



Robert Otterson

Germany: Mühlberg, Riesa, Würzen, Halle
April-May 1945

Retracing history



Above: The author's Web site, which retraces the life history of his father. Inset: Robert Otterson's British World War II medals. Left to right: Mühlberg, Germany; sign pointing the direction to a German war cemetery and Stalag IV B; the author with his daughter in Germany in 2006; map showing location of Stalag IV B; the river Mulde, which Robert Otterson and his friend crossed as they escaped from Germany to the American front lines.



In Search of My Dad **ONLINE**

BY MICHAEL OTTERSON

As our family prepared to retrace my father's World War II escape from a prisoner-of-war camp, we were amazed by what we found online to help us.

I never knew much about my father except that he had been a soldier in the British Army in World War II, and he had been a prisoner of war for several years.

In the autumn of 2006, I posted the following on the Internet about my father: "Robert Otterson was buried in the summer of 1949. Rifle shots were fired over the grave and a Union Jack draped the coffin. Later, his older brother would say of the funeral wake that it was a particularly silent affair. The usual attempt to cheer up the mourners with stories and even a little humor were absent."

Such was the stunned reaction to the death of a man who, at 37 as a professional soldier, had spent more years away from home and family than he had ever wished. Three of those years had seen him incarcerated as a prisoner of war, first in North Africa, then in Italy, and finally in Germany.

After the war, as he walked up the narrow street of a village in Surrey, England, in the late spring of 1945 to be reunited with his family again, he described his feelings as "on top of the world."

Only four years later he was dead—not the glorious battlefield death of a soldier, but a common road accident that threw him from his motorbike on to a Welsh country road.

For me, his son, it meant growing up without a father. I was nine months old when he died, and I have no memory of him. I felt no particular deprivation during my boyhood, due, no doubt, to

a devoted mother and two caring older sisters. But as I grew older, I began to sense the loss. I missed the experience of talking to a father. I missed the things I imagined he would have taught me. I missed his wisdom.

Soon these feelings of loss became the stimulus for me to learn all I could about my father's life. Over the years, I have re-created, from interviews, letters, and journals, the things I could not learn firsthand. I share it now with his children, 10 grandchildren, and 23 great-grandchildren, with the hope that they will come to know and appreciate this remarkable man.

ALL DONE?

Some say, "My family history is all done." Others say, "Uncle Fred is doing it all."

That's a bit like saying, "I don't go to Church, but that's okay because Uncle Fred goes for me."

The fact is that we need to be personally engaged in family history so our hearts will be turned to our fathers. Then we will forge that welding link between our ancestors and us that is so important to the Lord.

Think about it. We each have four grandparents and that doubles each generation. In 10 generations we have 512 "grandparents"—not counting the thousands of other family members they bore. In 16 generations, we have nearly 33,000 direct ancestors. Our family history hasn't all been done—I guarantee it.

Retracing Steps in Germany

I never knew whether there was any trace of the German prison camp where my father spent the last months of World War II. During the summer of 2006, however, my wife and I, with a daughter and son-in-law, found the huge flat field where the camp used to stand in what used to be East Germany, near Muhlberg on the Elbe River.

The camp was eventually liberated by the Russians, but Russian military authorities still wouldn't let the Allied soldiers leave. So my father and a friend slipped out of camp, trekking across fields and streams toward the American lines 25 miles (40 kilometers) to the west.

Using my dad's prison camp journal, we learned that my dad and his friend had spent that night in a barn with German refugees to avoid the Russian



patrols. Finally they reached the bridge over the Mulde river. The American front lines were on the other side. My father described his feelings as he walked over that bridge and shook hands with the American soldiers. He wrote that for the first time in years, he felt “really free.”

We traced the route he took as closely as we could, and I walked across that same bridge over the Mulde, trying to imagine how he felt in 1945. I sent our American son-in-law ahead so I could shake hands with an American on the other side as my father had done. Then I stood on the bank of the river with the bridge in the background and read from my father’s journal as my daughter recorded it on a digital video recorder. That is now posted on our family Web site in the hope that it will help turn the hearts of my children and grandchildren to their fathers.

Finding More Online

What if I hadn’t been able to travel to Germany? I would still have had the power of the Internet available to me.

From the Web site for the Rijksmuseum in the Netherlands, I found a picture of the gates to the camp known as Stalag IV B—the German prison camp where my father finished out the war.

Personal items of Robert Otterson from World War II. The top two items are the telegram (and its envelope) from 1945 saying that Robert is coming home; the center two items are Robert’s POW tags lying on his journal, which is open to a page telling of his arrival back home; and the bottom two items are photographs of Robert as a professional soldier.



From an Italian naval Web site, I found a picture of the *Ugo Foscolo*—the prison ship that carried my father across the Mediterranean from North Africa to Italy for three miserable days. Many of the men had dysentery. There was no proper sanitation. They slept below decks on metal floors—wretched, hungry souls who didn't know if they would survive. My father described his place on the ship, below the aft hatch. When I found a site online for model shipbuilding that had a model of the *Ugo Foscolo*, I could clearly see in the picture of the model the hatch my dad described.

When the prisoners finally disembarked, they faced a three-mile (five-kilometer) march—an eternity it seemed to some of them—to their new camp near Bari on the Adriatic coast.

My father wrote of their arrival: “As we passed through the city, the doors and windows of every house were filled with curious spectators. There were giggling girls, mocking youths, grave-faced men, and an old lady, who watched while tears ran down her furrowed cheeks. Truly, our appearance was more to be pitied than laughed at, but ragged, unkempt, dirty, and half-starved as we were, we held our heads erect, got into step, and gazed defiantly back at the mocking faces, while the war songs of 25 years ago burst from our lips and echoed through the streets.”

Why Should Our Hearts Turn to Our Fathers?

So why is this important? Because when we stand in the baptismal font of a temple, as I did in New Zealand in 1970 for my father, the experience is immeasurably richer. This is also true as I complete any temple work for someone whose life I have studied. And even if all I can find on the Internet is a description of the time and place in which an ancestor lived—and that is the case for most of them—it still helps me make a connection. Family history for me now is not just names and dates, but flesh and blood experiences to be passed on—stories to bind and strengthen families. Could the Lord also have had this in mind when he said the hearts of the children would be turned to their fathers?

May your hearts truly turn to those whose sacrifices have helped you become who you are. May you feel the reality of the Spirit of Elijah. May you use your natural gifts, talents and experience to help capture the stories that make your families special, and that will help bind your children and your children's children through those common experiences. ■

All text, including sidebars, is from a BYU–Idaho Devotional, presented by the author on November 28, 2006.

WHAT YOUNG ADULTS CAN DO

I doubt there are many young adults who aren't familiar with how to use a computer. The same isn't true for many of their parents or grandparents. So I want to encourage you as young adults to do three things next time you are in their home.

1. Download. If your parents or grandparents have a computer with an Internet connection but don't have an electronic family history program on their hard drive, go to www.familysearch.org and download a free copy of Personal Ancestral File (PAF) or other family history software for them. It will take you only a few minutes.

2. Tutor. If they have never done any family history work, sit down with them and get them to enter their own names into the software. Enter husband, wife, and children—no more for the moment—and just add the names, birth dates and places, marriage dates and places, and death dates and places. That will take about 20 minutes.

Then encourage and help your parents or grandparents to gather up any written family history information from shoeboxes, scraps of paper, and pedigree charts and to begin entering it into the computer. In the weeks to come, help them with this goal. Once information is in an electronic format, you will be able to access the power of the Internet and amazing things can begin to happen as you search for your family history. If you do not know how to access this information from the Internet, a Church family history specialist should be able to help you.

3. Interview. If you can, use a digital recorder or digital video camera and ask your parents about their early lives and what they remember of their parents and grandparents. Do this in multiple sittings, but get it while you still have the blessing of living parents and grandparents. If you don't have that opportunity, then try to gather this information from aunts and uncles or anyone of the previous generations. If you don't do it, those memories will pass out of existence.

Becoming involved in family history as young adults will turn your hearts toward your ancestors, enrich your temple experiences, and help to unite your family together forever.

