

William “Bill” Cory

1920 – 2011

William Robert Cory was born on 3 January 1920 in College Park, Maryland, the son of Dr. and Mrs. Ernest N. Cory. He was educated at St. Andrew’s School in Middletown, Delaware, and Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia.

MILITARY SERVICE AND KRIEGY LIFE AT OFLAG 64

Cory joined the Maryland National Guard in 1938. During WWII he fought Rommel’s Afrika Corps in Tunisia with II Corps, the first American formation to experience combat during the war. LT Cory was Executive Officer of Company A of the 805 Tank Destroyer Battalion and was captured on 17 February 1943 near Kern’s Crossroad, west of Faid Pass, when his tank destroyer half-track was totally destroyed by German 88s in the heavily-fought breakthrough. Cory spent the next two years as a prisoner in Oflag 64, a POW camp located in Schubin Poland.

Cory soon became known as “Tunnel King”. Quoting his own words from a document dated 12/13/2008:

The tunnel itself was begun in a Laundry Pot in the middle of one of the many one-story barracks. The fire box under the Pot was falsified by creating an illusion of having been used by spreading ashes around, actually this was our entrance, about 25 feet down, chamber was roughly 30X30 with bed-board slats used to shore up the sides to prevent dirt or sand slides or cave-in. About every 50 feet or so, we had a small chamber big enough for a “digger-helper” to sit cross-legged to facilitate the boxes which were filled with dirt/sand, or empty to be used as sleds with ropes fore and aft and be pulled back and forth.

The “fixes” for several tunneling issues were solved by ingenious means: excess soil from the tunnel was dispersed via Red Cross boxes in the ceilings and roof of their hut by “Mouse” Waldman. Bed slats were used to shore up the sides and top of the tunnel, and when Hauptmann Zimmermann began to suspect that they were being used elsewhere and started a slats’ check, Kriegies moved behind and ahead of the slats’ checkers, assuring an accurate count.

Addressing tunnel breathing challenges, information from Stephen Dando-Collins’ book, *THE BIG BREAK*, stated that as the tunnel became longer, fresh air was needed. This issue was solved by Louis Otterbein. He built Bellows “to pump air into the tunnel and air lines made from linked Klim milk cans. When Cory

shaft began to fill with water, Otterbein built a suction device that efficiently sucked the water out.”

As tunneling continued, disappointing news was delivered by Colonel Drake who had been called to Oberst Schneider’s office with the alarming alert that 50 POWs had been shot while trying to escape from Stalag Luft 3 (model for the book by Paul Brickhill and movie *The Great Escape*). This news resulted in a direct order by Drake to desist all escape attempts—critically affecting those throughout the camp whose plans had been months, even years in the making. Perhaps their only hope for resolution of their POW status would come soon through Allied means.

Continuing from Dando-Collins’ writings:

As unhappy kriegies transferred earth back from hiding places to fill in tunnels, Bill Cory’s team tunneling from Block 3A rebelled. Deciding to keep their hole in the ground as an insurance policy, they only filled it in partway. The day would come when they would cash in that policy in an unusual but ultimately successful escape.

ESCAPE POSSIBILITIES

In January 1945, POWs at Oflag 64 were to be marched to Hammelburg for their safety from the Russians, according to propaganda issued by the Nazis. During Appell that morning, six prisoners were missing and Colonel Goode knew where four were: Bill Cory and fellow diggers “Spud” Murphy, Bill Fabian, and Hervey Robinson had sought and received permission to hide in their tunnel until the camp marchers had departed. Goode agreed. They stayed hidden and watchful until the camp emptied, then reported to Colonel Drury who was in charge of the hospital. Days later, as Drury’s “hospital party” reached Rembertov, Cory and Murphy decided to escape on their own (buddies Fabian and Robinson were now hospital patients themselves) by walking and riding in numerous modes of transportation until they reached Lvov where they were accused of being German spies and jailed. Rescued by a Russian journalist, Vladimir Belayeu, they were entertained by a Russian general and flown to freedom by USAAF personnel from ESCOM—finally landing in Miami on 28 February 1945.

Integrated into the regular Army, he worked in the intelligence branch at Ft. Knox, Kentucky, and at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. He also served as Military Attaché in New Zealand and Greece from 1946 to 1949.

CIVILIAN LIFE

Cory resigned his commission in 1950 and became a successful businessman until his retirement in 1988 with leadership positions at Anaconda Aluminum,

Stitzel-Weller Distillery and Fleming Pottery Company. His after-retirement duties included his tenure as a director of the Community Chest (now the United Way), the Family and Children's Agency, the Metropolitan YMCA, the Wynn Stay and Louisville Country Club. His other affiliations included the Filson Club, the Speed Museum, the Salamagundi Club and the Society of Colonial Wars.

Bill Cory was also an active member of the St. Francis in the Fields Episcopal Church in Harrods Creek and Trinity by the Cove Episcopal Church in Naples, Florida. After an active and creative life, Cory died in his 91st year on 3 August 2011. His private burial occurred at Cave Hill Cemetery in Louisville, Kentucky.

William Cory was preceded in death by his wife of 55 years, Caroline Barr Joyes Cory, and survived by daughter, Nina Cory Claytor (Preston) and son, Ernest Neal Cory II. He was also survived by his companion, Charlotte W. Price, and her daughters, Ann Price Davis and Liz Price Dias. The families were also blessed with grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Biography written by Kriegy Research Group writer Ann C. Rogers