

1945 April 30-May 6

Witness to the Horror

Padesky Writes About Seeing Atrocities At German Camps

(La Crosse Tribune, 1945 May 3, page 16)



Lt. James E. Padesky

(Quad City Times, Davenport IA, 2017 March 28)

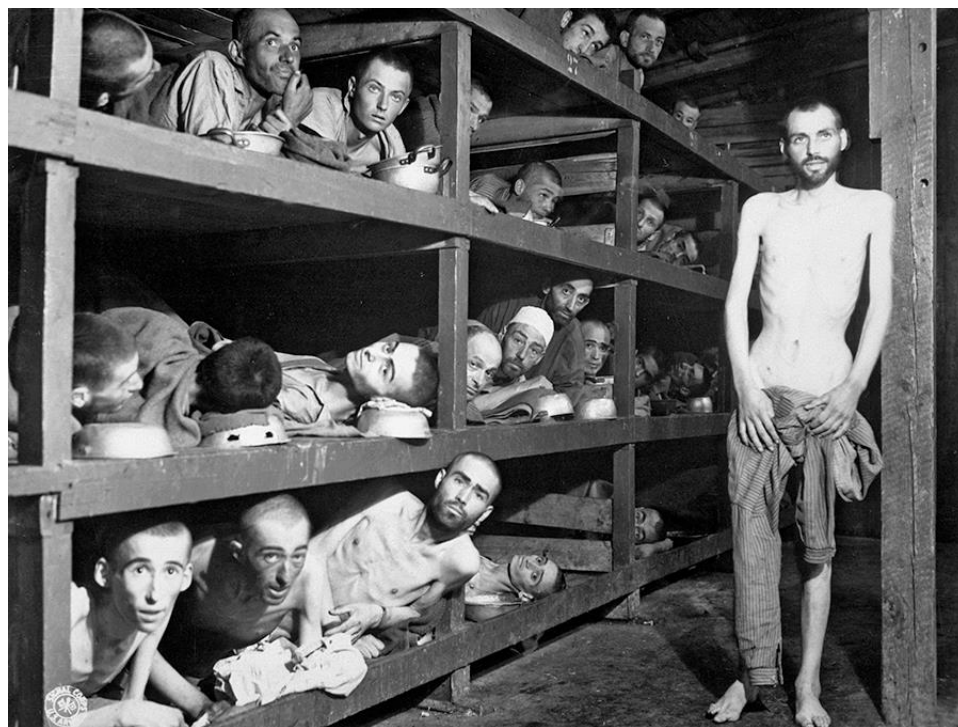
As the Allied vise squeezed the life out of Nazi Germany, with the Americans, British, and Canadians pressing in from the West and the Russian juggernaut hammering from the East, the [Allies liberated](#) concentration, death, and labor camps where the Nazis had imprisoned and murdered millions of people. There is no such thing as a good war, but the horror revealed in these camps was a prime example of why this war was necessary.

Imprisoned and enslaved in these camps were people the Nazis considered "Untermenschen"¹ (subhumans), meaning Jews, and Slavs from the East. There were also political prisoners, Gypsies, the mentally ill, homosexuals, and even some Allied prisoners of war. Beaten, starved, tortured, and murdered, their only crime was being born in the wrong place and the wrong time to the wrong family. Over six million people were exterminated in Adolf Hitler's bizarre and vengeful "Final Solution" that became known as The Holocaust.

The "big" names tend to be most remembered--[Auschwitz](#), [Bergen-Belsen](#), [Buchenwald](#), [Dachau](#), Mauthausen, Ravensbruck, Sachsenhausen, Sobibor, Treblinka--but these large camps were also nodes for a [network](#) of hundreds of other camps in Germany and its occupied territories where millions suffered and died.²

When the Allies closed in, the camp inmates were sometimes evacuated and herded on forced marches to keep ahead of the front. Thousands died along the way. Sometimes the guards melted away, leaving the prisoners to fend for themselves until the Allies arrived. In other cases, the guards remained until the end to be killed by Allied soldiers or, in some cases, even by their once helpless captives.

The liberation of the camps began in January 1945 and continued until Germany surrendered in May 1945. When Allied soldiers burst through the gates of these Nazi charnel houses, they were greeted by gaunt survivors and unforgettable scenes of human cruelty that they would never forget.



Buchenwald, 1945 April 16
(Britannica.com)

There are innumerable sources of testimony and primary sources on the Holocaust. In this short article, we will offer the eyewitness account of just one La Crosse World War II veteran who was there.

James E. "Jake" Padesky was born in 1921 in La Crosse to Jacob and Eileen (Burns) Padesky.³ They lived at 103 North 19th Street.⁴

Padesky attended St. Mary's Catholic School and then La Crosse Aquinas High School. He was a member of the Boy Scouts.⁵ He played on the Aquinas football team,⁶ and Padesky was also co-editor of the award-winning student newspaper, the *Aquinas News*.⁷

After graduating from La Crosse Aquinas in 1939, James Padesky enrolled at Notre Dame University.⁸ One of his professors at Notre Dame was La Crosse native Herbert J. Bott, who had been a member of the Notre Dame faculty for 17 years.⁹

Like so many people during this time, Padesky's life was disrupted by World War II. He was in his junior year at Notre Dame when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.¹⁰ Padesky entered the Army Air Corps on January 28, 1942.¹¹ By April 1943, Notre Dame college student James Padesky was Pvt. James E. Padesky in the 59th College Training Detachment at Raleigh, North Carolina.¹² Less than a year later, he was an air cadet in training to be an Army Air Corps pilot at Chester, Illinois.¹³ By the end of January 1944, Padesky had completed primary flying training at McBride, Missouri, and then he moved on to basic pilot training in Malden, Missouri.¹⁴ Other stops along the way included Miami Beach, Florida; Maxwell Field, Alabama; and Nashville, Tennessee.¹⁵ The next phase of his training took him to Stuttgart, Arkansas.¹⁶ Padesky earned his pilot's wings and a commission as a second lieutenant when he graduated at Stuttgart on May 23, 1944. That was followed by combat training in larger aircraft.¹⁷

Padesky shipped to England and flew bombing missions over Europe for three months.¹⁸ Following the invasion of France in June 1944, his unit moved to France. By early December 1944, James Padesky had already flown more than ten combat missions in a [B-26 Marauder](#) bomber. He had also earned the air medal with a bronze oak leaf cluster.¹⁹ The two-engine [B-26 Marauder](#) bomber was considered a medium bomber in the United States Army Air Corps. Most of its combat missions were in direct tactical support of Army troops near the front lines, as opposed to the four-engine strategic bombers (B-17, B-24) that bombed larger targets and cities far behind the front lines.



Martin B-26 Marauder bomber
(Kent G. Budge, Pacific War Online Encyclopedia)

Padesky's stint as a bomber pilot was followed by an assignment as a liaison pilot with General George Patton's 3rd Army.²⁰ [Liaison pilots](#) flew small, two-seat, single-engine planes that were used for aerial reconnaissance and artillery spotting. The [Piper L-4](#) was one of the most common of these types of aircraft. Because they could land almost anywhere, they were nicknamed "puddle jumpers" and "grasshoppers."²¹ Their high wing placement made for easier observation of the ground. These aircraft could also be used to transport officers and couriers.



Piper L-4
(Warbird Alley)

It was in this role that James Padesky was able to visit a liberated concentration camp. He wrote to his parents:

If you see pictures or hear about the German atrocity camps, you can take my word for it---it was the worst sight I've ever seen. One camp was at Weimar and I personally saw bodies of starved men piled like logs and covered with lime to make their bodies disappear.

Also I saw half charred bodies in incinerators and trucks piled high with dead. Most of the men were slave labor workers and in two camps alone some 20,000 were supposed to have died.

When we saw it some were still alive but their legs were nothing but bones the size of broom sticks. Their stomachs were pressed against their backbones. Believe me, it's the most sickening, unbelievable thing a man can imagine.²²

Padesky Is Shown In Film At Rivoli

Lieut. James Padesky, son of Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Padesky, 100 North 19th street, is shown with General Patton in a news reel at the Rivoli theater viewing some of the German atrocity camps. Padesky wrote a letter to his parents, reprinted in part in Thursday's La Crosse Tribune, telling of some of the things he saw. The news reel will be at the Rivoli Friday and Saturday.

(La Crosse Tribune, 1945 May 4, page 8)

Two concentration camps near Weimar were Buchenwald and Ohrdruf. [General Patton visited](#) there, so it is likely that these were one of the camps described by Lt. Padesky.

Many Germans claimed not to have known what was happening in the camps. The Allied military authorities set out to educate them. German civilians were taken to the camps to view what had been taking place in their neighborhoods. German civilians were impressed to [dig graves](#) for unburied bodies. Every one of the 343,000 German prisoners of war in the United States, including those held at Camp McCoy, were ordered to watch films of the camps to see the atrocities perpetrated by their regime.²³



Generals Dwight D. Eisenhower, George S. Patton, and Omar Bradley view charred remains at Ohrdruf
(National WWII Museum)

After the war, James Padesky finished his degree at Notre Dame University.²⁴

In 1952, he married Virginia Schmidt, who was a nurse in the United States Naval Reserves Nurses Corps stationed at the Great Lakes naval training center. Padesky was working for Household Finance Corporation of Kansas City, Missouri, at the time.²⁵ He was the manager of the Milwaukee branch of Household Finance until August 1953 when he was transferred to Superior, Wisconsin.²⁶

By the end of 1955, Padesky and his family were living in Illinois.²⁷ Moline, Illinois, was their home from then on. He worked for Sexton Ford for 29 years until retiring in 1988.²⁸

James E. Padesky died at the age of 95 on March 26, 2017, in Rock Island, Illinois. He was survived by his wife, two sons, and two daughters. James Padesky was buried with military honors at the Rock Island National Cemetery.²⁹



James E. Padesky
(*Quad City Times*, Davenport IA, 2017 March 28)

What James Padesky saw as a 23-year-old Army Air Corps pilot was not just loss of life, it was a loss of humanity instigated by one man and embraced by many others.



Holocaust Memorial, Miami, Florida
(Jeff Rand, 2013 August 2)

I recall one of my college history professors saying that his high school history teachers were World War II veterans, and "they showed us concentration camp films until we puked." They were just making sure the next generation would not forget what happened before them.

The [Holocaust survivors' speaker](#) series created by Darryle Clott at Viterbo University in La Crosse is more than just voices from the other side of the wire that instill remembrance; they are cautionary stories for all time.

THE THINGS I SAW BEGGAR DESCRIPTION.... THE
 VISUAL EVIDENCE AND THE VERBAL TESTIMONY OF
 STARVATION, CRUELTY AND BESTIALITY WERE...
 OVERPOWERING.... I MADE THE VISIT DELIBERATELY
 IN ORDER TO BE IN A POSITION TO GIVE FIRST-HAND
 EVIDENCE OF THESE THINGS IF EVER, IN THE FUTURE,
 THERE DEVELOPS A TENDENCY TO CHARGE THESE
 ALLEGATIONS MERELY TO "PROPAGANDA."

GENERAL DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER,
 APRIL 15, 1945

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington D.C.
 (Jeff Rand, 2019 June 8)

As the last voices from World War II become feeble and are finally silenced, the [Holocaust deniers](#) and demagogues may become even more emboldened and try to rewrite history to mold it into their twisted and malevolent view of the world. Mountains of documentary evidence will help thwart this scheme, but it is also up to us, and future generations, to not let them get away with it.

Revised: 2020 May 15

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Sources & Notes:

¹ "'Less Than Human': The Psychology of Cruelty," *National Public Radio*, 2011 March 29, <https://www.npr.org/2011/03/29/134956180/criminals-see-their-victims-as-less-than-human>.

² David M. Kennedy, *The Library of Congress World War II Companion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), 683-687.

³ James Padesky obituary, *Quad City Times*, Davenport, Iowa, 2017 March 28, https://qctimes.com/news/local/obituaries/james-padesky/article_0536f727-b79f-5824-94f9-9c20e2aa5cb3.html.

⁴ "Locals," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1944 June 13, page 4.

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- ⁵ "St. Mary's Pupils Hold Mission Crusade Parade," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1935 April 7, page 6.
- ⁶ "Aquinas Presents 'Touchdown Twins,'" *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1939 February 15, page 8.
- ⁷ "Aquinas Papers Receive Honors," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1939 September 21, page 2.
- ⁸ "La Crescent Prenuptial Party Guest," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1940 September 9, page 4.
- ⁹ "Herbert J. Bott, Former Resident of City, Heads Notre Dame Faculty," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1942 April 5, page 9. Bott was the president of the Lay Faculty Club at Notre Dame. He was a graduate of La Crosse Central High School where he was a member of the undefeated 1914 and 1915 football teams. Bott served in General John J. Pershing's headquarters in France during World War I in the statistical department. Following the war, he graduated from La Crosse State Teachers College in 1921 and embarked on a career in education, except for a one-year interlude as a statistician for the state of Wisconsin.
- ¹⁰ "School Bells Ring For 200 College-Bent," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1941 September 15, page 4.
- ¹¹ "Padesky Writes About Seeing Atrocities At German Camps," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 May 3, page 16.
- ¹² "Our Men In Service," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1943 April 18, page 9.
- ¹³ "Our Men In Service," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1944 January 28, page 7.
- ¹⁴ "Our Men In Service," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1944 January 25, page 7.
- ¹⁵ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 May 3.
- ¹⁶ "Our Men In Service," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1944 April 5, page 4.
- ¹⁷ "Our Men In Service," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1944 June 4, page 10.
- ¹⁸ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 May 3.
- ¹⁹ "Local Aviators Now in France," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1944 December 10, page 16.
- ²⁰ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 May 3.
- ²¹ Herbert P. LePore, *Eyes in the Sky: A History of Liaison Aircraft and Their Use in World War II*, *Army History*, No. 17 (Winter 1990/1991), page 32. JSTOR: https://www.jstor.org/stable/26302917?seq=3#metadata_info_tab_contents.
- ²² *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 May 3. For related stories, see: "Nazi Prison Last Word In Vile Deeds," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 May 1, page 3. Hal Boyle, "Leaves From A War Correspondent's Notebook," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 April 25, page 12. "News Men Who Saw Atrocities Give Statement," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 May 13, page 6.
- ²³ "Order Nazi Prisoners View Atrocity Films," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 May 13, page 4.
- ²⁴ *Quad City Times*, 2017 March 28.
- ²⁵ "Nuptials Announced For Spring," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1952 March 16, page 10.
- ²⁶ "J. E. Padesky Named To Superior Position," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1953 August 2, page 13.
- ²⁷ "Births," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1955 December 20, page 16.
- ²⁸ *Quad City Times*, 2017 March 28.
- ²⁹ *Quad City Times*, 2017 March 28.

See also:

[United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#)
[Yad Vashem The World Holocaust Remembrance Center](#)
[USC Shoah Foundation](#)