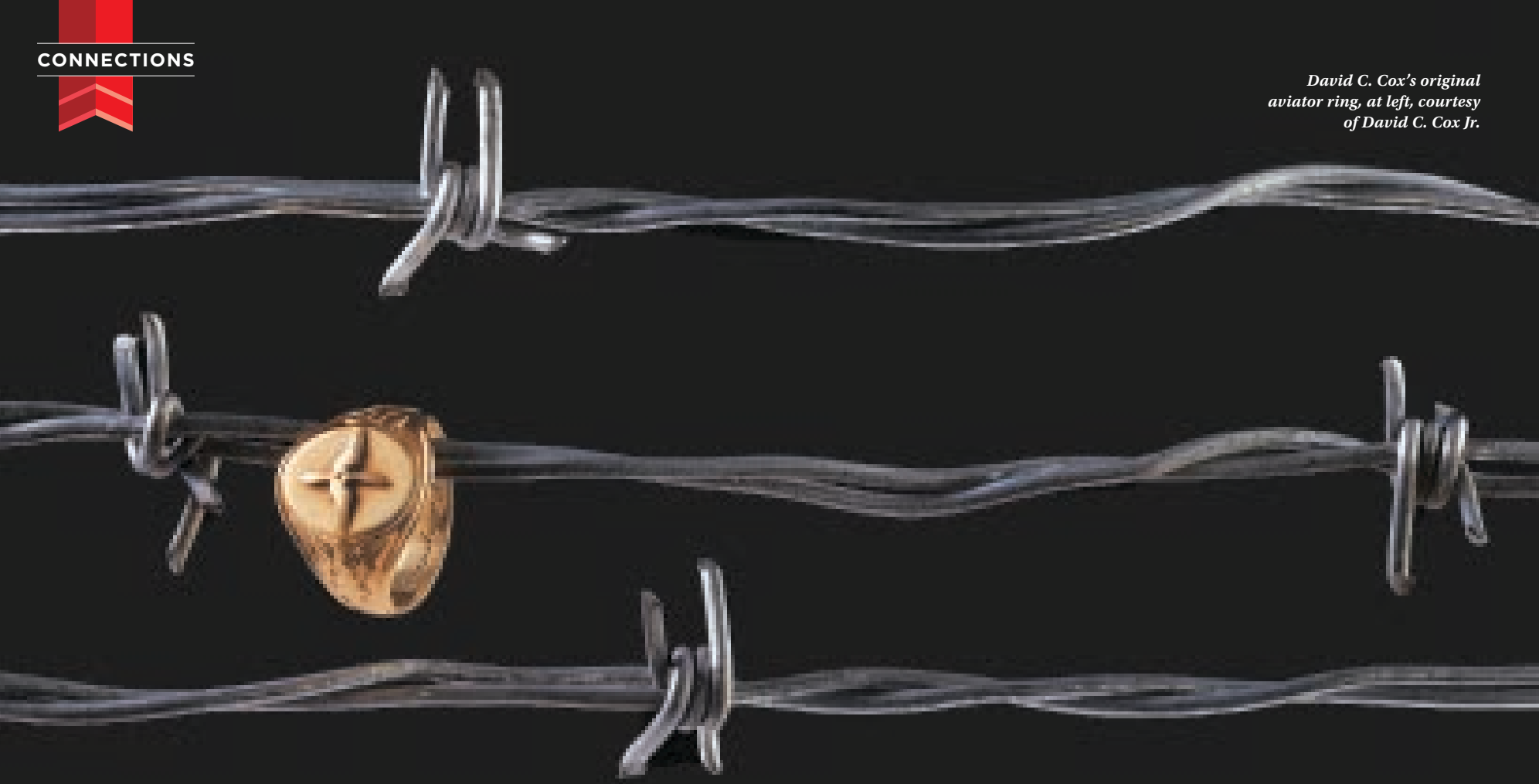

David C. Cox's original aviator ring, at left, courtesy of David C. Cox Jr.

THE EPIC JOURNEY OF A P.O.W.'S RING

A gold ring is swapped for chocolate in a World War II prison camp. Seventy years later, it makes its way back home.

BY KENNETH MILLER

PHOTOGRAPH BY NICK FERRARI

The Italian soldier on the other side of the fence held what 2nd Lt. David C. Cox craved with every cell in his body—two chocolate bars. It was March 1945, and both men were captives in the German POW camp Stalag VII-A. The prisoners were segregated by nationality, but the aching hunger didn't discriminate. Inmate rations consisted mainly of bug-infested soup and black bread adulterated with sawdust. In Cox's compound, U.S. soldiers and airmen milled about, as gaunt as scarecrows in their tattered uniforms. On the other side of the barricade, skeletal captives from other countries huddled against the chill.

The Italian P.O.W. pointed at the aviator ring on Cox's right hand; he wanted it in exchange for the chocolate. The American officer glanced down at the ring and flashed back to the moment his parents had given it to him: on the day he'd graduated from flight school and got married. Tall and fair-haired, the son of a lumber-mill owner from Greensboro, North Carolina, Cox had been president of his senior class and finished two semesters of college before dropping out to join the Army Air Forces. He copiloted huge B-17 Flying Fortresses on missions over Germany and occupied France. In May 1943, he won a Distinguished Flying Cross for helping to steer his burning plane back to England after a raid in which half of his ten-man crew were killed. That July, however, a Nazi rocket blew his bomber out of the sky.

Cox bailed out over a village in southeastern Germany, where he landed in a rose garden and was captured by a passing patrol. He wound up at Stalag Luft III, a P.O.W. camp reserved for Allied air force officers. The prisoners were adequately housed and fed; they spent much of their time playing sports, putting on theatrical performances, and digging secret tunnels under their barracks. Only after 76 Allied prisoners fled through one of those excavations did the terror begin. The rest of the men were confined to quarters; when a colonel in Cox's barracks protested, a guard shot him in the throat. Shortly afterward, 50 captured escapees were machine-gunned in the yard, on Hitler's direct orders. All but three of the escapees were eventually recaptured.

As the tide of the war turned toward the Allies, the prisoners' hopes rose. But on the frigid evening of January 27, 1945, as the men in Cox's compound performed *You Can't Take It with You,* an officer stepped onstage to announce, "The goons have just given us 30 minutes to be at the front gate. Get your stuff and line up!" The P.O.W.s joined tens of thousands of others on a great forced march, in the middle of Germany's coldest winter in 50 years. They walked all night and for the next two days, through a howling blizzard. Those who fell were shot or left to freeze. The survivors, crammed into cattle cars, with buckets serving as toilets, rode for another two days; more men died along the way.

> ***"Cox twisted the ring on his finger. Then he tugged it off and thrust it through the fence."***

Finally, the prisoners arrived at Stalag VII-A, near the Bavarian town of Moosburg. Designed to hold 10,000 inmates, the camp now packed 80,000 into barracks and tents. After two months, Cox, like most of his comrades, was close to starvation; at 26, he felt weak and frail. A few extra calories might keep him from collapsing for a little while longer.

Cox twisted the ring on his finger. He thought of his mom and dad, his wife, Hilda, and the love and dreams that were alloyed in the golden band. Then he tugged it off and thrust it through the fence.

TO COX'S OLDEST SON, David C. Cox Jr., the tale of the lost ring was as central to his father's identity as the replica that he wore in its place. "My siblings and I heard the story several times," recalls David Jr., now 68 and a retired medical-equipment executive. "He'd take off the ring and show it to us. I'd put it on, and it would be way too big for me. He told us those chocolate bars were the best thing he'd ever eaten."

After George Patton's 14th Armored Division liberated Stalag VII-A in April 1945, the elder Cox made his way back to North Carolina. He reunited with Hilda—a petite, warm-hearted blonde—and David Jr. was born nine months later. Another boy, named Brad, and a girl, Joy, followed. David Sr. started a tire-retreading equipment business with his younger brother and soon grew rich. There were big houses and tail-finned cars, barbecues and cocktail parties. Outwardly, he seemed the picture of *Mad Men*–era success. But those closest to him saw something darker.

Aside from rare moments of tenderness, David Sr.'s parenting style was harsh and distant. Each morning, he would roust the children from bed as the guards had done, barking, "*Raus!*" After work, as David Sr. retired to the sofa with a Tom Collins cocktail, Hilda would warn the kids to leave him in peace. At dinner, if they failed to clean their plates, he'd remind them in detail of his own privations.

By the time David Jr. was a teenager,

PREVIOUS SPREAD: PROP STYLIST: MEGUMI EMOTO FOR ANDERSON HOPKINS

David C. Cox Jr.'s memorabilia honors his father's World War II service.

ASSOCIATED PRESS/GERRY BROOME

his father's drinking had become a serious problem. David Sr. would launch bitter tirades at his wife and kids or withdraw into himself, muttering about the civilians he'd killed in carpet bombings. At work, he picked so many fights with colleagues and employees that his brother eventually forced him to sell his share of the firm. He invested the proceeds in another business, which failed, leaving him and Hilda almost broke. In retrospect, it seems likely that he was suffering from what's now known as PTSD—but the diagnosis didn't exist yet, and his offspring knew only that they found him insufferable.

The gulf widened when Hilda (a former chain-smoker) developed emphysema and David Sr. refused to stop lighting up around her. "She's the one who's sick, not me," he'd growl. After Hilda died, in 1984, David Sr. passed the replica ring—by then too small for his finger—on to his eldest son, then in his 30s, who wore it with a mixture of pride and sorrow. A few years later—around the time David Jr. caught the ring in a sliding door, breaking it nearly in half—the old man began having trouble finishing sentences. He was diagnosed with dementia.

In 1993, David Jr. reluctantly moved his father to an assisted-living facility near his home in Raleigh. By then, David Sr. could barely speak, aside from the words *no, right,* and *you're late.* But he could communicate through shifts in intonation and facial expression—and David Jr. was astonished to discover that his dad was saying, "I love you. I enjoy your company. Please don't leave me alone."

David Jr. visited almost every evening. "I got to like him," he marvels. "I started to see what I'd been missing."

When David Sr. died of a stroke at age 75, in September 1994, David Jr. was holding his hand. "It was a privilege to walk him through that door," he says.

NINETEEN YEARS later, in July 2013, Mark and Mindy Turner went to dinner at a neighbor's house in the village of Hohenberg, Germany. The Turners had moved to Hohenberg from Kansas when Mark, 45, got a job as a civilian air-traffic controller at the U.S. military base in nearby Ansbach. Their neighbor, Martin Kiss (pronounced "Kish"), was in his mid-60s, tall and white-haired, with a square face and a gentle manner. He worked as a master church painter, and the American couple—along with their mothers and Mark's aunt, who were visiting—were eager to see his studio.

> ***"Martin came in holding a small plastic box. "I have something I'd like to show you," he said."***

Martin's wife, Regina, served a hearty meal on the back deck, and then everyone trooped in to inspect the artwork, which included religious paintings, elaborate wood-and-plaster crucifixes, and a portrait series. When the tour was done, Martin vanished into another room and came back holding a small plastic box. "I have something else I'd like to show you," he said.

He opened the box to reveal a gold ring, decorated with an airplane propeller, wings, an eagle, and the letters *US.* Then he shared some personal history. He'd grown up, he explained, in what was then Communist Yugoslavia (now part of Serbia), where his family had run a small inn on the Danube River. In 1971, he immigrated to West Germany to become an artist. Before he left, his grandmother presented him with the ring, which had been given to her as payment for room and board by a Russian soldier heading home from the war. Martin's *oma* hoped it would bring him luck; if not, it might be good for a few deutsche marks.

Martin said he'd worn the ring for some time but later kept it in a jar so it wouldn't be damaged while he worked. He'd wondered for years about its origins. From the design and inscription, "Mother & Father to David C. Cox Greensboro, NC. 10-4-18-42," he knew it must have belonged to an American soldier, but he had no idea how to track down the owner.

"Can you help me find this man or his children?" asked Martin. Mark promised to try, and he shot photos of the ring before leaving Hohenberg.

BACK HOME, after about 20 minutes online, Mark and Mindy had found a master's thesis—written in 2005 by someone named Norwood McDowell—on the wartime experiences of Cox and one of his squadron buddies. The tale of the ring and the chocolate bars was told in four sentences.

Mark e-mailed him, asking whether he knew the whereabouts of David C. Cox's family. McDowell responded that he was David Jr.'s son-in-law; the thesis, he explained, was based largely on David Sr.'s diary, which had remained in the family after his death. He then forwarded Mark's e-mail to his father-in-law. David Jr. saw the message when he sat down at his desk the next morning. "I got chills," he recalls. "I said, 'This can't be possible.' I felt like I was dreaming."

More e-mails flew back and forth. For verification, photos of the original ring and the replica were exchanged electronically. David Jr. explained to Mark that the numbers in the inscription referred to his father's birth date and the year he received the ring. He sent a note to Martin Kiss (with the help of Google Translate), offering to pay the value of the gold in the ring.

Martin refused to accept even reimbursement for postage. "It's not my ring," he later told reporters.

The package arrived two weeks later. On August 16, David Jr. gathered a small crowd in his living room—his sister, his wife and daughters, their husbands and children, and three members of the press. (His brother had died in 1999 of alcoholism, a disease that had claimed several of his kin.) As he tore the paper off the box, his hands were shaking. At last he lifted out the ring. "It's beautiful," his sister exclaimed, her eyes tearing.

"I thought, The last time my father held this, he was trading it away," David Jr. recalls. "I wish it had been returned when he was still alive, so I could say, 'Pop, look what you got!'"

After the guests cleared out, David Jr. stashed the ring in a safe place beside its replica. He takes them out from time to time to show to visitors. "I plan to keep them in the family," he says. "I hope they go from generation to generation, along with the stories."

David Jr. also intends to visit Martin Kiss and the Turners someday and to express his gratitude in person. "If I ever go over to Germany," he vows, "I'm definitely going to take them some chocolate." R

* * *

ANALYZE THIS

If you study statistics in school,
what are the odds that you'll need it later?

MYQ KAPLAN, comedian