

Billy Bingham

1920 to 1997

EARLY LIFE



Little information is available on Billy Bingham's life before World War II. He wrote a memoir of his wartime experiences, part of which survives, and gave a brief, oral interview which has been preserved. We know he was born March 23, 1920, in Greyhawk, Jackson County, Kentucky. His parents were James B. Bingham and Mary Tincher Bingham. He enlisted in the United States Army on January 17, 1941, with the rank of private. His enlistment card recorded that he was single with two years of college education.

WORLD WAR 2 EXPERIENCE

In his memoir, Bingham tells us that his commanding officer at the time of his capture was Lieutenant Colonel John H. Van Vliet. LTC Van Vliet was the commander of the 3rd Infantry Battalion, 168th Infantry Regiment, 34th Infantry Division when he was captured in Tunisia in February 1943.

The 34th Infantry Division was sent to Ireland in May, 1942, to train for the invasion of French North Africa. Between January 1941 and May 1942, Billy Bingham became an officer, probably by attending Officer Candidate School. He was a Second Lieutenant when he was captured.

The Division landed at Algiers on November 8, 1942, as part of Operation Torch, the invasion of French North Africa. By late January, 1943, the 168th Regiment had moved east and joined the southern Allied line in Tunisia. The regiment fought in the action around Sened Station January 31 to February 3, then retreated northward toward Sidi bou Zid, assigned to help block the Faid Pass. The battle of Sidi bou Zid erupted on February 14, 1943. By February 16 LTC Van Vliet and his battalion were marooned on a hill called Ksaira, surrounded by the enemy. (Atkinson, p 355) With no hope of reinforcements or rescue, the troops crept down the hill and into the desert that night, trying to reach the Allied lines. When day broke on February 17, many were captured, including LTC Van Vliet. 2LT Billy Bingham evaded capture until February 21. He may have reached the Allied lines and been captured in the action to defend the Kasserine Pass.

PRISONER OF WAR EXPERIENCE

After capture he was transported to Italy and moved through prisoner of war camps in Capua, Rome, and then to Oflag IX A/Z in Rotenburg an der Fulda, northeast of Frankfurt, Germany. This camp was opened to hold French and British air officers captured from 1939 onward. On June 9, 1943, he became one of the charter members of Oflag 64 in Szubin, Poland.

We know from other sources that Billy was an MIS-X Red Cross Parcel Recipient. MIS-X was the secret project that supplied the Kriegies with contraband and escape support such as pistols, compasses, maps, and local currency. Billy's job was to help sneak the contraband parcels, mixed in with



Billy Bingham, row 2, far right

genuine Red Cross parcels, through the German security procedures.

In 1995 Billy self-published a memoir, of which we have five of the ten chapters. In Chapter 2, "*Conditions in the Camp*", he provided details of the inadequate rations, estimated to contain about 700 calories per day. The food in the Red Cross parcels was essential to prevent starvation.

For the first four months we had to live entirely on German rations. This amounted to only hot or warm water for breakfast, nothing more; a thin barley soup for lunch and occasionally some spoiled turnips and shriveled carrots for dinner. Sometimes, instead of the turnips and carrots, we got three small potatoes. The Germans, in addition, gave us one loaf of German wartime black bread, about 4-5 inches long, to last a whole week. (Bingham Memoir, p 6)

The Germans provided the camp (Oflag 64) with so many grams of meat per day for everyone; but the weight was on the hoof, which meant the bones, horns, hooves, neck and head were weighed. The Germans took the good meat for themselves and gave us the head, neck and bony parts. Although we got the weight due us, as prescribed by the German Quartermaster, it was mostly bone. They would just throw the head of a beef into a tub of soup, hair, eyes, nose, everything. The Germans went through the motion of removing the hair, but we quickly learned that we were better off to not look at what we were eating. (Bingham Memoir, p 7)



Billy Bingham, 3rd from left

ESCAPE FROM OFLAG 64

On January 21, 1945, 2LT Billy Bingham marched away from Oflag 64 with all the other Kriegies deemed fit to march. That night, as it snowed, approaching the barn where they were to spend the night, Captain Bob Krall grabbed Billy and pulled him between the houses until the column moved on. The pair were fortunate to bump into a friendly Polish man, who hid them for the night. With the help of friendly Poles, who gave them what food they could spare, Billy and Bob walked eastward, toward Warsaw. In mid-February, the situation changed.

All HELL broke loose after the Yalta Conference, when Roosevelt and Churchill gave half of Poland up to the Cuion (Curzon) Line, to the Russians to keep them in the war. From then on the Poles abandoned us. When we asked for food at some peasant's hut they would run us off or seek [sic] the dogs on us. (Bingham Memoir, p 9)

WARSAW, REMBERTOW, AND THE KATYN FOREST MASSACRE

Billy and Bob reached the Warsaw area where they did some sight-seeing in the rubble. They visited the remains of the Warsaw Ghetto. But they were finally caught and detained by Russian soldiers and placed in the large refugee camp near Rembertow. Either before or after being detained, Billy reported that they spent one night in the home of the wife of the Commander of the Cavalry Academy at Rembertow. The Commander was in London, a member of the Polish government in exile. He reports that she told him about what is now known as the Katyn Forest Massacre.

She told me that the Russians were committing terrible atrocities by murdering thousands of Polish Officers. She ask[ed] me to convey this to our government, if and when I should get back to the U.S.A.

I did, and our G-2 (Intelligence Agency) refused to believe me, saying I had been brain washed by the Germans, and threatened to throw me into a physico [psycho] ward. They could not believe our ally, the Russians, did this. (Bingham Memoir, p 15)

By the time Billy Bingham wrote his memoir, the Russians had admitted responsibility for the massacre. Billy also knew that LTC John Van Vliet, his commanding officer in Tunisia, was one of two United States Army officers brought to the massacre site by the Germans to bear witness to the fact that they were not responsible for this atrocity.

ON TO ODESSA

The Rembertow camp was overcrowded, squalid, and the food situation was terrible. After a few days behind the barbed wire, a Russian Commissar (political officer) who spoke some English, visited Billy and Bob's part of the camp. He lectured them about their unkempt appearance but also gave them a hand-written letter that gave them permission to ride any transportation going into Russia. With that paper in hand, Billy and Bob walked away from Rembertow and began the journey to Odessa. The only problem with the paper was, few of the people they showed it to were able to read.

One way or another, they made it to the port area of Odessa. They had not shaved or bathed for months, were dressed in various bits of clothing, none of it United States Army uniform, and had no identification papers. Despite these obstacles, they talked their way onto a British ship. Once aboard, the British welcomed them. They were able to clean up, shave, eat, and put on clean clothes donated by the crew. That ship delivered them to Istanbul, Turkey, where they found the American Embassy, hoping for help. Instead, the embassy staff told them to return the next day due to their lack of official identification.

They decided to try the British Embassy instead but were picked up by the Turkish police as vagrants before they found that embassy. They spent five days in a Turkish jail under conditions far worse than Oflag 64 and Rembertow. They were released, without explanation. They then found the British Embassy and Billy called up the names of all the British officers he had known at Oflag 9 A/Z. Connections were established and the British took them in, gave them money against their back pay, and put them on a ship to Port Said, Egypt. From Port Said they were shipped to Naples, Italy, and then home to Camp Miles Standish, Massachusetts.

POSTWAR LIFE

Billy married Martha Bess Biscoe, in Lonoke, Arkansas, on July 7, 1946. According to the 1950 census, the family was living in El Paso, Texas, possibly at Fort Bliss, with their two young sons. Billy was either recalled to Army service for the Korean conflict or was not discharged until after the conflict ended. He was assigned to General MacArthur's staff in Tokyo, Japan, during the conflict. He reached the rank of Captain before he was finally discharged from the United States Army.

The family returned to Lonoke, Arkansas, where they made their home until Billy's death on March 28, 1997. Billy visited Szubin three times after the war. His obituary records that he was a retired farmer, a Christian and a member of the Masons, Shriners, and Kiwanis Club. He was buried at Roselawn Cemetery in Little Rock, Arkansas.



1971 – Kriegies at Flame Memorial, Szubin, Poland

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