

## **Roy Jesse “Tex” Chappell, Jr.**

**1919 – 2010**

### **EARLY YEARS**

Roy grew up in Kaufman, Texas, the son of Roy Jesse Chappell, Sr. and Nellie Nash Chappell. As a very capable student, Roy graduated as the Valedictorian of his mid-term class in 1936 from Kaufman High School. Continuing his education, he attended Allen Academy in Bryan, Texas, then entered Texas A&M College (now University), graduating with a degree in Petroleum Engineering in 1941. Known as an ardent, life-long Aggie, Roy served as Captain of the Field Artillery Band during his senior year and was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant upon graduation.

### **MILITARY SERVICE AND CAPTURE**

With the war developing across Europe, Lt. Chappell answered the call of his country’s military through training units at Ft. Sill and Camp Bowie which prepared him for combat duty in Europe. In 1942, his division was moved to Ft. Dix New Jersey, before they boarded the Queen Mary when the ship left New York harbor en route across the Atlantic Ocean, landing in Belfast, Ireland. Roy’s training included additional courses and exercises in England, Ireland, and Scotland and became more intense and specialized as he joined the ranks of other allied forces in Chester England.

Next aboard a troop carrier, Roy’s ship sailed by Gibraltar through the Mediterranean to Tunisia. Assigned as a forward artillery reconnaissance officer, a member of the 27<sup>th</sup> Armored Field Artillery Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division in Oran, North Africa, he was captured on 26 January 1943 by elements of Rommel’s Afrika Corps. Unfortunately, notifications to next-of-kin during war time were sometimes inaccurate. This happened to the Chappell family. Roy was mistakenly listed as Missing in Action which led to the holding of a memorial in Kaufman before the War Department notified the family that he was, instead, a Prison Of War in a camp for American ground officers in Szubin, Poland.

According to information concerning Americans who were captured in North Africa, they were taken to the Tunis airport, flown to Naples, Italy, and placed in a camp at Capua (also known as PG 66), then sent by rail to Moosburg. Their next stop was Rotenburg an der Fulda, and finally Oflag 64. (Meltesen, Chapter Three, p. 27)

### **OFLAG 64**

Arriving at Szubin on 23 June 1943, the POWs, including Lt. Chappell, were marched to the front gates of Oflag 64, processed and assigned to a barracks

cubicle. Fortunately, although the camp was governed by a German Colonel, the Senior American Officer (SAO), Colonel Drake, was largely responsible for the daily lives of the American POWs. Discipline was strict but fair, and the officers were reminded that they were still Americans in the U.S. Army with responsibilities to themselves, their fellow officers and others in the camp. Secreted radios within the camp provided the men with updates of the war, etc. from the BBC, thus keeping them in touch with the outside world.

Eventually, a daily schedule was established for the POWs which added structure: Awakened at 7:40, Appell (roll call) at 8:00, Breakfast at 8:15, Lunch at 12:30, Appell at 4:00, Supper at 6:00 and Lights Out at 10:30. Meals were often meager (and sometimes included only hot water for tea or a portion of German bread with thin soup) so one of the greatest challenges for the men became food shortage which reflected the lack of needed nutrition. Red Cross food parcels were distributed when available and garden plots sprang up, but many men lost weight during their stay in the camp. Other issues surfaced as well, including the lack of heating in the barracks, concerns about their loved ones, and the locations of the missing men they served with. These resulted in deleterious effects on some camp Kriegies, but these frustrations were often temporary and encouragements from others, like Roy Chappell, kept the atmosphere as even as it could be under the circumstances.

Fortunately, some avenues made available to them encouraged the men to improve both mind and body. For example, they read books from the camp library and took courses from the camp college, participated in theatre and sports activities with equipment provided by the International YMCA, and—planned escapes. There are many stories about escapes from POW camps during World War II, the following account is one of the most memorable:

*‘There was one interesting escape made right through the supposedly impenetrable fence at Szubin. It was a tangled mass of accorded barbed wire, but still four men, Lt. Col. Van Vliet, Lt. Roy Chappell, Lt. Frank Aten, and Lt. William “Willie” Higgins, from Boulder, Colorado, cut their way through this morass and got out in a short time. They had collected two pairs of wire cutters by devious methods, and they used them to good advantage. They planned to walk around out in the front yard just at dusk, which was the habit of many Kriegies and would not be considered suspicious. Then just as the guard was about to be changed and all the guards were more or less looking for their relief rather than for Kriegies escaping, they planned to walk over to the corner of the fence where they had detected a thin spot in the barbed wire, and cut their way to freedom. The time was set for just before the lights went on, and they got away with it.’*

*‘They cut their way out. However, as last man went through the opening, it so happened that a guard inside the [Kommandatura] (Commander’s quarters), which was right next to the fence at that point, looked out of the window and accidentally saw them as they*

*left. They never were seen by the regular guard at all, but the man in the [Kommandatura] turned in the alarm immediately and the chase was on. They were all caught in a period of several hours, and were given sentences of seven to ten days solitary confinement in the regular camp jail right across the street from our camp.’ (Holder, p. 187)*

Escape and evasion plans were prevalent throughout many Allied POW camps through Europe during WWII. All were risky and some ended in death for the participants, but they achieved at least one major goal—to create chaos among their captors and the hope of freedom among fellow inmates! As a result and as the war drew to a close, the Americans were put on notice that any more escape attempts could result in death.

In early 1945, with the Russians advancing “blitzkrieg” style across Poland toward Germany, those in the camp who were able to travel were foot marched out of its gates on 21 January 1945 during the worst winter storm in 50 years. Roy and small groups of marchers started to evade their captors as they slept in barns at night and as the guards became more distracted by their own agenda to disappear, Roy and others made their ways by rail to Odessa, Russia, then on the Black Sea where they joined other Americans and Allied parties. On March 15, 1945, they boarded a ship called the SS *Duchess of Bedford* stopping first at Malta, then Marseilles before heading to Naples, Italy, where they boarded the *Mariposa* bound for the U.S. They arrived on 9 April 1945 at Camp Miles Standish in Boston Massachusetts.

## **CIVILIAN LIFE**

Being welcomed home by family and friends, Roy Chappell and Helen Ruth Moore were married in the First Baptist Church of Kemp, Texas. Their joyous union was to last 65 years. He remained on terminal leave until the end of 1945, but remained in the U.S. Army Reserves, attaining the rank of Colonel.

Roy became employed in 1946 by Gulf Oil Corporation (now Chevron) with multiple assignments in Texas and Oklahoma. He later worked in real estate development with Belin Development Company in Conroe and Elkins Lake, Texas, and with Buckner Benevolences in El Paso.

He was also a Master Mason, a 32<sup>nd</sup> Degree Scottish Rite Mason and a Noble of Arabia Shrine. In addition, he continued his life-long Rotarian membership and served with the Texas Aggie Band Association and Kaufman Friends of the Library.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

Through the **Veterans History Project**, Roy Chappell was interviewed many years after the end of WWII by Robert Babcock. His wonderful wife, Helen Chappell, was present as well. Roy, an intelligent and very affable spokesperson, revealed much about himself and his experiences during this interview. Extremely articulate, his realistic descriptions provided snapshots for viewers as valid reminders of this Nation's Greatest Generation's contributions through their achievements and sacrifices during this period of world history.

## **FAMILY STORIES**

Roy shared stories with his family over the years. Ben Chappell, Roy's son contributed the following two stories.

*"The first one involved my mother (Helen R. Chappell) and Dad. During the period after Dad's capture, but before he was reported as a POW, people in Kaufman came to believe he had been killed. But Mom would not let herself believe that, and as one expression of that did something she had never done before or since: she went to a "spiritualist" in Dallas, Texas to ask about "Dad's situation". The spiritualist told her she was not a fortune teller, but had been given a gift of seeing. She told Mom several things. That Dad was alive and she saw him "dining at a long table with a fine looking white table cloth". That they would eventually marry, and have seven children; and sadly that the first child would die young. They did of course marry, they did eventually have seven children, and sadly my oldest brother (Jay) died of pneumonia when he was 9 months old. The relevant part about Dad and the "fine white table cloth" was very interesting to hear years later upon Dad's return. He said that during the time the POWs were being transferred from North Africa through Italy, there was one time when as part of an interrogation for war details a number of the POWs were brought in to a large room and served a very nice meal, where they were allowed to sit and eat at a nice table, with fine white table cloth and food like they never had before or after during their captivity. He said it "didn't work" in terms of their providing any strategic information, and he knew the whole meal they must be trying to soften them up for advantage. But you can imagine Mom's surprise to hear of this part of his captivity after he got back (of course at that point not knowing how much if any of what the "spiritualist" told her might be legitimate)."*

*"The other involved another escape attempt by the same 4 Kriegies, who Dad always called "Col Van Vliet, Frank Aten and Willie Higgins". There was apparently a ditch when ran behind the solitary confinement facility, and then eventually out of the*

*camp, but it had to be accessed from the rear window of the center hall running along the solitary cells (that is, when you were released out the “front door” of solitary you were back in the heavily fortified fences). During the solitary confinement of these four, they had managed to smuggle in two things: (1) a crude saw/razor like piece of metal and (2) some wire which was usually successful to unlock the doors to their cells (though not substantial enough to open the door leading out of the center hall the cells opened onto). Taking turns based on the guard rotations, they would get out of their cells and saw on the bars of the window at the end of the center hallway. It was slow going work, and when they finished a session of sawing and returned to their cell, they would cover the sawing places with a soap and dirt mix to cover up the work. Unfortunately for their plan, they had not been able to saw completely through the bars by the time they were released from that particular solitary confinement period. Not to be deterred, they soon concocted a mix of things that seemed like homemade moonshine (he swore it wasn't the ‘real stuff’), and staged a loud argument and brawl among the 4 of them, which successfully resulted in their being thrown back into solitary confinement. True to the plan, they continued the sawing exercises until the bars were cut, and the night of the escape could be set. When the night came, Aten, Higgins and Dad got out of their cells to begin the escape; but try as all 4 could this time they could not get the “wire key” to work on Col Van Vliet's cell. Because they did not want to leave him behind, they “probably, in retrospect, lost too much time trying, and delayed the time of the escape”; but when they all concluded the 3 men should go ahead, Aten, Higgins and Dad all got out through the back window, into the ditch and out of the camp. They had gotten as far as “the cemetery in the town” when they heard “all hell breaking loose” from the camp guards; who came searching with dogs and found them all in the cemetery. They were returned to camp, and to solitary confinement, to thorough strip searches and eventually to repaired and reinforced bars on the hall windows.”*

“I don't know if this was the escape or another one that lead to Dad being “tried” under the new German policy that escapees would be punished by death; but he did tell us that when the end came, and the camp was being marched “west” in advance of the Russian advance, that was a Godsend to him and some others who had by that point been “sentenced to death” for the last escape attempt that they had made.”

## **SOURCES**

Obituary for Roy Jesse Chappell, Jr., published in The Kaufman Herald, on June 30, 2010 and Roy J. Chappell, Jr. Collection (AFC/2001/001/05602), Veterans History Project, American, Library of Congress

[Note: Information gained from Roy Chappell's Obituary and the Veterans History Project Interview are used throughout this biography.]

ESCAPE TO RUSSIA by Howard Randolph Holder

ROADS TO LIBERATION FROM OFLAG 64 by Clarence R. Meltesen

FAMILY STORIES contributed by Ben Chappell, Roy's son

Biography written by Kriegy Research Group writer Ann C. Rogers