



# Walter Kurt Zehl

APR 10, 1925 - MAR 2, 2018



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April 10, 1925 to March 2, 2018

Walter Kurt Zehl went home to the Lord on Friday March 2nd, 2018. He was born in Hohenstein-Ernstthal, Germany on April 10th, 1925. Following his father's footsteps as a World War I veteran who was wounded in France, he volunteered for the Luftwaffe German Air Force at the age of seventeen to be a pilot. With Germany losing the war, the mortality rates of pilots being at an all-time high, and through God's grace, flight school was full. Walter's superiors "sensed" his disappointment and figured that if Walter wanted some action, they would oblige and they transferred him to the Wehrmacht German Army who quickly deployed him to the Arctic cold of the Russian Front.

Through battle front impasses and a stroke of luck, Walter narrowly escaped the battle of Stalingrad: the largest battle of World War II. After multiple conflicts, eventually in Operation Market Garden, he was shot through both legs by a British unit's machine gun and was taken prisoner. After recovering from his wounds, he spent the remainder of the war in a British POW camp. After the war, he served three years of forced labor in England as reparations for his part in the war.

Traveling back through war ravaged Europe, Walter ended up in his "split" country on the Russian occupied side of East Germany. After settling back-in as a happy mail carrier, Walter wasted no time in finding the love of his life and showering her mailbox with gifts. The couple married on December 24th, 1949, Christmas Eve, to maximize food rations for the celebration. Since the Russian occupation of East Germany was harsh, the couple made the painful decision to leave their family and friends for the freedom of the West. The adventurous duo left all their possessions, severed all family ties, and risked their lives to escape across the heavily guarded



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eastern border under the cloak of darkness. Walter made it, while Ursula got caught but managed to coax the young guard into letting her cross.

Life was better in post-war West Germany but estranged from all family ties in East Germany, the couple eventually decided to take their sojourn one step further and left for America. Selling everything they owned for the fare, they immigrated via ship to New York in 1954. Their first sight of America was the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor.

They stayed with their cousin temporarily in Connecticut on their way to Georgia to live with their sponsors. They settled in the Bronx, and they genuinely loved America: their new homeland. Walter displayed the US flag everywhere: on shirts, cars and at home. They took English classes at night while they worked long hours during the day, dropped their native tongue and became proud U.S. citizens in 1971. After fourteen years of marriage and many prayers, their only daughter, Patricia, was born.

Walter's journey did not end there. The adventurous couple snaked their way across the United States to Houston as opportunities presented themselves. They visited Germany on vacation three times, but the first time was the scariest. It was before East Germany was reunited and the family was worried, they might still be on a watch list as they passed through the border checkpoint crossing. Eventually, they end up in Friendswood where they retired.

Walter was an industrial machine mechanic. He was an expert craftsman priding himself on transforming broken-down, grease-laden machines into mechanical works of art that delighted his customers. Eventually Walter retired joining his great friends at Stone's Throw Senior Community. Shortly after moving in, his soulmate of 58 years passed away in 2008.

Resilient Walter marched on with the help of his German kindred spirits: Al and Betty Forsten who he met at church. Meanwhile, Graciela Rosas, an angel on earth, kept Walter living independently and cared for him like her own family. Paul Hoese, hearing Walter's stories over the years, took it upon himself to preserve his oral history in a book titled "Amazing Journey: One Man's Adventure from Nazi Germany to America." Walter never met anyone that did not "need" a copy of that book. In later years, Jarrett Long and Joseph Wood, two fine young World War II scholars, became Walter's adopted grandsons. They awarded him with the Iron Cross medal (the German equivalent of a Purple Heart) that circumstances never permitted Walter to receive. Since Walter was a little more than a month shy of his 93rd birthday, a celebration he would never see,



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his guardian angels at the Windsong Nursing Home lovingly threw him an early birthday party. All the while, the Gloria Dei Lutheran Church community and its “Second Family Group” supported him every step of the way. Everyone loved Walter because after his war trauma, he was so grateful to be alive that his happy demeanor and enthusiasm captivated everyone he met especially when combined with his patently charming German accent.

Walter is preceded in death by his parents, Kurt Bruno Zehl and Elsa Frieda Zehl, his sister Marianna Baldauf and his wife, Ursula Annemarie Zehl. Walter is survived by his daughter Patricia Hoesl, son-in-law Mark Hoesl, and prized grandson Ryan Hoesl. His presence will be greatly missed, but we rejoice in knowing that one day we will be reunited in Heaven. Walter is inurned at South Park’s Garden of Hope in the Hoesl Family Cemetery next to her lifelong soulmate: Ursula.



## **Memories only last if you share them**

Join us in honoring Walter by contributing to a collection of shared memories.



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