

The following biography which outlines the life and achievements of John L. Creech is being shared through the Military Science and Leadership (Army ROTC) Hall of Fame, located at the University of Rhode Island. Permission has been granted through the Alumni Association Representative, Colonel John Petrella Jr. (Compiled together with additions written by Oflag 64 Kriegy Research Group writer Ann C. Rogers.)

Captain, WWII John L. Creech

Biography



Captain John L. Creech was a native of Woonsocket, Rhode Island. He was a 1937 graduate of Woonsocket High School. John entered Rhode Island State College (now the University of Rhode Island) in 1937 and enrolled in the Army ROTC program. In 1941, John graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Horticulture and was commissioned a Second Lieutenant of Infantry. He was immediately called to active duty due to the growing crisis in Europe.

As a First Lieutenant, he served during World War II in the "Big Red One," First Infantry Division, where he fought in the Allied invasion of North Africa. After the Allied landings in Tunisia in November 1942, First Lieutenant Creech was awarded the Silver Star for heroic actions on 25 March 1943 when he led a patrol deep into enemy lines. Captured shortly thereafter by General Rommel's Africa Corps and taken prisoner, he and other prisoners of war were flown to Germany where they were sent to camp OFLAG 64 (Offizier Lager = Officers' Camp) in Schubin, Poland. He remained a POW from 1943 until 1945.

While imprisoned, he applied his skills in horticulture and raised plants in a two-acre plot and in a 60-foot greenhouse to supplement the food for over 1,500 prisoners. In the Germans' prison, starvation was a constant threat. Through his leadership and horticultural skills, he managed to grow significant amounts of vegetables to feed his fellow captives. Creech received both the Silver Star, for gallantry in battle for his efforts during the mission in Africa, and the Bronze Star for his efforts in gardening activities in the camp. Creech had been heard to say that the Bronze Star for feeding his fellow prisoners meant more to him than his Silver Star for bravery.



Captain Creech's military career ended in 1946, though he remained a reservist until 1953. Upon his return to the United States, he completed his academic work with a Masters' Degree in Horticulture from the University of Massachusetts and a Doctorate in Botany from the University of Maryland. This last location brought him close to his ultimate career destination, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

For 26 years he worked for the Agricultural Research Service, principally as a plant explorer specializing in the wild and cultivated woody plants of Asia.

Captain Creech was eventually appointed the third Director of the National Arboretum, a position he held for many years. Spontaneous, outgoing, unassuming, accessible and kind, he was a model ambassador for the Arboretum and its agenda. His work and friendships with Japanese horticultural authorities led to his efforts to institute a collection of Japanese Bonsai trees under the National Arboretum. His work directed the way to a permanent national collection of Bonsai within the National Arboretum and eventually the creation of a museum for Bonsai.

In 1979, Dr John L. Creech received the prestigious Scott Medal and Award given annually to an individual making outstanding national contributions to science and the art of gardening. John Creech has spent his entire life serving his community and nation during peace and war. His exemplary devotion to duty, personal bravery and outstanding leadership is in the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit upon himself, his family and the University of Rhode Island.

Captain John L. Creech died on 7 August 2009. He was buried with full military honors in Columbus, North Carolina. Dr. Creech was survived by three children: two daughters, Diane B. Martin, Victoria C. Waterstradt, and one son, John Creech. Family members also included three grandchildren. His first wife, Amy Wentzel Creech died in 1984. His second wife, Elaine Innis Creech, also preceded him in 2003.

KRIEGY NOTES

Many Kriegies mentioned John Creech's valuable contributions in their notes and conversations concerning his heroic efforts to supplement their meager food diets with fresh foods grown on the camp grounds of Oflag 64. These additions, plus the Red Cross Parcels and packages from home, helped to increase their chances of survival and many are of the opinion that without these added food supplies, they would have perished.

Specific information is stated in the book, *Americans Behind the Barbed Wire, Chapter 5, "Prisoners Who Made A Difference"* by J. Frank Diggs.

One was a modest, cheerful young lieutenant named John L. Creech, who happened to have a brand-new college degree in floriculture. John knew that the biggest problem facing all of us was the serious shortage of food. He asked for, and got permission to use, an old greenhouse plus two-and-a-half acres of land in the compound to grow food for the American prisoners. Why not, the Germans said? So he and several other kriegies, with a lot of back-breaking effort, spaded up the plot. Then he created "flats" for the greenhouse with used Red Cross cartons. With seeds he somehow received from home, John started some 6,000 tomato plants and filled three cold frames with beet and lettuce seeds. The Germans were popeyed at his tomatoes, Marglobe, Bonny Best, and giant Ponderosa. Leeks then became a staple in the Kriegy diet. John had apparently gotten several thousand leek and onion plants from some sources in town. Once word of his achievement got out, more seeds poured in from other sources, the American Red Cross, the Royal Horticultural Society, the French and the Dutch.

Even this additional food remained too small to stop our weight loss. John's crops, however, made a substantial difference in balancing our diet as the camp's American population increased rapidly. At one point, the Gestapo grew suspicious of all that digging and came into camp to dig up part of the plot where kriegies were spending so much time. John appreciated the help as we would not have to plow that section ourselves. After the war, Lt. Creech became Dr. Creech, with an international reputation as Director of the National Arboretum in Washington, D.C. and for developing new plants of many kinds.

Added Note: The digging-and-clearing action "contributed" by the Germans mentioned in the preceding paragraph was actually a subterfuge initiated by a Kriegie and was based on his supposed denied permission to be allowed to escape through the tunnel. As planned revenge, he told the Kommandant the location of the tunnel which resulted in the German cleanup.

Tony B. Lumpkin's book, *Captured Yesterday*, also contains relative and accurate information which affected the lives of every POW in Oflag 64: "Appendix B – Rations and the Effects of Hunger". Some phrasing from this appendix has been abbreviated.

RATIONS

As POWs, we all learned, mostly for the first time, the value of calories for human health and comfort. In general, a person sitting still requires somewhere in the neighborhood of 1,200 calories a day for his basic metabolism. An active person should have 2,500 calories, and the Army ration was something in excess of 3,000 calories per day.

The German ration for POWs was somewhere between 800 and 1,000 calories. The American Red Cross parcel contained, roughly, 1,000 calories, a small can of powdered coffee, ¼ lb. of sugar, a can of meat or fish, Army ration chocolate bar, a small package of cheese or cheese food, and a can of powdered milk. The British Order of St. John had in their parcel: tea, olio, jam and oatmeal. The Canadian Red Cross had a parcel which contained canned butter. The Turkish Red Cross also sent us some bulk dried raisins which were turned over to the sick in the hospital.

Clearly, information from these sources offer readers a clearer picture of the conditions under which every Kriegie lived and struggled to survive another day in captivity. It is with profound admiration that we who read these accounts honor their endurance, their courage and their determination to return to the home for which they have given their all.

FINAL THOUGHTS

John Creech remained an active part of the Oflag 64 Family throughout his life and contributed information and thoughts regularly. In June of 1993, in a letter to one of the editors of the 50th Anniversary Book, John referenced an article about the camp greenhouse stating that "during gestapo searches, I hid the camp radio under a potted plant in the greenhouse." In December of 1993, in a separate letter sent to Herb Garris, former editor of the Post Oflag 64 Item, John referenced escape

attempts. This is a scanned copy of the actual letter written in John's own handwriting regarding escapes from POW captivity.

December 6, 93

Dear Herb,

Thanks for the 1945 wedding photo. Al Ferry was an early friend from the 1st Division at Ft. Stevens in 1941.

Herb, here's one for you to think about. How many POWs (mostly Oflag 64) made an escape at some time between capture and liberation. There would be no statistic in the U.S. military because there was no way for such events to be documented except as mentioned by the escapees.

In example, in 11 o'clock in the morning, I escaped from a train near Spaf, along with Banckov, Berghart (dec.) Ward (dec.) and Rogers (no info). Several others also jumped the train that night. Our escape was due to a flyer who carried a fleibble saw in his belt and we simply sawed the door open. Eventually our 5 were taken by Arabs, tied up and beaten by their women and poked with sticks, robbed of all jewelry. Later we were turned over to Italians who kept us at their headquarters in a very friendly atmosphere. Finally, they reluctantly turned us over to the Germans and that ended our escapade.

How many more had similar or different escape experiences. It would be interesting to know. Particularly since you keep coming up with unique reports, like in your latest Stern and exchange material.

What is your reaction!

John C.

P. S. Have a fine Christmas and
expecting new year!
Good success with your lecture!