, Captain Richards sent me to a hospital in Montreal. My legs were badly burned from my return trip to Canada as a fireman. Don't forget, I was 16 going on 17 at this time.

A doctor found out about the horror that I had been through and told me that he would get my father to come to me in the hospital. I really didn't believe him.

I still remember as if it were yesterday.....It was a Saturday evening around 7.P.M.when I first heard my father asking for me. I was leaning on my right side facing the wall..... I turned slowly.... and there was my father.....

I was so happy that I cried. I really loved my father and I couldn't tell him my story because of his heart condition. This man was so proud. He had just walked 4 miles from union station because he didn't have any money. He even had to borrow the money to come to see me in the hospital.

He said: "Will, I have some letters here for you."

"Alright just give them to me."

And he said "They're checks from the Government."

I looked into his eyes and said: "Al right then, I'll sign them and I'll give them to you." I knew he had no money. I also gave him the \$300.00 I'd just received.

I was signed up for the Mulgrave Park 3 weeks later.

I went on two other ships afterwards, the Lasalle Park and the SS High Park. I was to make 18 oceans crossings during the war.

On one of my voyages, The SS High Park turned onto a 49 degree angle for 3 days. The cargo had shifted to one side. The ship could have sunk at any time and we didn't sleep for 3 days..... but that's another story.

When the war was over, I was able to come home but none of us were rewarded with help for education, housing or any of the benefits the other services received.

The merchant navy in England received the same full rights as the military, as far back as 1940. We didn't even have any medical benefits until 1992.

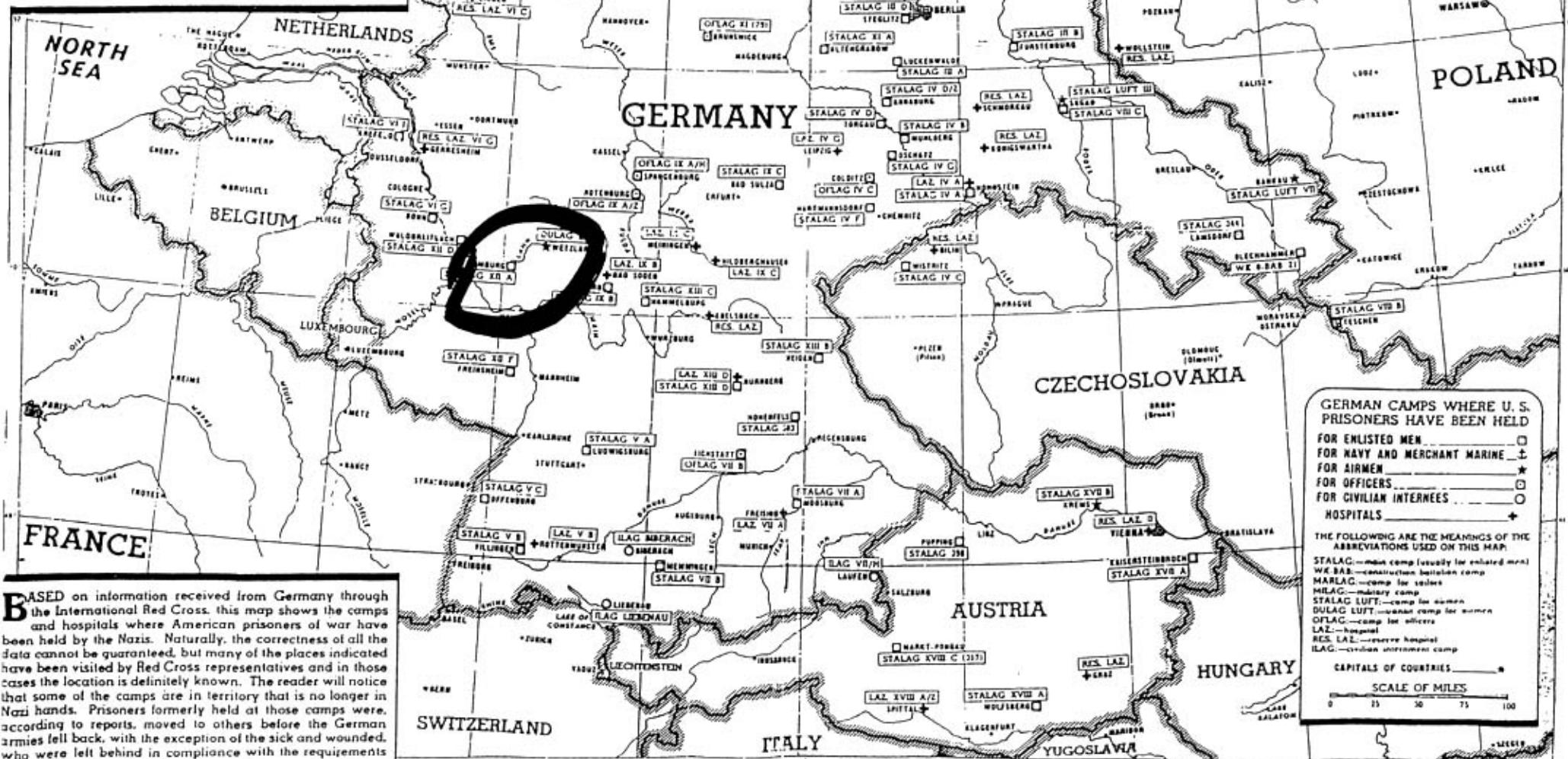
I think I speak for all the merchant navy and especially the prisoners of war, when I tell you how frustrating but most of all how humiliating it was, not even to be allowed to stand and take a salute on Remembrance Day.

When I was starving in Stalag XII for almost 21 days, I could never imagine in my wildest dreams that someday, my country would force me to do it again along with my comrades. The fast lasted 10 days from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> of October, 1998.

**I'm pleading with all Canadians, "Canadiens et Canadiennes" across this country, young and old.....**

**PLEASE DON'T FORGET US! PLEASE DON'T LET US DOWN!  
OUBLIEZ-NOUS PAS!**

# PRISON CAMPS



## Will's Picture

(Jean and Dianne De La Croix wrote this song. The words are dedicated to our friends, Will and Loraine Marsolais. We were inspired when Loraine showed us a little picture of Willis, which she has carried in her wallet for over 40 years after a fire destroyed all their personal possessions. The picture shows Willis in an army uniform at age 13 before he was discharged. The next year he was accepted in the Canadian Merchant Navy at the grand old age of 14. By the time he saw Canada again, at age 16, he had been captured on the high seas, shot in the leg, starved, tortured and eventually made his escape to come home to Canada only to be forced back to sea under penalty of incarceration..."Sail or Jail!". Like so many other POW's, Willis still feels the agony and emotional strain even after 54 years.)

It's just a worn out photograph all wrinkled, torn and faded  
But when she holds it in her hands, you'd think that god had blessed it  
She knows the story of his life, which no one can imagine  
The lad who could have stayed in school, sailed off to save his nation

It's just a worn out photograph all wrinkled, torn and faded  
But when she holds it in her hands, you'd think she was in heaven  
Her love for him will never fade, although at times she'll lose him  
To memories far beyond her reach, which no one can imagine.

It's just a worn out photograph all wrinkled, torn and faded  
But when she holds it in her hands, her love for him is bursting  
And then she gazes in his eyes, she knows once more she's lost him  
To torture of the prison camps, which no one can imagine

It's just a worn out photograph all wrinkled, torn and faded  
But when she holds it in her hands, the memories come to haunt her  
Awake at night in restless walks, she knows once more she's lost him  
To fifty years reliving times, which no one can imagine

It's just a worn out photograph all wrinkled, torn and faded  
But when she holds it in her hands, the thought of him just tells her  
That no one cares how they should be, the nation has forgotten  
A maple leaf has gone to sea and no one "Will" remember.

It's just a worn out photograph all wrinkled, torn and faded  
But when she holds it in her hands, you'd think that god had made it  
Sometimes she'll wish he'd never left, to spare him all his torment  
But then "what if" that was their fate, they'll live just for the moment

It's just a worn out photograph all wrinkled, torn and faded  
The lad who should have stayed in school, went off to save his nation

# War veteran breaks silence

PoW tells story he couldn't repeat for half a century

BY COLIN GREY

Willis Marsolais kept silent for 54 years about the hell he went through as a prisoner of war in Germany during Second World War.

All he told his family when he returned home in 1946 from his service in the merchant marines was that he had been at sea. He never told his four children because he didn't think they would understand. He told his wife of 51 years some of the horrors but left out the worst parts.

All of a sudden, Mr. Marsolais has received much attention and sympathy after he told his story, from the capture of his freighter in 1942 to his escape from a prison camp 18 months later.

Over two wrenching days last week he wrote it down with his friend Jean De La Croix of Aylmer. He passed out the written version when he addressed the House of Commons veterans affairs committee last Thursday.

The committee is considering demands by merchant navy veterans like Mr. Marsolais for compensation for the half-century they have gone without the benefits that veterans of the regular armed services received.

Mr. Marsolais is one of the band of merchant navy veterans who held two hunger strikes to pressure the federal government to make lump sum payments of between \$5,000 and \$30,000 to approximately 2,300 Canadians who are merchant navy veterans. He is scheduled to address the committee again in two weeks, after Parliament returns from Easter break.

The 71-year-old retiree says he finally told his story to try to win compensation before it was too late.

"We're coming to the end of our lives, and I figure if I could help my shipmates in any way, this is the time to do it," he said in an interview at his home in St. Isodore, about 75 kilometres east of Ottawa. "Because we have eight to 12 (veterans) dying each week and time is getting short."

Mr. Marsolais was only 14 when he



BRUNO SCHLUMBERGER, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Willis Marsolais has decided to share his experience as a prisoner of war in Europe.

## FIRST PERSON

'I got to the point where I was begging them to shoot me'

enlisted in the merchant marines. On only his second voyage, Germans raided his freighter, the SS *Danskie*. The raiders shot him in the right leg during the attack, a wound that stung mercilessly over the next few days because the Germans kept the captive seamen in a cargo-hold full of salt.

After treating him at a hospital for six weeks, the Germans charged Mr. Marsolais with espionage and shipped him to the first of two prison camps. Two months later, they transferred him and eight other prisoners to another camp. There they lived in horrible conditions, surviving on meagre rations and sleeping in cramped barracks.

His worst ordeal came when he was wrongly accused of spitting in the face of an SS officer. He was beaten and placed in solitary confinement for 21 days, left to survive on nothing but water.

When they freed him, they gave him another vicious beating.

After 18 months, Mr. Marsolais escaped with the help of resistance forces, and after several days found his way to England.

It was not the end of the war for him. As soon as he was healthy again, the merchant marines sent him back to sea. He crossed the Atlantic 18 more times before his discharge in 1946.

Since he went public, the story has garnered Mr. Marsolais much attention.

CFRA talk-show host Lowell Green has read it aloud on his show, and distant publications such as *Time* magazine have called him for interviews.

But Mr. Marsolais said he is only interested in correcting the injustices he and other merchant navy veterans faced when they returned from the war and were rewarded only with a \$300 cheque and an apology from the Canadian government.

"I'm not looking for the attention," he said. "I'm just looking for compensation for myself and every other mariner throughout Canada."

"It stays with you your whole life. By me telling my story, it helps and it makes people realize what the merchant seamen went through."

## Shot, captured and beaten. **Willis Marsolais** relives painful memories of his time as a prisoner of war in Germany.

I live in St-Isodore, but a long time ago my address was an SS concentration camp, Stalag XII. What I'm about to tell you is my story as a merchant navy prisoner of war.

I joined the merchant navy in the fall of 1942. I was 14 years old. Three of my brothers were already in the services and ever since I could remember I wanted to follow them and do my bit.

My story really starts when I signed up with a Liberian freighter, the SS *Danskie*, for a trip from England to Canada. We were about three days out when German raiders boarded the *Danskie*.

It was two o'clock in the morning. Topside, I could see the captain, chief mate and others running around. Suddenly I felt a burning in my right leg — I had been shot. Then I was grabbed by the arm and shoved down along the gangplank to the raider ship.

I was forced to jump into the ship's hold, a 12-foot drop. I landed on something that felt like sand. Then I realized we were in salt! Apparently German raiders used salt for ballast. I can still remember that burning sting. I ended up in a hospital in Hamburg for six weeks. Just before my stay ended an SS officer came to me and said, "You are being charged with espionage."

My God! They thought I was a spy! As I understood it, I was being sentenced to death!

They wasted no time and transferred me to a prison camp that afternoon. I was kept in solitary confinement for six or seven weeks. My only thought was at any time I could be shot.

One day an SS officer came to me and said, "As of tomorrow, you will be taken to a marine base where you will be held for a period of time."

One morning I was on parade. An SS officer was inspecting our group when suddenly someone spit in his face. The last thing I remember was a massive pain on my head.

When I came to, I was full of blood and my head was bandaged. I had been blamed for the spitting.

I was thrown in a tiny compound with no windows except for a small two- or three-inch hole in the back wall. I was there for 21 days. Twenty-one days with no food, only water. I got to the point where I was begging them to shoot me.

When I was let out, I was brought back to my quarters and beaten in front of everybody. I can't say for certain how long I was beaten. Their aim was to beat their victims until they lost consciousness and passed out. When the show was over, I was hauled up into my bunk. I had to stay there for three days, unable to move.

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The padre told the nine of us to follow him. We had to sneak under the buildings in order to avoid the searchlights. We made it to the fence and cut our way through. From there we crept 900 yards to boats on the River Rhine. Once in Belgium, we had to completely strip and change into fisherman clothes. We were kept in a safe house for a week in Holland. The resistance started the healing process by giving us a needle to get the circulation going. They fed us (so we could) regain the normal use of our body.

A group of four of us were put on a fishing boat. We dressed as fishermen and we were told to keep silent when German patrol boats went by. They must have done this before because we made it all the way to Kent. When we got there, I jumped out of the boat and felt like kissing the ground.

I came back to Canada working aboard a ship, the SS *Wentworth Park*. After more time in a hospital in Montreal, I was signed up for the SS *Mulgrave Park* three weeks later. I (went on) to make 18 ocean crossings during the war. None of us were rewarded with help for education, housing or any of the benefits the other services received. We didn't even have any medical benefits until 1992.

*Excerpt of transcript to be read for the  
Commons' committee on Veterans' Affairs*