

American POW's prized gold ring comes home after he gave it away for food during World War II

RALEIGH, N.C. — After a year and a half behind barbed wire as a prisoner in World War II, 2nd Lt. David C. Cox had just about reached his breaking point.

Deliveries of Red Cross parcels to Stalag VII-A had all but ceased, and the U.S. Army bomber co-pilot and his fellow POWs were subsisting on scanty rations of bug-infested soup and bread. Outside the wire, Adolf Hitler's forces showed no signs of giving up. Cold and hungry, the North Carolinian made a difficult decision. He slipped the gold aviator's ring — a gift from his parents — off his finger and passed it through a fence to an Italian POW, who handed back a couple of chocolate bars.

He would never again see the ring. But it did not disappear.

Last week, about a dozen family members and friends gathered in the living room of David C. Cox Jr.'s Raleigh home and watched as he slit open a small yellow parcel from Germany. The 67-year-old son dug through the crinkly packing material and carefully removed a little plastic box.

"And here it is," he said with a long sigh as he pulled out the ring. "Oh, my goodness. ... I never thought it would ever happen. I thought it was gone. We all thought it was gone.

"He thought it was gone," he said of his late father.

The story of how the ring made it back to the Cox family is a testament to a former enemy's generosity, the reach of the Internet and the healing power of time.

Following the December 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the elder Cox left college and enlisted. The Army Air Corps accepted him on his second application.

He graduated from flight school on July 26, 1942. That same day, he married his high school sweetheart, Hilda Walker.

To celebrate his commission, Irvin and Connie Bell Cox presented their middle son with a gold signet ring, the oval emblazoned with a raised propeller and wings. Engraved inside were the words, "Mother & Father to David C. Cox Greensboro, NC," and the numbers 10-4-18-42 — his birthday and the current year.

Cox was assigned to the 305th Bomb Group, 364th Squadron — part of the "Mighty Eighth" Air Force. By October, he was in England.

As a co-pilot in the B-17 "Flying Fortress," Cox flew more than a dozen bombing missions over occupied France and the German heartland. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for helping to get his burning plane back to England from a May 1943 raid that cost the lives of half his 10-man crew.

On July 28, 1943, Cox's plane was shot down over Kassel, Germany. He parachuted into a rose garden, was taken prisoner, interrogated and then shipped to Stalag Luft III, the POW camp made famous in the Steve McQueen film, "The Great Escape."

He remained there until January 1945, when he and the other Allied officers were force-marched three days through the snow, then packed into train cars for another three days before ending up at Stalag VII-A near Moosburg, northeast of Munich.

As Hitler's Third Reich collapsed upon itself, POWs from all over found their way to Moosburg. By the time Cox arrived, conditions there went from bad to what one historian described as "barely correct by the standards of the Geneva Convention."

It was at Moosburg that he traded the ring for the candy bars.

Finally, on April 28, 1945, Gen. George Patton's 14th Armored Division liberated the camp, and Cox, who was promoted to 1st lieutenant, made his way back to North Carolina. He started a tire retreading equipment company with his brother, and he and Hilda raised three children.

Cox didn't talk much about the war, except to remind his children of his privations when they refused to clean their plates. And he spoke wistfully about his lost ring.

Upon his return from the war, one of the first things Cox did was to have an exact duplicate made of his prized ring — right down to the inscription. When he died in 1994, the replica passed to his son, David Jr., who wore it until it finally broke in the middle. Now fast-forward to today and the tiny Bavarian village of Hohenberg, a picturesque collection of stucco and half-timbered houses.

Mark and Mindy Turner moved there about a year ago so he could take a job as an air traffic controller at the nearby U.S. Army installation in Ansbach. Earlier this month, the couple accepted a dinner invitation from their neighbors, Martin and Regina Kiss.

A 64-year-old master church painter by trade, Martin Kiss is also a skilled artist, and after dinner he showed his visitors around his studio. Then he mentioned he had something else he'd like them to see.

Kiss disappeared into the living room and returned with a gold ring — then told a story. The Kiss family was Hungarian — the name is pronounced "KISH" — and comes from an area in the northern part of present-day Serbia. They ran a small pub near the Danube River.

A Russian soldier on his way home after the war traded the ring to the family — presumably in exchange for room and board, Kiss' grandmother told him. His "Oma" gave it to him when he moved to Germany in 1971 — for luck, or in case he needed some quick cash.

Kiss wore it proudly on his pinkie. He realized it must have come from an American soldier, but didn't know how to trace its owner — especially in a new country that wasn't all that eager to talk about the war.

Worried it might get damaged as he worked, Kiss placed the ring in a corked glass bottle with an old coin and a gold chain.

Still, he never stopped thinking about the original owner — and now, with two computer-savvy Americans in his home, he decided it was time to try and find him.

Mark Turner went online when he got back home. Within 20 minutes, he'd hit pay dirt. He found a 2005 master's thesis from North Carolina State University. One focus of Norwood McDowell's 219-page paper was the war diary of his wife's grandfather, David C. Cox Sr. — the name on the ring's inscription.

And there, on page 179, was the anecdote about the chocolate bars. After all those years, this epic ring cycle had ended within a two-hour drive of where it began.

"It just seemed like it couldn't be true," says Turner.

Turner emailed McDowell a photograph of the ring and its inscription.

"That's it for sure," an ecstatic David Cox replied when McDowell forwarded the picture.

"Well, praise the Lord!" Mindy Turner wrote back. "We are so excited for your family!"

After a few more emails and phone calls, the ring was on its way to the United States.

Cradling it in his hand after opening the package Friday, the pilot's son was struck by the original's condition, compared to its replacement. His sister, Joy Wagner, walked over and took the ring in her hands.

"Gosh, it's beautiful," she said as tears welled in her eyes. "Oh, that's so special."

David Cox said holding the ring gave him goose bumps.

"I feel his presence," he said of his father. "I wish he was here."

Kiss — whose own grandfather spent several years in a Soviet camp during and after the war — said in a phone interview with The Associated Press that his only regret is that David Cox Sr. and his grandmother weren't alive to share the "happy ending."

Refusing to accept even reimbursement for the shipping, he added, "You know the old saying: 'It's better to give than to receive.'"

Read more: <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2013/08/19/american-world-war-ii-pow-prized-gold-ring-comes-home-after-70-year-journey/?test=latestnews#ixzz2cViFxHas>