



In a new series, we celebrate the remarkable history of Patek Philippe watches and their equally remarkable owners – including Lieutenant Charles Woehrle (second from right, above), whose first Patek Philippe watch, a REF. 1461, arrived unexpectedly in extremely difficult circumstances

“I think it’s hard for the average person to appreciate what it meant to us,” says Charles Woehrle, talking about his first Patek Philippe watch, a REF. 1461 stainless steel wristwatch. A lieutenant in the U.S. Eighth Air Force during World War II, Woehrle was a prisoner of war at Stalag Luft III, the camp that inspired the film *The Great Escape*. Woehrle, now 94 years old and residing in St. Paul, Minnesota, was shot down on his sixth mission as a bombardier.

On that day, May 29, 1943, Woehrle was attacking a German submarine pen. “As we dropped the bombs, I followed them in my sights. They went down like a school of fish. When I looked up, though, I saw a lot of flak. The Germans had us.” After a harrowing parachute jump, it wasn’t long before Woehrle found himself a prisoner of war.

The 1963 film starred Steve McQueen as one of a group of POWs who tunnel their way to freedom. The work was done with handmade tools, as well as tools lifted from local workmen. “Any tool that a German workman let out of his sight,” says Woehrle, “well, he wouldn’t see it again. But most of what we used to build the tunnels was made by hand.”

Three tunnels were excavated, necessitating the displacing of a large quantity of sand. “We put it in the walls of our barracks and between the seats of the theater where prisoners put on performances,” Woehrle says. “That theater would not have been made if it wasn’t for the tunneling projects.”

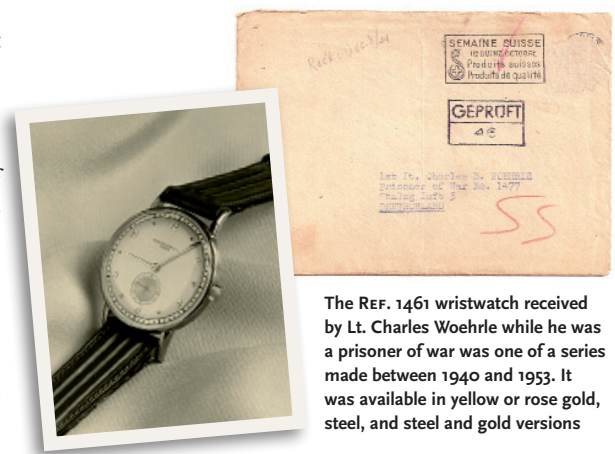
Woehrle himself was not among the escapees, but he was a witness to some of the cruel punishment that was meted out as a response. Fifty of the remaining POWs were killed, he explains. “Two of them were the men I bunked with. Afterwards, the Germans brought 50 tin cans into the camp, each of them containing the ashes of one of the soldiers, with their names on the cans.”

In March of 1944, Woehrle noticed a piece of promotional literature that had made its way into the camp. “It was a little folder about watches, and I recognized the name Patek Philippe. There was a coupon you could send in for information. The watches were expensive, and I knew they were beyond my means, but I filled out my information. I wrote, asking if they could send a watch I could afford. I explained that I could pay them when I got home. At that point, anything new, anything different, would have meant so much.

“Several months went by, and I’d kind of forgotten about it, when one morning my senior officer, who’d just come from the camp commandant’s office, told me a parcel had arrived from Geneva, from the watch company Patek Philippe.” The commandant apparently hadn’t wanted to hand the watch over, because he thought it could be used to bribe the guards. “But,” Woehrle continues, “our senior officer told him, ‘Commandant, I know Lt. Woehrle, and he would be so pleased to have the contents of that parcel that he would never, ever abuse it.’ His personal guarantee was all it took.

“And so the next day I opened that package, and there was this perfectly beautiful wristwatch on a black alligator strap. The news ran all through the camp. There was a line of men all up and down the hall outside of my room. They all had to see that watch. What an event it was for us! Such a thing arriving at that camp from the finest watchmaker in the world, addressed to a POW... It was hard to comprehend. It was thrilling, absolutely thrilling, just to hold the watch, to see the sweep hand, to wear it. I can’t tell you how many people asked, ‘Can I see it again?’ It was an event, not just for me but for all of us.”

Not long afterwards, the POWs were moved from Stalag Luft III as the Americans approached. “One day we heard explosions and saw a lot of smoke. Finally an American flag went up. A French soldier next to me said, ‘I love my country’s flag, but I’ve never been so happy to see any flag as I am to see that one.’” It was April 29, 1945, and Patton was liberating the camps. Woehrle’s internment of some 22 months had ended. ♦
Patek Philippe would like to hear other interesting stories about Patek Philippe watches and their owners for possible publication. Please email them to lifeandtimes@patek.com.



The REF. 1461 wristwatch received by Lt. Charles Woehrle while he was a prisoner of war was one of a series made between 1940 and 1953. It was available in yellow or rose gold, steel, and steel and gold versions