

2LT George Alva Cobb

1917 - 1967

BACKGROUND

George Cobb was born September 25, 1917 in Greenville, South Carolina to Eliza Lenora Campbell Cobb and Thomas Greenfield Fahnstock Clemson Cobb. George was the youngest of eight children. His father was a railroad engineer and was killed in a train accident when George was 19 years old.

George married Sallie Pearson Cobb on May 24, 1941.

MILITARY SERVICE



George Cobb registered for the draft on 16 October 1940. The departure place for U.S. Army personnel going to Europe through Ft. Dix, New Jersey would be the first time that most young men like Cobb had embarked on large ships or crossed an ocean. The American Army had learned after the First World War that personal items were useful for soldiers headed into battle. The following account, written by CPT Clarence Ferguson in his book, *Kriegsgefangener 3074 (Prisoner of War)*, describes the following:

The basic accoutrements of an infantry soldier were so commonly known it was almost prosaic. These consisted of his weapon, an M1 Garand rifle; a cartridge belt, containing sixty rounds of ammunition; his canteen filled with water and a canteen cup; a first-aid-packet; bayonet; and either a shovel or a pick axe. In this instance, he was issued an extra bandolier of 120 rounds of ammunition which he swung over his shoulder. His pack held underwear, socks, toothbrush and paste, soap, handkerchief, hand towel, shoe strings, bed sack, shelter half with pole, two blankets—one of the blankets remained a part of the pack while the other was rolled and fitted in horse-shoe fashion over his pack—his mess gear, and on this mission a gas mask. He wore heavy leather boots, wool shirts and trousers, and a steel helmet over a plastic interlinear. Once on the beach he would drop his backpack and gas mask above the highwater mark and continue into battle with his weapon, cartridge belt and an extra bandolier of ammunition. (p.12)

Oflag 64 records reflect that 1st LT Cobb was captured on 12 February 1944 during the Siege of Anzio, Italy. The following passage was copied from *The AMERICAN HERITAGE Picture History of WORLD WAR II* by C.L. Sulzberger.

“I had hoped that we were hurling a wildcat onto the shore, but all we got was a stranded whale.” Thus did Winston Churchill describe the Allied landings at Anzio and Nettuno on January 22, 1944. (p. 388)

For almost four months the invaders remained trapped on the beachheads, every foot of which was vulnerable to the German artillery on the nearby hills. Foxholes, the usual refuge from bombardments, were often filled by rainwater, surface shelters built of sandbag and the few buildings that had not been smashed to rubble were the only protection. Not until May 11, when a massive assault was launched by both the Fifth and Eighth armies along the Gustav Line, were the men at Anzio able to break out. All told, they suffered 59,000 casualties, more than half of which were caused by disease, exhaustion, and the strain of waiting to see where the next shell would explode. (p. 388)

As a part of this assault, LT Cobb was the Platoon Leader of Company A, 179th Regiment, during what became known as Battle of the Factory, one of the most brutal engagements of the war in Europe.

THE STORY OF THE REGIMENT by Warren P. Munsell provided a written history of these events through this online source:

http://digicom.bpl.lib.me.us/ww_reg_his/34/

The enemy, massing more troops against the beachhead than he had facing the whole 5th Army front had concentrated most of his army in the Carroceto area. The Germans were preparing this locality as a battleground. Its terrain features made it an ideal base of operations behind Carroceto, soon to become famous as “The Factory”, the ground rose on the north and west giving the enemy elevated positions from which to observe Allied positions and direct artillery fire. From immediately behind the buildings of Carroceto, roads led out to the south and southeast, perfectly suited for tanks to sally out of the flank of any force assaulting Carroceto frontally. And before the Factory lay the Allies lines in flat barren terrain save for a wooded area a few miles to the south. The microscopic gradations afforded slim cover to the beachhead defenders. The 179th's C.O. meanwhile made daily reconnaissance of the beachhead lines making plans to occupy any position in the central portion of the front immediately on order. The battalions prepared advance defence lines, individual foxholes and C.P.s.

On February 10, under cover of darkness, the 179th was committed to a new action concerning the 168th British Brigade and two days later on February 12, 1944, LT Cobb was captured.

Many captured Americans from this campaign suffered wounds, often those of a serious nature. The Germans have a mixed record of treating those wounded. LT Cobb's citations include a Purple Heart with 1 bronze Oak Cluster which indicates that he was wounded twice in combat.

Transportation to POW camps was often accomplished through train cars which were crowded and unheated—food rations meager and/or non-existent during their rail voyage from camp to camp, changing trains, sometimes spending hours on side tracks as other “necessary for the German war effort” trains passed them by.

OFLAG 64

Oflag 64 records reflect that 2nd Lt Cobb arrived at this American Officers Prisoner of War Camp at Szubin, Poland, on 21 April 1944, having been in transit for two months. Formed into groups and marched through the town, they entered through camp gates, then processed and vetted to validate their true identities. Assigned to one of the barracks, his bunk mate was 2LT Thomas R. Johnson, also captured in Italy and admitted to Oflag 64 the same day.

When contacted by George's son, Tom Cobb, Johnson recalled, “*Your father was always jovial and is the person who kept everyone's spirits up.*” Morale was always a major survival factor, especially when soldiers were incarcerated, a tactic both learned and often a natural quality found in a platoon sergeant.

Each POW camp Cobb encountered shared similarities, the most prevalent being total isolation by the use of wire fencing which encircled the camp, often enforced by guards in watch towers. Appell, a German form of roll call, occurred twice each day to ensure the presence and control of all POWs. Settling in encouraged each POW to establish a routine which included meals with barracks mates, (American Red Cross Boxes being the most prized possession), exercise and other activities which favored thoughts of freedom and decreased the feelings of depression. American Senior Officers (SAOs) were present in every camp and assisted in the maintenance of military structure. At Oflag 64, one of the most outstanding SAOs was Colonel Thomas Drake. A soldier in every sense of the word, his strength of character and awareness of his position served as a constant and needed reminder that they were still soldiers in the U.S. Army and would maintain their status—even under German forced rule.

Recreation activities in Oflag 64 were among the much-needed morale builders, one which included the talents of George Cobb—the building of theatre sets.

A section in *The Fiftieth Anniversary Book [of] OFLAG 64* relates its history.

Sometime in the fall of 1943, at Schubin, Col. Thomas Drake called together a group of kriegies and charged them with the mission of providing a morale-building program of entertainment for the camp.

Taking the name of “The Theater Group” those officers, among them Frank Maxwell, Russ Ford, Bob Rankin, John Glendenning, Dick Van Sickle, “Boomer” Holder and Larry Phelan, totaled about 15. They set about arranging a general schedule of plays, skits, concerts, revues, and camp celebrations that would provide a regular weekly schedule.

It was a rewarding task to select the plays to be presented, choosing the producers to cast and direct each one, picking men who would create skits and revues, build the sets, develop the costumes and make-up, schedule rehearsal times, and set up a calendar of “opening nights.” At first there was just one performance per week, but after D-Day, the camp grew so fast that every performance required four nights to allow everyone a seat in our home-made “Little Theater.” (p. 25)

Broadway shows were among the most popular, displaying sophisticated “set dressings” thanks to volunteers like George who spent hours building sets—often from materials they scrounged around the camp.

SUNDAY, JANUARY 21, 1945—THE LONG MARCH BEGINS

Rumors that the Russians were near prompted Oberst Schneider, the camp Kommandant, to send word that the camp would “move out.”

Descriptions from Howard Randolph Holder’s book, ESCAPE TO RUSSIA, describe the preparations which took place.

After a short night’s sleep (the lights were on all night), we were awakened early.

At about eight-thirty in the morning we were formed in the Appell area. However, we did not get started until about ten o’clock. Before we left, Schneider gave us a big spiel about how he would stay with us to the end, that we’d been good Kriegies most of the time, that we shouldn’t try to escape, and that he would save us from the awful Russians. He did not look happy. The entire Goon garrison was present, both officers and men, and they had their belongings piled on two of the horse-drawn camp wagons. Schneider’s paraphernalia, and he had plenty of it, was piled into a carriage and wagon combined. He also had his limousine with him.

The formation was to be a column of platoons five men abreast. As we started out the gate, we learned that the guards were further bolstering our food supply by issuing a loaf of bread to each man. This did not last long. They ran out by the third platoon. We suspected that the only reason we got the bread was that they didn't want to leave it for the Poles or the Russians. It was an easy job to convince yourself that 150 loaves would not go very far if it were divided between fifteen hundred hungry Kriegies.

We trudged out the big, latticed main gate in a sort of an elation born of a change in atmosphere and the knowledge that at least something was happening. We joined the lines of half-frozen refugees who were still streaming past our camp, and started our long trek westward toward Germany. The hundreds of officers and men in our column stretched out for nearly a mile. We looked like Coxe's army, as we had on all kinds of clothing to keep us warm. Scarfs were tied around heads; and nearly everyone was dragging some contraption along the road or carrying a pack of sorts. (pp. 200 – 202)

Holder continues his summation with the memories of their march of twenty-two kilometers the first day, ending in a barn yard formed around a U-shaped courtyard. The column of men sought shelter within one of the barns and it was here that George Cobb and a fellow Kriegy, James Bond, covered themselves with hay for warmth and used it as a hiding place the next day when the column moved off. They successfully returned to Oflag 64, made their way to Warsaw and on to Odessa where they caught a ship for the U.S.A.

After repatriation, LT Cobb chose to stay in the Army, making the rank of Captain and then Major on February 1, 1952. He retired on 30 December, 1960.

MEDALS AND CITATIONS

2 Bronze Stars; Army Commendation Medal; Good Conduct Medal, 2nd Award; American Defense Service Medal; European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal; World War II Victory Medal; Army of Occupation Medal (with Germany Clasp); National Defense Service Medal; Korean Service Medal; Combat Infantry Badge, 1st Award; Combat Medical Badge, 1st Award; United Nations Service Medal; POW Medal

TAPS

Major George Cobb died on 30 December 1967 and was buried with full military honors at Florence National Cemetery, South Carolina.



Biography written by Kriegy Research Group writer Ann C. Rogers