

SAVING THE LIPPIZANERS

American Cowboys Ride to the Rescue

by Lieutenant Colonel Renita Foster

"We were so tired of death and destruction, we wanted to do something beautiful."

COL Charles Hancock Reed, 2nd Cavalry Group (Mech.), Commander, 1945 explaining his decision to save the Lippizaner horses.

World War II, the world's worst armed conflict, was in its final weeks, and the men of the 2nd Cavalry Group (Mech) were feeling a great surge of pride and triumph. As soldiers immersed in the drama and tragedy of a global cataclysm involving 56 nations and lasting six years, they had not only helped end it, but had highly distinguished themselves in doing so.

They were the men who spent more days in combat, captured more ground, more prisoners-of-war, and survived with the lowest ratio of American casualties than any unit in Europe of equal size. But the 2nd Cavalry had one delicate, complicated mission left. One that would lead them on an extraordinary adventure and save an over-400-year-old enchanted culture.

It was around mid-April, 1945, when the 2nd Cavalry was ordered to the German/Czechoslovakian border to accept a surrender from a specialized German intelligence staff known as the Gruppe Gehlen.

The American location, however, violated the occupation boundaries designated by the Yalta Agreement, mandating that the mission be kept under a Top Secret classification.

When CPT Ferdinand Sperl, an interrogator, began questioning German officers, he made a startling discovery. In an attaché briefcase belonging to a Luft-

waffe colonel were several pictures of horses. Knowing that his boss was a passionate horse-lover, Sperl immediately notified COL Charles Hancock Reed. An accomplished horseman, who had just three years earlier exchanged his beloved horses for armored scout cars, Reed was fascinated with the photographs. He instantly recognized them as the world-famous Lippizaner Performing Stallions from the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, Austria, an institution dating back to 1572. These horses were known for proud bearing, elegant gait, superior intelligence, and strength; animals that delighted audiences the world over with their magnificent performances.

Reed also knew the Lippizaner was one of the purest breeds of horses in the world. Over breakfast with the Luftwaffe colonel, Reed learned that the performing stallions were still in Vienna, but that the rest of the Lippizaner breeding mares were transferred to Hostau, Czechoslovakia in 1942, a town just 35 miles down the road. The mares were now on the wrong side of the Yalta agreement boundary line and Russians units were approaching the area. Reed realized that without the safe return of the Lippizaner mares, the riding school in Vienna would not survive.

"This was not, as mythology has it, a direct order from Third Army commander GEN George Patton, but a field commander's decision to grab something directly in front of his nose," explained Louis Holz, chairman of the board of the 2nd Cavalry Association.

As a young second lieutenant who participated in the rescue over 50 years ago, Holz is clear on the fact that it was Reed who made the decision and ultimately devised a successful plan for the Lippi-

zaner liberation. "Patton didn't become involved in the issue until May 7 when COL Alois Podhajsky, the commandant of the Spanish Riding School, requested and was granted protection by Third Army. When Patton asked an aide to look into the status of the Lippizaner mares, they found out 2nd Cavalry had already taken care of it," Holz said.

It was the close proximity of Russian soldiers that made time a vital factor in planning what became appropriately known as "Operation Cowboy." Reed knew using American firepower to accomplish the delicate rescue could destroy the very prizes he wanted to save. Instead, CPT Thomas Stewart was chosen to negotiate a surrender from the Hostau German Commandant, LTC Hubert Rudofsky.

Crossing the German front lines at dark by motorcycle, Stewart approached the compound and asked to speak to the commanding officer. Rudofsky, however, determined to obey his orders until the end, refused. Stewart was immediately taken prisoner. "We were anxious and worried, of course," Holz said, "while waiting for word when Stewart didn't return right away. But what Tom and the rest of us didn't know was Rudofsky's staff, knowing the difference between surrendering to the Russians as opposed to the Americans, began a mini-mutiny and finally persuaded Rudofsky to accept the American terms."

Two days later, Reed received the answer to his proposition, in the only way worthy of a cavalry unit. Riding side-by-side on white Lippizaners, in full uniform, through the fighting lines, came Stewart and CPT Rudolph Lessing, a German veterinarian, no longer enemies, but comrades bonded by admiration and love for centuries-old-tradition.



Louis Holz, above, was a second lieutenant in April, 1945, and one of the members of the 2nd Cavalry who rode to the rescue of the Lippizaner breeding mares. He is now chairman of the Board of the 2nd Cavalry Association.

“It was an unbelievable sight, this American and German soldier, astride white horses and passing through our lines. The sentry on duty was so shocked he quickly roused the sergeant of the guards,” Holz beamed. “You don’t see this scene in the movie made by Walt Disney (*Miracle of the White Stallions*, 1961), depicting the Lippizaner rescue. I think Disney missed it!”

The next morning Alpha Troop, 42nd Cavalry Squadron, led by CPT Carter Catlett, arrived at Hostau. German soldiers stood at “Present Arms” and held rifles lining both sides of a long driveway leading into the camp’s gate. As Catlett led his soldiers in, they were saluted by the enemy and then greeted by Rudofsky without incident. “Operation Cowboy” was underway.

Transported first were newborn foals and horses that could not make the journey on foot and had to be loaded in trucks.

True to a cavalry unit, there were plenty of real-life cowboys to shepherd the rest of the horses westward to Bavaria. And though the horses numbered in the hundreds, all were accounted for. “Even three horses who got a little finicky and broke away and returned to the stables at Hostau,” Holz said. “They had to make a second trip.” A few months later, the entire Spanish Riding School was reunited in Wels, Austria.

Despite the fact that Holz was involved in a daring, wartime rescue to save such a sacred tradition, he didn’t realize its significance: “I remember walking around and looking at the horses, but un-



Lippizaner stallions perform at the Spanish Riding School in Vienna. The horses had been a tradition since the late 1500s.

til the explanations were made and seeing COL Reed’s excitement, I really didn’t appreciate the prizes we’d acquired,” he said. “Now, as the years have gone by and all the accolades are still descending upon us half a century later, I think it’s one of our proudest moments. This is truly unique. There’s been no parallel before or since. The United States Army literally put the war on hold for two days in order to save a sliver of culture for the world.”

Holz attributes the success of the Lippizaner rescue to Reed, due to his genuine love for horses, expert planning, and his ability to weigh the consequences. “I strongly feel this is a case of the right man being in the right place at the right time. If there had never been a Charles Reed, I don’t believe those horses would have survived,” Holz said. “Undoubtedly, he understood how much the outcome of this operation would affect the rest of the world.”

The same sentiment is shared by Dr. Rudolph Lessing, the German veterinarian who assisted the rescue and developed a lifelong friendship with the Lippizaner rescue veterans. “If it had not been for COL Reed, with his knowledge, compassion, and understanding, the Lippizaner horses would have been horse-burgers for the Russian soldiers,” Less-

ing said at a 2nd Cavalry Association reunion some years later.

The kind of admiration Holz and his fellow veterans feel for the late COL Charles Reed, both as a commander in war as well as the Lippizaner savior, has increased with time and is easily detected when Holz speaks of serving in Europe under him. “Every unit has its heroes. He’s ours. We call COL Reed ‘Frank Buck’ because he brought us back alive,” Holz said.

“He has his own corner at our regimental museum in Fort Polk, La., where his uniforms and medals are displayed, and all the highlights of the unit including the Lippizaner rescue can be seen. We do understand the unit didn’t fight a war to save horses. It was simply the icing on the cake. And I’m mighty glad we had that icing!”

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