2LT Jesse Frank Diggs

1917 – 2004

THE EARLY YEARS

Jesse Frank Diggs was born in Hagerstown, Maryland in 1917. Affected by the depression years in America, Diggs wrote about the lack of family funds to support his college enrollment. Fortunately, his position as editor of his high school paper prompted a full scholarship at American University (AU) in Washington, D.C. Editorship of the college newspaper, *The American Eagle,* also supplemented his income as it included a $100 stipend per semester. In addition, Diggs took on part time jobs while he studied. These personal sacrifices paid off when he graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in Economics from AU in 1938. A job at *The Washington Post* filled his next three years, a professional coup which would serve as guide and teacher throughout his professional career.

IN THE ARMY NOW

As WWII grew closer, Diggs completed his Master's in Economics through a two-month deferment and reported for military duty in May 1941. Officers Candidate School, Class 64, at Fort Benning, Georgia, became his three months' "home" for military training, and he was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in 1942. Headed home for two weeks leave, Jesse Frank Diggs married Tracy Briscoe in his family's living room with a short honeymoon in Philadelphia.

In October 1942, the 3rd Division, of which he was a serving officer, joined a large convoy of 500 warships and 350 transports, all heading toward Africa and landing at three ports: Casablanca, Oran, and Algiers; their mission was to "*establish a foothold for a later invasion of Hitler's Europe.*"

Diggs began his war journal in July 1943, having been in the Army for about two years.

> *We were headed for Sicily with 3000 ships of all kinds, 160,000 American and British troops, 14,000 vehicles and 600 tanks. Our landing destination was at Licata on the southern coast of the island, while the British were to land on the east coast. We had six divisions; the British had seven.*
>
> *Sailing from North Africa, where we had spent the winter since the landing at Casablanca, my battalion of the 3rd Division embarked aboard a landing ship-tank (LST), for the overnight trip to Sicily. We had little or no sleep on a crowded landing ship that night.*

> *Just before dawn, we began to unload onto smaller landing craft when the enemy artillery started to fire at the convoy. The enemy fire was almost constant as we moved toward the Sicilian coast. Our Navy responded by firing over our heads at the shore installations. Some of our small landing craft were hit, far too many, but mine was not.* (Diggs, p. 1)

Now on shore, Diggs' intuitive leadership resulted in the surrender of 150 Italian soldiers, zero casualties among his platoon, and forward movement of the battalion. For this astute military action, Jesse Frank Diggs was awarded the Silver Star, received in his absence by his wife, Tracy, after he was captured and became a POW.

CAPTURED IN SICILY ON 11 AUGUST 1943

During his fourth amphibious landing near the town of Brollo on the north coast of Sicily, Diggs' platoon positioned itself to guard the coastal road. Even though they were outgunned (his howitzers versus their tanks with 88-mm cannons), his platoon held up the German withdrawal by 12 hours before they were overrun by additional German tanks and troops, forcing their surrender. Several of his best men were killed and wounded in the firefights, and Diggs himself was wounded. Fortunately, he had encouraged his men towards safety with this message:

> *'Move up the mountain to join the battalion's position' and most did. A few of us were wounded—including myself with some shrapnel in my leg—and were knocked out before we could follow, so we were overrun and captured.*
>
> *Being a prisoner of war turned out to be very matter of fact. A German soldier helped me to my feet and escorted me and Lt. Keiser to a German command car, which drove us, together with two other captured officers, through the darkness to the eastern end of the island. Thus, I became a prisoner of war, a POW, the last thing I ever expected to be.* (Diggs, p. 3)

After the war, Lt. Diggs was informed that he had been awarded a Bronze Star and Purple Heart for this action.

Transported to the Strait of Messina and transferred to a boat bound for Italy, the group found themselves in a largely vacant, barely habitable camp near Naples where a German doctor tended to Diggs' wound.

During this same time frame, the Strait of Messina also proved useful for the Axis forces. After their capitulation, 100,000 German and Italian troops escaped to Italy with their equipment in an amphibious withdrawal. (Stephen-Dando-Collins, p. 50)

The following account, like many taken from Diggs' book, is truly unique and reflects his talents as a first-hand reporter.

> *A few days later, a German officer called the four of us together and issued the strangest invitation I had ever heard. We were being invited to have dinner with the two-star commanding general of the German 2nd Armored Division, which had been our nemesis in Sicily. An unbelievable, but real invitation, and of course there was no declining such an offer. So that evening we four Americans and one Australian officer sat down at a long table under a large oak tree, together with the German general and eight or ten officers from his staff. Dinner came, a chicken dish of some kind. Then he addressed us in perfect English. It seemed that* he *wanted our views, as allied officers, on a purely hypothetical manner: Would there be any way in which two civilized countries like Germany and the United States, and possibly England, could come to some agreement to stop fighting each other and join forces to fight our common enemy—the Godless, communist country of Russia.*
>
> *Our answer, of course, was couched in diplomatic terms but in effect we said something like, 'Never, at least not with Hitler still running Germany.' The general apparently expected that answer, but thanked us anyway and bade us a good evening, sending us back to the camp with some welcome leftover chicken.* (Diggs, p. 4)

After several weeks more, the six American officer POWs were trucked to Rome and placed on a passenger train with armed escort toward Germany. In a prison camp outside of Berlin, known by Kriegies for its solitary confinements and interrogation techniques, Diggs and the other Americans endured intense sessions with a German who spoke American-style English. All answered with only name, rank, and serial number, regardless of threats or treats offered. Eventually, all were returned, placed in boxcars without food or water, and delivered to small Polish town called Schubin where a newly designated camp for American Army officers awaited them.

OFLAG 64 ARRIVAL ON 10 SEPTEMBER 1943

After exiting their miserable boxcar accommodations, the men were marched down the main street, *Adolph Hitler Strasse*, to the double gate of Oflag 64 *Offizierslager* (officers camp), where they noted a three-structure building, a crude wooden latrine, camp hospital, brick barracks, run-down chapel, greenhouse and a barn.

> *I was greeted, given a very welcome Red Cross food parcel, and assigned to the big dormitory on the second floor of the White House. My friend, Larry Phelan and I were to share a double-deck bunk in a room with 40 other Kriegies. After settling in, I was carefully interviewed by the camp security officer, Lt. Col. James Alger, who explained that the Germans sometimes tried to sneak an English-speaking spy into the camp to uncover any escape plans. He wanted to make sure we newcomers were all really American Army officers.* (Diggs, p. 17)

Touring the camp later, Phelan and Diggs talked to other Kriegies about camp life, including treatment of POWs, medical facilities, camp activities (sports and others), bartering opportunities, and run-downs on the senior officers. They learned that most decisions and actions were the responsibilities of the camp's senior officers (SAOs). Discipline was no-nonsense and included military rules for dress, shaving, and haircuts.

Boredom and insufficient food were definite negative issues—'*the food ration for POWs, which was supposed to be equal to the German troops according to the Geneva Convention, had never been adequate.'* Keeping warm in very cold weather was also a challenge, even with peat bricks being issued each morning for their porcelain stoves. To combat this discomfort, many exercised to increase their body heat and stamina, searched out the warmest places in the camp, and slept in their clothes and overcoat.

> *To curb boredom, J. Frank Diggs put his newspaper knowledge to work. He and Captain George Juskalian came up with a great idea—a printed monthly newsletter called The Oflag 64 Item, for distribution to every single Oflag 64 inmate. They put their concept to SAO Drake, who presented it to their captors. To Diggs' great surprise, Oberst Schneider [camp commandant] also gave the idea his approval.*
>
> *To produce The Item, Diggs assembled a team of a dozen kriegie writers, including his new friends and roomies Larry Phelan and Boomer Holder, and also used the illustrative talents of several inmates, including those of tall, dark, young Jim Bickers from Chicago. Between them they put together a lively publication.*
>
> *Most of Diggs' writers were amateurs, but for six months he was able to rely on the talents of another experienced journalist, Pulitzer Prize-Winner Associated Press War Correspondent, Larry Allen, who had been captured while covering British Navy operations in the Mediterranean. Allen penned an op-ed column for The Item, as well as regular war situation features, using the tongue-in-cheek byline 'Schubin Bureau of the AP'.* (Stephen Dando-Collins, p. 51, 52)

After capture, Allen had been held in solitary confinement before being released to a POW camp in Italy. His cleverly worded writings often made him persona-non-grata, so his next stop was Oflag 64.

> *When Larry arrived at Szubin, classified as a first lieutenant to assuage the Goons' consciences because they knew he was a noncombatant, he again started his AP daily news sheets. He drew it up by hand and printed it with the watery ink available at the Canteen. Sometimes he had to paste a half-dozen sheets of paper together to make up his newspaper front page for the bulletin board. This new sheet was not overly popular with the guards at our camp either, but Larry had a good staff of interpreters working for him, and check as they would (and they did check every day) the Goons could find no discrepancies in what he printed. He used their own newspapers and radio for all his news sources, so the only variances that occurred were due to the differences of opinions between the interpreters. However, he wrote the news with an Americanized touch that sounded great to the Kriegies, but did not sound so good to the Goons.*
>
> *Often, he would be hailed to an audience with the German commandant because of an article he had written, but usually when he was summoned, Col. Drake went with him, and between the two of them, the poor Germans always came out second best.* (Holder, p. 174)

Diggs' ideas continued to flourish. In 1944 he was granted permission to write and post a handwritten daily newssheet he called "*The Bulletin"* and place it on the camp bulletin board. Unfortunately, Allen was sent home under the Geneva Convention mandate on repatriation provisions, but another equally talented war correspondent appeared by the name of Wright Bryan (sometimes known as "Write Bryan").

After landing with US Airborne on D-Day, he was later captured when armed, so this negated his "passport" home. He wrote for *The Item* and was editor of the Sunday edition of *The Bulletin*.

Agreement was reached to print *The Item* in a print shop in Schubin, run by a German soldier and former printer Willi Kricks. Once a month under armed guard, Diggs took the finished copy and art work to the shop. The first one was printed in October 1943.

This portrait of Diggs appeared in *OFLAG 64 The fiftieth Anniversary Book:*

> *Lieutenant J. Frank "Dudley" Diggs***.** *Quartered in the "White House" newsroom.*
>
> *At Oflag 64, young Lt. Diggs, who had been a newspaperman in civilian life, served as editor of The Oflag Item, the monthly camp*

> *paper printed in the local Polish printshop—15 issues of which are reproduced in this book. He also wrote and hand-lettered the everyday wall newspaper, "The Daily Bulletin," which reported the news from outside as extracted and sanitized from German newspapers and magazines plus items from letters from home.* (pp. 90, 91)

Frank Diggs' nose for news and his innate curiosity sought and soon located the "life pulse" of the camp. He monitored activities and events and was greatly responsible for keeping Kriegies both entertained and enlightened. In his words:

> *To stay sane, everyone needed a project and opportunities started to develop. A library of a few hundred old English novels, left from when British officers were quartered there, was being expanded under the direction of Capt. Parrott. Volumes were sent by the YMCA, the Red Cross and prisoners' families back home. Athletic equipment was starting to arrive, thanks to the YMCA. The 'escape artists' were getting their tunnel plans under way. Volunteers were needed for several camp projects and many came forth.*
>
> *All the options helped to take the prisoners' minds off their problems. Americans do not take kindly to captivity, however. No one ever expected to be captured. There we were, prisoners in enemy hands, locked in a camp completely isolated from the rest of the world and dependent for everything on the often ruthless and completely unpredictable Germans. Also, we were in the most escape-proof camp the Germans could devise. I found it more than a little traumatic, unsettling, and hard to get used to. I wondered naturally how most of my fellow prisoners were coping. I found a few who had withdrawn into themselves, nearly all of them obsessed with taking the blame for the deaths of men under their command. Most of the others seemed to be coping very well despite the hardships of prison life, once they became involved in a project of some kind.* (Diggs, pp. 25, 26)

Offerings included academic classes; well attended and popular theatrical programs; a "Schubin Merchandise Mart" based on the point system; the Green house project; a monitored workable secret radio, which dispensed accurate BBC news, including the D-Day Invasion; the "Gnome Bookbindery"; and sports equipment of almost every kind.

A visitor from beyond camp walls also influenced each Kriegy's quality of existence. Henry Soderberg was a young Swedish civilian who became *'the best friend the American prisoners at Oflag 64 had.'* Among his other talents, he possessed coping skills when dealing with Nazi gangsters as he traveled with permission throughout occupied Europe as a representative of the International YMCA. Through this organization, he dispensed a wide variety

of much needed and appreciated items, such as sports equipment, musical instruments, books, Bibles and theatre gear; perhaps his most important influence was actually present on two fronts: his efficient manner concerning delivery of promised items and his easily discernable traits of being an honest, compassionate and very brave person.

To honor the man everyone called "Henry", Diggs later wrote a book entitled, *The Welcome Swede: The true story of a young man who brought hope to thousands of Nazi Germany's prisoners of war.*

DREAMS AND REALITIES OF ESCAPE

> *Every prisoner dreams of escaping. My chance came when the Russian army, in its massive drive across Poland, drew within earshot of Oflag 64. As the sound of artillery fire became constant and grew louder, the Germans decided to march all 1400 of their American officers back into Germany before the camp was overrun. This was decided in January 1945, the dead of winter in Northern Poland.*
>
> *It was bitter cold and had been snowing hard when the whole camp, except for 80 in hospital, bundled up and shuffled out through the finally opened gate.* (Diggs, pp. 90 +)

DATES, DESTINATIONS, AND DESCRIPTIONS

January 21—SCHUBIN, Poland

Marchers were carrying all of their possessions [some wearing all of their clothes for warmth] including a Red Cross food parcel. Tacy and Diggs hauled their gear on an ancient six-foot Polish sled, which they found hidden in the White House. The march covered 24 kilometers that first day and bivouacked in a large Polish barn.

January 22—POLANOVA, Poland

The next day's march covered 23 kilometers. Kriegies were split in several groups and slept in two farm buildings, Diggs and Tacy above a pig sty, the warmest place offered. Some fellow Kriegies tried to escape but were caught.

January 23—CHARLOTTENBERG, Poland

The marching pace grew faster as heavy artillery sounds grew closer. Kriegies were herded to a large dairy barn circled by barbed-wire fencing and fed rations. Posting of guards only at entrance and corners offered Diggs and Tacy their much-anticipated chance for escape.

> *We each put on our escape costume, which made Nelson* [Tacy] *look like a disreputable Polish worker and resemble a German guard, with a homemade cloth "helmet" and a stick of wood carved to slightly resemble a rifle. Thus attired, at dusk, Tacy slowly pulled our loaded sled across the compound to an unlighted far end, while I followed and swore at him from time to time in low German. It was supposed to look like a typical work detail—and it worked.* (Diggs, p.90)

Undetected, they pulled the sled to the back fence, pushed the heavy sled over the top with each jumping over in turn, and continued pulling it down the road. Meeting a Pole on his way home, Diggs used his "*fractured German that we were Americans who needed a place to hide. Our new friend knew of just such a place: a farmhouse only a few kilometers away where a member of the local Polish underground lived."* (Diggs, p. 91)

Knocking on the door and explaining who they were, they were quickly pulled inside with the sled. This large, generous family fed them, enveloped them in conversation and offered them a featherbed for the night—a much appreciated gesture.

January 24-28—WIRSITZ, Poland

The Dudziak family of six were generous hosts. They lived on a small farm, the father a member of the local anti-German underground. Refusing to let Diggs and Tacy stay in the barn, they were fearless when two soldiers came to the door searching for the escaped Americans. Neighbors visited with stories and gifts of hoarded food.

> *They were more apprehensive of the approaching Russians than of the retreating Germans. The Dudziak family had survived six years here of rather barbaric treatment under the Germans and were determined to stay and keep operating their small farm. Deeply religious, practicing Catholics but vehemently anti-Semitic. They blamed many of Poland's problems not on Hitler but on the Polish Jews. Time after time we heard the wistful notion that the U.S. Army would come to the aid of Poland after Germany was defeated and before Russia could take over the country. We asked our hosts to please not to count on it. But this appeared to be the only hope they had for Poland's future.* (Diggs, p. 92)

January 27—WIRSITZ, Poland

This day the Russians were close. Diggs and Tacy expressed their deep appreciation to the Dudziaks, gave them Red Cross cigarettes and pulled their sled into down. The Russians appeared in horse-drawn sleighs, as mounted cavalry scouts, on tanks, in familiar army trucks (probably US made) and as

squads of infantry reconnoitering the town. Tacy and Diggs were apprehensive because they were wearing an assortment of old U.S. Army uniforms, G.I. overcoats and homemade hats. A Russian colonel thought them suspicious until he saw their ID cards and waved them on. Shouting *Amerikanski*, they moved past groups and vehicles safely.

> *Several small groups of Russia GIs passed by on foot, looking disheveled and far from military. We exchanged greetings with some. A few stopped to share their ration of raw Army vodka and toast, 'Stalin, Churchill, Roosevelt!' This usually led to an invitation for us to come along with them to Berlin, an offer not always easy to refuse, but we managed to part friends every time.*
>
> *By late afternoon we got word that some other Amerikanskis were in the area and we soon tracked them down. They were six old kriegies who had managed to stay hidden in the hayloft despite all the firing by German guards. They had found the town's old Nazi headquarters, strangely undamaged, where they had located and happily liberated some German food rations and even a bit of schnapps. So, we quickly joined them temporarily. The SAO was Major Crandall and the group included our old chums Durgin and Holder. They had been staying in a deserted German house and we spent the night undisturbed.* (Diggs, pp. 93, 94)

January 28—WIRSITZ, Poland

This day was spent observing Russian soldiers who were clearing the buildings of Germans, shooting some and making prisoners of others. Diggs wrote that the Russians were curious about Americans and though a tough and rugged breed, they were usually friendly. Pointing to the lend-lease army trucks that were driven by, they were identified as "*Schudabeggers"* after the American label of Studebaker vehicles. Some Russians gave Tacy and Diggs their Red Star insignia as sort of a memento but declined their offer of U. S. Army insignia in return. One called them "Capitaleest's" but appeared to be kidding.

January 29—NACKEL, Poland

> *Getting out of Poland on our own posed quite a problem. As no transportation seemed to be headed east, our small group decided to split up and try to hitchhike back to Oflag 64, which presumably was now overrun by the Russians. The Soviets, we figured, would have to provide some sort of evacuation for the hospitalized kriegies, so we would maybe ride along as supercargo. So Tacy and I headed back toward Schubin.* (Diggs, p. 94)

Diggs' accounts of their return trip to Oflag 64 offered true-to-life portraits of the Russians. Often inebriated and singing in passing trucks, they even laughed when one of their comrades fell out of a truck and the next one ran

him over, which was celebrated by all—probably according to Diggs—because of the driver's *"precision driving."* The town of Nackel was in ruins—buildings still burning. Fortunately, two Poles they met after walking around the square, cold and hungry, invited the Americans to their apartment for dinner (black bread and lard) and places on the floor for the night. These people, like the Dudziak, feared the Russians and looked to Americans as saviors.

January 31-February 4—SCHUBIN, Poland

On the road again, the heavy sled now abandoned in deep snows, the duo shouldered their backpacks and made their way down the mushy highway.

> *The biggest tank I had ever seen clanked up beside us and stopped. We said the magic word 'Amerikanski' and the tank commander welcomed us aboard. It turned out that he had seen us smoking and was out of cigarettes. So, I offered him a Camel; he took the pack.* (Diggs, p. 96)

The tank driver drove like an Indy 500 racecar driver down the middle of the highway, scattering everyone and everything in the tank's path: 18 km from Schubin, Tacy and Diggs waved and jumped off.

> *Back in Schubin, we walked through the familiar wide-open gates and there found a terse note posted on the bulletin board by the camp SAO. A Russian truck convoy, it appears, had finally arrived the day before, packed up all the sick and wounded, and had taken off in the direction of Warsaw. We had missed it by one day.* (Diggs, p. 96)

Finding the camp looted and empty, they decided to rest before starting out again. Another returnee, Lt. Marcellus Hughes, who had also escaped, been hidden by a Polish family and returned as they did, joined them. They all slept in the attic library—the safest place around.

During their five-day stay, Tacy and Hughes found food and drink among the compassionate Schubin Poles; this was especially welcomed by Diggs who had become ill and still suffered from his game leg. By the time he recovered, 14 other Kriegie returnees had joined them and all were ready once more to go East.

February 5—LABISZYN, Poland

Bribing a Russian truckdriver headed that way, the group of 17 rode in good spirits though cold and hungry. At Labiszyn, they departed with thanks as Tacy and Diggs once again headed for the town square. Another generous Polish family welcomed them with food and a place to sleep, their rumors about Russian treatment and hopes for American rescue again fell on the Americans' ears.

February 6—HOLENSALZA, Poland

Four Americans, Holder, Durgin, Tacy and Diggs left town the next morning in rural Polish style—in the back of a horse-drawn cart. During lunch at the hotel (paid for with Red Cross cigarettes), they met an engaging Russian captain named Ivan who was headed their way. Catching a ride then became easy. Boris, his evil-looking batman, stood in the middle of the road and shot his burp-gun over the head of the next approaching truck driver, causing the startled man to stop while four new passengers hopped aboard. After several such rides, they were taken to the best hotel in Hohenzaltza, which was taken over for Soviet officers. There they were made welcome with lots of vodka toasting and assigned rooms. Diggs' most memorable moment happened when he and Ivan exchanged uniform jackets which became a quick re-exchange when the unit's Commissar appeared.

February 7—SOMEWHERE in Poland

Breakfast was shared with Polish officers, escapees from German prison camps after five years.

> *It was hard to visualize what they had been through—or what was ahead for them. Today we drove all day across the snow-covered countryside spotted with wreckage of war—shelled buildings, burned-out vehicles, unburied German corpses. At sundown we came to another Polish town with an unpronounceable name and headed for the town square. Tacy and I once again joined a hospitable Polish family, this time with nine people sharing two crowded rooms with no heat and little food. We talked until a late hour by lamplight. They claimed firsthand knowledge that several U.S. Army divisions were already on their way to Poland, a sad misconception.* (Diggs, pp. 97, 98)

February 8—WARSAW

Boris again hailed trucks as the group traveled east past Kutno, reaching Warsaw at dusk after a very long day of 150 km. Completely destroyed with few walls standing, the Russians only cleared paths through the streets of the old Polish capital. Led to a basement, the four Americans listened to stories by the survivors of the battle of Warsaw.

February 9—WARSAW

Walking through the city, they observed unimaginable destruction with civilians frantically searching, perhaps for their destroyed homes. Locating the refugee center at Rembertov, Diggs adds these reflections:

> *We were not prepared for what we found there, however. Probably 4000 to 5000 war refugees of at least a dozen nationalities were milling around the old brick compound. It looked like a Polish Dante's Inferno. Hundreds of homeless, ragged Polish civilians, some Serbian GIs, a contingent of British and French POWs who*

had escaped, lots of recently liberated Yugoslav and Polish troops, some Bulgarians, a few Norwegians, and at least one Hollander were among others in the hopelessly crowded compound. Most were living like animals, sleeping in hallways, filthy, scrounging scraps of anything that might be worn or eaten. They wore mismatched pieces of clothing, and were obviously hungry, cold, and unwell. More than one had a leg or arm missing. (Diggs, pp. 99, 100)

They finally located the hospital contingent led by Col. Frederick Drury. "Guests" for nine days already, the Russians were being uncooperative about letting him connect with the American military mission in Moscow. Ideas about a trip to Moscow were tossed around.

February 10—REMBERTOV, Poland

Checked into the refugee center, they enjoyed a hot shower and were relieved to deliver their clothes for delousing. Meals were served at noon, at 8 pm and consisted of *kasha* (cereal) and weak tea. Members in the American sector were assigned several feet of floor space for sleeping and the warning to watch their possessions! A trip into town revealed a local open market where the barter system was in place; goods were plentiful and of varied quality. The local currency called *zloty* was worth about 20 cents American.

Their next stop was the Rembertov hospital where the facilities were primitive, the doctors, Russian women, and medications scarce. "Boomer" Holder and Wright Bryan were current patients and glad to see their Kriegie buddies.

February 11—REMBERTOV, Poland

A few American enlisted men arrived here today. They are supposed to be the advance party for up to 1000 noncommissioned (NCOs) whose prison camp in southern Poland was overrun before the Germans could move them out. We hope the rest of them make it; this bunch looks pretty hungry. (Diggs, p. 101)

As more civilians arrived every day, Diggs equated it to a *'train terminal operating around the clock.'* Meals were now served later with barley soup and tea. Dysentery was rampant.

February 12-19—REMBERTOV, Poland

The Russian commander made promises he could not keep, but the good news is that Col. Drake was able to contact the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. More American officers (240) and enlisted men (480) had now arrived.

The latest batch to arrive were kriegies from Oflag 64, who were on the long march but were in such bad physical shape that the Germans turned them loose about 40 km from Stettin. From there, they managed to hitch rides to Bromberg, then got aboard a freight

train bound for Warsaw. They reported under-going some shelling when overrun by the Russian army, but luckily, they suffered no casualties. (Diggs, p. 101)

Pages 102-104 in Diggs' book described the extreme difficulty Washington experienced when attempting to provide assistance for American POWs. After agreeing to a well-organized plan, the Russians blatantly disregarded all efforts to comply.

The Russians refused to allow the American mission to send any of the accumulated supplies to the liberated camps or to Rembertov, which had been designated as the assembly point for all freed Americans. They also flatly banned any of the talented, Russian-speaking U.S. officers who had been assembled for that purpose from going into Poland to contact the Americans at Rembertov or anywhere else. Nor would they permit General Deane to send his big transport planes to Poland to pick up the growing number of ex-POWs there. Kremlin Policy.

It was late in February before the Russians made any concessions at all, when they finally agreed to provide enough boxcars to transport the growing number of Americans out of Rembertov down to Odessa.

February 19—REMBERTOV, Poland

The good news finally arrived tonight. We are to leave for Russia in three days by train for the port. The destination is not clear yet, but with the Baltic now iced in, we are guessing at a port on the Black Sea.

Along with the promise of some transport out of here, Marshal Zhukov has sent the American contingent here an unbelievable gift of captured German stores: some chocolate, a barrel of wine, some food rations, cigarettes, and even a few cigars.

We are gorging ourselves. (Diggs, p. 104)

February 20-23—REMBERTOV, Poland

Our train to take us across Russia turns out to be a bunch of unheated boxcars headed for Odessa, but that beats walking. There are bunks with accommodations for about 220 U.S. officers and 600 GIs, plus about 400 British. The plan is to assign 30 men to each boxcar. This arrangement seems to be standard Russian army transport with double-planked platforms for bunks furnished with straw mattresses, an issue of Russian army blankets, a wood burning stove for each car, and a couple of water pails. Food and fuel may or may not be provided. (Diggs, pp. 104, 105)

Bartering everything they owned, including the treasured pen Diggs used "for putting out *The Daily Bulletin*" he also used his *zloties* to acquire as much Polish black bread as he could pack. Loaded onto their assigned boxcars, they waited patiently for the train to leave but spent the late-night hours, instead, in their "cozy boxcar."

February 24—EN ROUTE, in Poland

Good News. The train left during the night, but the use of wood for fuel resulted in multiple stops. Bartering sessions were frequently seen in every way station, and many enjoyed just standing outside in the open air. Despite the cold, it was decided to leave the side door open to view the snow-covered plains of Poland.

February 25—EN ROUTE, in Russia

The train crossed into Russia in the morning and stopped at Brest-Litovsk. Headed south for the 1500 km trek across the Russian steppes, former Kriegies noted landscapes like the American Midwest as the train moved slowly onward. By nightfall they were in Kowel and stayed the night. Pleasant scenery was replaced the next day by a trainload of German prisoners—possibly 90 per car—with long, sad faces looking outward.

February 26—EN ROUTE

A Russian soldier had been stationed in our car to advise the Americans on procedures every Eagle Scout should know: where to sit to avoid the coldest wind blasts, how to keep the fire going, how to keep warm, etc. Barter sessions were still popular at fire wood stops and everyone looked forward to the daily soup calls handed out from the kitchen car.

February 27—EN ROUTE

Two hundred miles were crossed this day with frequent stops. War damage was present across the lands with signs of winter everywhere. Troop trains continued to pass them, often manned by women and young boys. No passenger trains were seen. Two meals were served: *kasha* with black bread and tea.

February 28—EN ROUTE

> *We are now traveling down through the Ukraine. Nearly all the villages and railroad depots were in ruins from the fierce battles last year in this area. It was getting warmer, so I started selling more pieces of clothing. We are dealing here in Russian rubles, at highly inflated prices. With a supposed exchange of 5 rubles for $1 apiece, buns for $2 each, a pair of socks for $40, and a pair of army blankets for $200.*

Most of our boxcar bunch were down now with some respiratory ailment, but the end is in sight. We halted tonight just 10 miles from Odessa. (Diggs, p. 107)

March 1—ODESSA, Russia

We finally reached this big Black Sea port early this morning. The city is in bad shape under its cover of snow. The railroad station is about leveled by shelling, and most other buildings were damaged to some extent. There are no automobiles in sight, only army trucks and jeeps. But the sun is shining and civilian looked better than any we had seen for a long time. Some women even wore lipstick, a highly unusual sight for us. Our little group of Americans was met by a sort of military band, which attempted to play 'Roll Out the Barrel' over and over. We hiked and hobbled for several miles through the city of Odessa. It was a good feeling.

Then our group of Americans was moved into an imposing building labeled in Russian, Polygon No. 2, reported to be the former Italian consulate. It was located in a little park surrounded by an iron fence. Unfortunately, there are no heat, lights or water. The Russians quickly stationed guards around the place to see that no Americans could climb over the fence and go into town. (Diggs, p. 107)

March 2-6—ODESSA

Frustration with the Russians was at the top of everyone's list. No barter system was possible and meals served to them were all inedible fish heads and tea. Cold and miserable, the Americans were stuck. Fortunately, a young American Major, Paul Hill, who was fluent in Russian, appeared "unofficially and semi legally" to relay the message that pressure was being applied concerning food and flights out, but the Russians remained noncommittal. Major players on both sides exchanged comments, but it was clear that the Americans were pawns in the world of geo-politics.

March 7—ODESSA

The Russians relented and the men marched to the dock. A British freighter, the *Moreton Bay,* became "home" to the following passengers: *"Close to 2000 British and American ex-POWs were all of anxious to get the hell out of Russia as soon as possible."* Sleeping assignments were announced and the dining room became the most popular place with the first meal being served: "*real coffee, genuine white bread, edible soup, delicious canned roast beef, elegant mashed potatoes, and superb junket."*

Cast off was late in the day in the general direction of Turkey.

The boat was crowded but memorable. They sailed across the Black Sea, through the Bosphorus to Istanbul, through the Dardanelles and across the Mediterranean coast to Egypt's Port Said at the entrance to the Suez Canal.

March 14-16—PORT SAID, Egypt

> *We landed here at a well-stocked U.S. Army transient camp and spent three days getting our group of skinny, disreputable kriegies back into decent shape. We scrubbed up, got haircuts, exchanged our decrepit old uniforms for good new ones, got half a dozen shots and a lot of medication, sent cables to our wives, and cautiously tried a British beverage called whiskey. I found that I was down to 127 pounds, about 50 pounds under normal, and tried to make it up by eating around the clock. We all started to thaw out and even did a bit of sightseeing. With a small salary advance, I managed to buy a new watch that worked.* (Diggs, p. 110)

March 17-19—AT SEA

Smooth sailing accompanied the "cruisers" as they boarded and sailed on another British ship, the *TSS Samaria,* for the three-day trip to Naples.

March 20-29—NAPLES, Italy

Boarded at the Terme Hotel, a health resort near the town, the Americans received an extensive physical exam, more shots, and forms to fill out. Diggs located friends and was presented with a Purple Heart, "*for a minor leg wound incurred, it seemed, at least 110 years ago."*

March 30-April 9—AT SEA

> *From Naples, we boarded an American troop ship, the USS Mariposa,* a *former Matson Line cruise ship and set out for home across the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. We spent the next 10 days luxuriating in the nine-man stateroom, eating two great meals a day and enjoying a smooth crossing.*
>
> *By the time we landed in Boston, we had pretty much agreed on one lesson learned from our recent travels: the Russians are great fighters but they think and act very differently than we do in wartime. We had better understand this difference well if we ever have to tangle with them. Hopefully we never will.* (Diggs, p.111, his last journal entry)

POST WAR JOURNALISM CAREER

J. Frank Diggs was born to be a professional writer and continued where he left off after returning home and resigning his commission. Joining the staff of the *U.S. News & World Report,* he worked there for 37 years and retired as

a Senior Editor in 1982. According to an article by a previous employer before the war, *The Washington Post*, Diggs wrote about the Bikini Atoll nuclear bomb tests in the Pacific after WWII, earthquakes in South America, military affairs in Europe, Soviet missiles in Cuba and archaeology, a hobby he enjoyed. A most-remembered piece involves his long interview with Commander John McCain, a former POW in the "Hanoi Hilton" and a Republican Senator from Arizona. In addition, he also published three books: *Oflag 64- A Unique Prisoner of War Camp, Americans Behind the Barbed Wire: A Gripping World War II Memoir: Inside a German Prison Camp, and The Welcome Swede.*

Even in retirement, J. Frank Diggs continued to write about his travels for Maturity News Service. Diggs died at the age of 86 and was buried in Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors on March 15, 2004. His first wife, Tracy Briscoe Diggs, died in 1987. His second wife, Elizabeth Anderson Diggs, died in 2001.

Survivors include two daughters from his first marriage, Margaret Diggs and Debby Churchman, and four grandchildren.

FINAL THOUHTS

No biography about Jesse Frank Diggs would be complete without the inclusions of two additional writings summarized below.

"AN AMERICAN REVISITS POLAND" published in the *US News and World Report*, June 28, 1971.

The Poland that J. Frank Diggs visited and chronicled in 1971 was "*full of surprises—both pleasant and unpleasant."* Many buildings were new but looked old. Streets were wider, the Jewish ghetto was no longer present, and the population had returned to prewar numbers—1.3 million people. Driving across western Poland, the areas seen were rich agriculturally, but farmers still used primitive equipment and still lived as they did pre-war—not well. Families, in general, still spent about ½ of their incomes on groceries, mostly on meat.

> *Strict Government restrictions on travel outside of Poland's borders were reported to be the focus of most resentment against the 'modified' Communist regime.*

Polish literature was being advanced and books by British authors (not Americans) were sold in state-run stores. The streets were relatively safe and many people dressed up-to-date though the cost was often dear. TV entertainment was scarce, but did exist via black and white programs. Big city theatres featured US films, some French, and dance halls which offered American-style music continued to be popular. Black markets which

appeared outside of many hotels (hopefully appealing to wealthy people or visitors from outside of Poland) were an open secret.

> *To the visitor returning after 26 years, there are two main impressions: The rebuilding of Poland's war-wrecked cities has been superb, but life of the hard-working Poles has not shown much improvement since wartime 1945.*

'THE KRIEGIES RETURN TO POLAND – 45 YEARS LATER"

The trip in 1990 for 36 Kriegies (with wives and widows) was both memorable and cathartic. The Oflag 64 camp was now changed; only one building, the White House, was being used as a trade school for boys; other buildings were unused and/or crumbling, with guard towers removed. John Creech brought a small tree and planted it beside a memorial "*as a living monument to all the kriegies who had once lived there."* Bob Oshlo and Billy Bingham placed a wreath at an existing memorial.

> *What made the trip so interesting, though, was yet to come. For nearly three weeks, the ex-POW group had a first-hand look at what is going on in the midst of a crucial period of transition in both Poland and Russia, and a truly eye-opening glimpse of how different life is like now in the Scandinavian countries next door—Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Denmark. The contrast was almost unbelievable.*

Warsaw was "*downright pathetic*", characterized by derelict buildings and morose looking people.

> *One evening, Henry Soderberg arranged a banquet for the group at the old, restored Jablona Palace outside of town. 'Boomer' Holder acted as MC and introduced the Swedish Ambassador to Poland, who spoke gravely of the Polish economy being now in shambles, with much of the future of Eastern Europe depending on how the Poles handle the transition to democracy and a market economy. The Polish veterans' organization also spoke about how grim things are now, and later confided to someone that this was the first good meal that he had had in a long, long time.*

One of the highlights for Diggs was to be reunited with the grandson and family of the Dudziak family. They had successfully hidden Tacy and Diggs from the Germans when they escaped on the third day of the long march.

"Russia was different, but no better." Leningrad's buildings and parks were impressive, and streets were clean, but peoples' lives had not changed for the better as long lines for anything to purchase, eat or drink were common. Plans and appointments made months in advance were ignored and "perestroika"

agreements did not ease the entrance to or exit from Russia. In summary, the group was glad to leave—just as they felt 45 years ago.

In contrast, other Scandinavian countries they visited were refreshing changes. The trip overall was considered a success.

SOURCES

Americans Behind the Barbed Wire : World War II: Inside A German Prison Camp by J. Frank Diggs,

THE BIG BREAK by Stephen Dando-Collins

Oflag 64 The Fiftieth Anniversary Book

Escape To Russia by Howard Randolph Holder, and national/international news sources.

Biography written by Kriegy Research Group writer Ann C. Rogers