

2LT George Lippincott Durgin

1918 – 1995



EARLY YEARS

George Lippincott Durgin was born on 30 November 1918 in Palmyra, New Jersey. He attended Rutgers University during his freshman year, but family concerns prompted him to stay home the second year to assist his family. His Registration Notice for the draft is 16 October 1940 and Enlistment is dated 29 January 1941. Durgin was assigned to the 2nd Armored Division, Ft. Benning, Georgia, where he was first initiated into the intricacies of tank warfare and field maneuvers under General George Patton. Next, he applied for and attended Officers Candidate School at Ft. Knox, Kentucky. Commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in January 1942, Durgin was assigned to Company E, 2nd Battalion, 1st Armored Division, and deployed in June 1942.

OVERSEAS DUTY – PREPARATION AND MOVEMENT

Preparations were hectic and frantic. We had very tight schedules to meet for getting our trucks, tanks and crated equipment to the railroad yard. Word was received that on the next day, 30 May 1942, the 1st Armored Regiment would march to the rail head, board coaches, and head for our debarkation destination.

We rolled into Hoboken, NJ after dark, got off the train and boarded ferries which took us across the Hudson River to the troop ship docked in New York Harbor. We passed within a short distance of the Statue of Liberty, which was all dark. Everything was blacked out, so it gave one an eerie feeling. We got off the ferry boats and lined up along the pier awaiting the proper

loading sequence by Company. As each man started up the gangplank his name was checked off a troop-loading manifest by a military personnel clerk.

We were directed to our quarters by a member of the boarding crew. This became a bit confusing as the men had to carry a large barracks bag and miscellaneous equipment down the steep steel stairs. We kept descending deeper and deeper into the hold until we reached our assigned level, "F" deck. It so happened this was two decks below the water line, not a very encouraging thought! We learned also that we were aboard a peacetime luxury liner known as the "Oriente". There was no evidence of luxury now. We also learned that this was the sister ship of another peacetime luxury liner, the "Morro Castle", which caught fire and was scuttled at Asbury Park, NJ in 1934. I only hoped the "Oriente" was at least a bit more fire resistant! The "Oriente" had been converted to a troop transport carrier assigned to the Merchant Marine with a name change to "Thomas H. Barry". All of the accoutrements of a luxury liner had been gutted. All deck levels had now been fitted with triple-decker bunk beds. As good fortune would have it, the officers were assigned to double-decker bunk beds in what had formerly been cabins above deck. In all fairness to the troops, a company officer was required to be on duty with them on "F" deck at all times. We would rotate this assignment. If one thought too much about being two decks below the water line, you could start to become a little claustrophobic, like being in a submarine!

Finally, in the very early morning hours of 31 May 1942, we pulled out of New York harbor under cover of darkness and headed out to sea. We still had no word of our destination but I could tell by observing our relationship to the North Star that we were headed generally northeast. This would mean we were traveling parallel to the shoreline of the New England states. I could also see there was a Navy destroyer escort on either side of us.

That night we pulled in to a fairly large harbor where a number of other ships were at anchor. We learned from the deck hands that this was Halifax, Nova Scotia. We were apparently to remain here while a convoy of troop ships and freighters was consolidated prior to being escorted across the Atlantic by US Navy destroyers as protection against possible German U-boat attacks.

It wasn't until after the war that I learned just how serious this U-boat threat was. The Germans were having considerable "kill" successes from Halifax, Nova Scotia, to the Florida Keys, plus the shipping lanes south of Greenland and Iceland to Ireland, our route of travel. In 1942 the U-boats sank 21 merchantmen in

January, 28 in February, 50 in March, 50+ in April, 102 in May and 111 in June; pretty serious threats. Yes, June was the month when we crossed the Atlantic!

Life aboard ship was tedious to say the least. Having the troops lining up for mess call was a disaster as can be imagined. Every effort was made to have the troops adhere to a firm schedule. It didn't work. The end result was they just wandered around and ate when they could and what they could. The mess kitchen just had food prepared at all times and the troops ate when they could get to it; pretty awful! The bathroom and medical facilities were over-extended and deplorably inadequate.

The officers at least had the dining room of the old "Oriente" at their disposal. Dinner was the main meal of course; breakfast consisted of juices, coffee and sweet buns, and lunch was cold cuts and breads. One thing of interest was the biscuits we got for dinner. We noticed little critters running around the biscuit basket and we found out quickly, if you dropped the biscuits on the table, more would run out! We broke the biscuits into pieces and tried to maintain a vegetarian diet by that means.

There were six of us officers eating dinner at one of the tables near the dining room entrance when one of my friends pointed toward the open double door and said: "What's that about?" I turned around to look and there were the ship's Captain, General McQuillen, Colonel Hains, and a Navy officer standing there and pointing toward our table. I thought this could have nothing to do with us so I turned back to the table. One of my friends then said, "That Navy Officer is pointing at you!" I turned around again and looked more closely and I couldn't believe my eyes! It was my Uncle Eddie, the Navy Lt. Commander, my favorite uncle, and he was smiling and beckoning for me to come over! Well, of course I got up and went over. With all of that brass out there I didn't know whether to salute, genuflect, or what. Uncle Eddie solved my problem by extending his hand. He shook it warmly and had me come out into the foyer with the other top brass. What he said was that he was trying to talk my Commanding Officer into letting me go overseas in the convoy on HIS destroyer! When the trip was completed, he'd return me back to the troop ship. WOW! That sounded fantastic! However, Uncle Eddie said my CO could not agree to that because I had duties to perform here with my own troops. Uncle Eddie said that he understood this, but as a second choice could he take me over to his ship for the evening and show me around? The CO said that permission would be granted only if he could be assured I'd be back on board before the "Oriente" moved out. Uncle Eddie told my CO that the convoy would not leave until he gave the order, and that he was the Convoy Commander. So, he assured the CO that I

definitely would be back within a couple of hours. Wow! Pretty heady stuff for an Army 2nd Lieutenant! With the assurances just given, my CO gave permission for me to visit the Convoy Command ship. I saluted the CO and thanked him, and Uncle Eddie guided me toward the open access door at the side of the "Oriente". My buddies were sitting at their table agape taking all of this in. I turned around with a big smile and gave them the thumbs up sign!



LCDR Edward Robison Durgin

We climbed down a rope ladder and into the waiting dinghy. The bosun guided the small powered dinghy over to the anchored destroyer. We pulled up alongside, climbed up another rope ladder, and then Uncle Eddie told me to follow what he did. The bosun's mate piped him aboard, he stepped onto the deck, turned toward the American flag at the stern of the ship, and saluted it. I followed suit, all very proper of course!

I asked my Uncle how in the world he found me aboard a troop ship. He said "Easy. I knew elements of the 1st Armored Division were going to be in this convoy, so I had one of my officers contact the Port Authority in New York to check the shipping manifest. This they did and indicated you were aboard the "Oriente"- Amazing!

Uncle Eddie took me on a tour of his destroyer, a relatively new ship of the Mayo Class. He took me to the bridge, introduced me to some of his staff, showed me his quarters just off to starboard rear of the bridge, and then we went below. He took me through the crew's quarters and mess area. Uncle Eddie showed me the engine room; very compact! Next came the ammunition stowage racks and the gun turrets. Compared to our 3" tank guns, these 5" destroyer guns looked impressive. Too bad we didn't have them in the desert warfare of our future!

We walked from stem to stern and back, me asking all sorts of questions as we went. Finally the time had come to say goodbye. Before I left, Uncle Eddie said: "I know you can keep a secret; you're an officer and a gentleman. Observe that unusual-looking screen affair on top of the mast. It's called RADAR, which is an acronym for Radio Detection and Ranging. It's a brand new direction-finding device developed jointly by the British and US. It can locate enemy surface ships at great distances in the dark, in the fog, anytime. This will be the first convoy equipped with it and I'm very excited about it." I was duly impressed, thanked him for the tour and assured him the "secret" was secure. He also informed me that we were due to land in Belfast, Ireland, but knew nothing of any future assignments, of course. He said it would take about ten days for the crossing because we would be taking a zig-zag course to evade German U-boats. Also, we could only go as fast as the slowest freighters in the convoy, which would be about 10 mph. I was traveling on a "slow boat to Ireland"! Uncle Eddie summoned his bosun and we climbed down into the little dinghy again and headed off for the "Oriente". I climbed up the rope ladder, turned around, thanked him for the tour, saluted my uncle, and said I'd see him after the war. He responded in kind. The little dinghy turned and headed back to the Niblack. Now that was quite an experience!

I reported back to my commanding officer and spent the rest of the evening describing my experiences to my fellow officers. As I was on duty that night down of "F" deck, I entertained the troops by telling them of my visit to Uncle Eddie's destroyer, but made no mention of RADAR or Ireland. At least I knew now we were heading for the ETO (European Theater of Operations) and not the Pacific!

In the very early hours we could feel a rumbling throughout the hold and figured we were being positioned in the convoy ready for departure. This was truly the first time since I left my sweetheart in Pemberton that I had laid back in a flat-out position and had an opportunity to think a bit and meditate. So much had happened in such a short space of time, it was almost overpowering. In just the past five months I'd been commissioned as an Army officer, met the girl of my dreams, gotten betrothed, married her, and now off to war and who knew what. Rather breathtaking I'd say!

My reminiscing was short-lived. The troops were now aroused and wanted to see what was happening on topside, so up we went. It wasn't our turn, but how do you stop hundreds of GIs wanting to do something in such an unregulated environment? Hell, let 'em go! We piled up on deck and were able to see the

dark hulks of other ships in the harbor maneuvering into position. All I could think of was the massive logistical responsibility Uncle Eddie and his officers had directing each ship into its position and maintaining convoy control. Slowly, we left Halifax harbor and entered the North Atlantic. There were no lights apparent, but by keeping perhaps 400-500 yards apart, the ship's navigators, with the help I presume of coded radio instructions from the convoy commander, and his RADAR, we were able to fan out into the open sea without colliding.

Daylight came and ships were visible fore and aft and on both sides. The destroyers were knifing back and forth throughout the convoy and everything seemed to be under control. Periodically on order of the convoy commander, the ships would change course either to port or starboard. As the days passed, the temperature dropped noticeably. I could tell by the route we were generally following that we must have been passing close to the final resting place of the Titanic which collided with an iceberg and sank thirty years previously. I was trusting we weren't going to collide with a German torpedo and become bunk mates!

About this time the convoy must have arrived in the vicinity of lurking German U-boats. The Navy destroyers were darting about in a flurry of activity and dropping depth charges. One was dropped about 200 feet or so to the rear of our transport and the shock waves actually caused the stern of our ship to lift slightly. Of course by now the whole shipload of GIs knew my uncle was their convoy commander, so whenever a destroyer came near us a giant yell, like one would hear at a football game, would rise up to the heavens: "Go get 'em Uncle Eddie; sink the SOBs!!"

The day finally arrived when we could see land in the distance, at last! By this time we were in "safe waters" as it were, and the British Navy took over. At this same point I was summoned to the bridge where the communications officer handed me a message. A message! For me?! Who in the world would be able to send a message to me? My wife? That was my first crazy thought! It turned out to be a message from Uncle Eddie, of all people! He indicated he was sorry but would not be able to see me in Belfast. He was wishing me good luck in whatever my military duties required and said he was looking forward to seeing me after the war. I was really stunned! The signalman asked if I would like to respond. I said that I would, of course, but how? He said: "No problem, we can't use radio, but we can use our powerful signal light. I was still amazed but wrote a brief note to the effect: "Thanks for a successful convoy escort, good luck in your future naval duties, and I'll see you after the

war". The signalman then took me out to the port extension of the bridge and opened up a large enclosed searchlight with shutters on it, and pointed it toward a destroyer way out toward the horizon. This had to be Uncle Eddie's! The signalman took my message, then opened and closed the shutters rapidly, I presume using Morse code. He completed the message, awaited a response from the Niblack, turned back to me and said: "Message delivered, sir!" I thanked him and went back to my quarters thinking how wonderful we humans can be but also how positively inhuman at times. Why?

A few more hours of maneuvering into position were required because this was an enormous harbor. We notified the troops to get their gear in order in preparation for disembarking in Belfast, Northern Ireland. All the troops could say was: "Ireland? What are we doing in Ireland?" Well, no one at our level knew, but here we were! I must say, this was quite an introduction to my first ocean cruise. The date was 10 June 1942.

After several months practicing maneuvers in Ireland, LT Durgin's division was deployed to England in preparations for deployment to North Africa.

SPECIAL ASSIGNMENT: MIS-X CODED MESSAGES

During this period of waiting for move orders, a few of the officers in the 2nd Battalion were directed to report for a special staff meeting at a British Military Intelligence installation. It was located in a nice mid-sized building just a few miles away. We were transported to the meeting in the Colonel's staff car and spent the afternoon at a seminar. The British Intelligence Officer welcomed us and then told us why we were there. He said we would be in the combat zone of North Africa very shortly and there were a few things he would like to emphasize, even though we probably already knew about them. In combat an individual either survives, is killed, wounded and survives, or is captured. To be truthful, I had not thought of any of those possibilities except survive! The officer went on to say that he was going to concentrate on the aspect of capture. Based upon their dealings with British prisoners of war in Germany during the last three years, they had been able to devise a means of transmitting important military information back to England by means of a secret coding in the POW's letter to their home. We listened carefully how this was done. To make it more difficult for the code to be "broken", we were told to pick a two-digit number of significance to us and a unique closing signature that would tip off the Secret Service that this letter contained a coded message.

We practiced all afternoon, filled out a Top Secret card with all significant de-coding data, and were told to keep this information in our heads, don't write it down. Class dismissed. We just assumed we would never have occasion to use this information again, but it made for an interesting afternoon. As luck would have it, I did use it!

TRANSPORT TO NORTH AFRICA

Our time of leisure had come to an end in England and we were ordered to get combat loaded and prepare for shipping out. We moved all equipment for transport back to Liverpool where we loaded freighters with everything we had. It was a massive job of logistics to keep everything identified for proper retrieval upon arrival at our destination, which was kept secret as always.

We were escorted to a loading quay in the harbor and all personnel were loaded aboard a rather large peacetime ocean liner equipped for troop transport. The name of the ship was the "Duchess of York" and this was pure luxury compared to the "Orient", our double-loaded troop ship from America. We settled in, and under cover of darkness the convoy fleet headed out into the Irish Sea, through the North Channel, and out to the North Atlantic. As daylight approached we could see a vast convoy of freighters, troop ships and naval vessels stretched from horizon to horizon, a most impressive conglomeration.

The weather was cold, rainy and windy. By now we knew we were headed for North Africa. Where else? That's where the action was! As we lumbered southward the weather worsened and the seas became rougher. Seasickness was widespread throughout the ship and meals were sparse because the kitchen was in complete upheaval and the cooks were unable to prepare the food. We ate cold cuts and bread. Even the merchant marine sailors aboard had never seen waves so high as this. To our portside was the troop ship, "Duchess of Kent", and on the starboard side was another troop ship, the "Empress of Canada". It was larger than ours, having three smokestacks to our two. When our ship would be in the bottom of a large swell, the Empress and Duchess would disappear from sight. We were angling at about 45 degrees across the swells to minimize the roll of the ship. As it climbed to the top of the wave the bow would extend way over the crest, then, as the rest of the ship would rise on the swell, the bow would crash down to the bottom of the next wave with a resounding "boom"! The whole ship creaked,

groaned and shuddered. When looking down a long companionway you could see a twist in the ship's length. While this was continuing we heard a loud crash. We learned later it was the grand piano in the main ballroom that had broken loose from its moorings and crashed against the wall, breaking its legs. No, this was not a good month to be taking a cruise ship anywhere!

This inclement weather continued for the entire duration of our trip until we reached the Strait of Gibraltar. Relative calm at last! All of our stay in Ireland and England had been under blackout conditions. What a surprise to see the city of Tangier in Morocco, off our starboard beam, brightly lighted. Upon further analysis this was determined to be not too surprising. Tangier and surrounding environs had been ceded to Spain years earlier. As Spain was a neutral country during WWII, so was Tangier; thus, the bright lights!

A short time after entering the Mediterranean Sea we arrived at the port of Oran in Algeria, North Africa; the date was 21 December 1942.

TUNISIA - PRELUDE TO BATTLE

We departed Oran on 1 January 1943 and were not escorted by any Navy vessels. We hugged the shoreline fairly closely and the scenery was actually very beautiful. It would be somewhat similar to that of the coast of California. There were gentle slopes of farmland where orange groves and vineyards abounded with a backdrop of the Atlas Mountains in the distance. The water was calm and the weather was quite mild. A far cry from the North Atlantic Ocean a couple of weeks before! This leg of the trip was only about 400 miles long.

We pulled into a small harbor in Algeria by the name of Phillipville, a typical French name. The Arabs have since gained their independence from France so they have changed the name back to the original one of Skikda. This was the closest seaport to Tunis that was not under German control.

We were issued standard rations, our canteens were filled with water, and we mounted our tanks and headed south into the mountain passes of the Atlas mountain range toward Constantine. Nightfall came by the time we were climbing the twisting road into the mountains, and we were under blackout conditions. The road was only wide enough for one tank width

and fortunately there was no oncoming traffic. Our small blackout lights were essentially marker lights to indicate the presence of the other vehicle ahead of you; it did not illuminate the road.

In some areas there were steep drop-offs and it was a bit scary sitting there with your head sticking out of the tank turret and praying that the driver wasn't dozing! He wasn't, we made it safely to our bivouac area in the high desert south of Constantine, and we were still in Algeria.

We entered Tunisia in early January 1943, being shifted from one area to another, completely unaware of the "Big Picture", because apparently no one knew at the top side either, or if they did, it was not transmitted down to us ground troops who were the designated combatants! Essentially, we were in a holding pattern awaiting further orders.

At about this time we were shown pictures sent down to us by British Intelligence of the latest German heavy tank design. It was most impressive! As I recall it weighed about 62 tons, had massive armor plate, and mounted their extremely powerful 88 mm gun. We were told none of these had gotten to North Africa at this time. We learned later how incorrect this information was!

We were directed to take up positions in Ain Beida, 60 miles southeast of Constantine. Word was passed down that the possibility existed that an eastward thrust by our Division might be made toward Sfax in an attempt to sever the main supply line from Tunisia to Field Marshal Rommel's Afrika Korps fighting a fierce withdrawal action against General Montgomery's British 8th Army in Libya and Tripoli. With this information, I had a 10-foot square marked out in the desert sand and kept my platoon busy making a terrain map of the east-central portion of Tunisia, from Ain Beida to the sea at Sfax. We included the mountain ranges, the passes, wadis, and roads. It sure kept the troops busy and it reminded me of my childhood days playing in the beach by the ocean during family summer vacations! Well, Captain Machus was impressed, but it came to no avail. Higher command never approved such a plan and we moved our encampment farther southeast to Firyanah. I thought the idea was a great one, but apparently we must not have had the resources to follow through with such a plan. The Germans had control of all the mountain passes in the Eastern Dorsal segment of the Atlas Mountains parallel to the Mediterranean Sea coast south of Tunis. This was imperative to maintaining the coastal road open for their Afrika Korps supply line. As they were withdrawing northward into

Tunisia they needed more maneuvering space and the Allied forces were too close for comfort. As a consequence, they started aggressive activity all along the areas where they would be vulnerable to potential Allied attack.

Our American forces were separated into Company-size units in Tunisia and placed in locations where they could theoretically be called upon to be put into a rapid reinforcing position. This resulted in our Company "E" shuttled periodically over a 150 mile front from Gafsa to Firyanah to Sbeitla to Fondouk and finally to the Ousseltia Valley southwest of Kairoun.

A point worth mentioning is the fact that we frontline troops received absolutely no allied Air Force support whatsoever during this entire period in North Africa. Yes, we did see airplanes occasionally, but these were German reconnaissance planes keeping tabs on our strengths and movements. We learned later that our bombers were concentrating on destroying harbors in Sicily and Italy where future landings were to be accomplished. Unfortunately for us, it would have been better had they been bombing the Tunis airport and harbor, Afrika Korps buildup in Tunisia where the fighting was being carried out first!

The threat of German Stuka dive bombers striking our bivouac areas was a constant concern, so we always had to locate some form of cover, meager though it was, in palm and olive tree groves or scrub brush. This also posed a problem of refueling our tanks, which were thirsty rascals. You can imagine what energy was required to move a 36-ton vehicle through rough mountainous and sandy terrain in low or second gears. We averaged about three gallons of high-octane aviation gasoline per mile.



2LT Durgin
Illustration by Jean Harding Nielsen

COMBAT AND CAPTURE

Our maneuvering and repositioning during the past several weeks finally ended at the northern edge of the Ousseltia Valley in the vicinity of Fondouk and Pichon Passes. British Intelligence had indicated the German forces were concentrating east of these passes preparing for a breakthrough. As it turned out, this data was completely in error; more defective intelligence.

Disturbing reports were being received by us over Captain "Mac's" radio communications with Battalion Headquarters. The date was 14 February 1943, and from what we could determine, the Germans were advancing against Allied positions in the mountains and passes of the Eastern Dorsal range of the Atlas mountains about 60 miles south of us. By 5 o'clock that afternoon the situation had worsened and we received orders to move out to a position near Kern's Crossroads, named after Colonel Kern of the 1st Battalion, 6th Armored Infantry Regiment.

Excitement reigned as we platoon leaders dashed up to Captain Mac's command post to get our marching orders. We were to be certain all vehicles were in combat readiness and to fall in to a column formation and follow his lead tank. We were told that the Germans had broken through our lines at Faid Pass and had surrounded several of our battalions there.

We headed due south following Captain Mac's tank over very rugged desert terrain and under blackout conditions. The going was also slow and dusty. It might be interesting to describe this portion of the country more fully. It was not the gently rolling and sandy terrain of the vast Sahara Desert; this was sandy and rocky mountain terrain, in many respects like the barren desert and mountain regions of Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico and Utah back home in the States.

We travelled all night and stopped briefly at about 4 am the next morning near an American Infantry emplacement. Captain Mac contacted the unit commander hoping to get some breakfast rations for his Company of tired and hungry tankers. No luck! The Infantry CO said he had none either and would appreciate our moving on so as not to attract the attention of German patrols that were not too far away. We obliged and moved out. We continued southward until we finally reached Kern's Crossroads out in the middle of the desert. There was a group of high ranking officers gathered there and Captain Mac was able to report in to our 2nd Battalion Commander, Lt. Col. James D. Alger, where a staff meeting was convened. We were directed to

continue south one or two miles and prepare our vehicles for engaging the enemy; gas up, check ammunition and so forth.

Captain Machus returned from the battalion staff meeting and we platoon leaders gathered around his Jeep to learn the latest. We were completely oblivious to the current battle situation and were anxious to learn more about it. We asked lots of questions about enemy strength, equipment, locations and so forth, but to no avail. We did learn that our 3rd Battalion had been massacred and trapped on Djebel Lessouda, and some infantry and artillery units were also trapped on Djebels Hadid and Ksaira bounding the hamlet of Sidi Bou Zid. (A djebel in Arabic is a small mountain). This disaster became known afterwards as "Bloody Valentine's Day".

Just a couple of weeks prior to this event, word was received that Germany had suffered a disastrous defeat at the hands of the Russians in the Siege of Stalingrad on 31 January 1943. Approximately 160,000 Germans had died and 90,000 were marched into Siberia for ultimate death. Rommel's Afrika Korps was engaged in fighting a desperate withdrawal action as it was being pushed back from Libya by the British Eight Army under Field Marshall Montgomery. The American & British invasion of North Africa had been launched on 8 November 1942, so things were looking pretty bleak for the Germans on all fronts at this time. Word was passed down to us that the Germans were not taking prisoners, so fight to the death! That's war, right?

The bottom line to all of this was that we did not have a very good feeling about what was most likely to be in store for us. Lt. Holder and I discussed briefly some of the combat tactics we had been taught back at OCS and we could not see where any one of these lessons was being applied in this case. We did not know the enemy's strengths or his locations due to the lack of any reconnaissance. On our side our 50 tanks only had meager infantry and artillery support on our flanks, and these were open halftracks, and there was absolutely NO air support! Not at all encouraging. In addition to this our men in our entire battalion had not had any sleep the night before, and no food to speak of. Thank goodness we were young! I would like to comment here that the officers and men in our battalion were a true cross-section of America; loyal, dedicated and well-trained soldiers.

So much for that. The next step was to "move out" which we did at about 1:30 pm, 15 February 1943. It was a most impressive display of a tank battalion in combat formation, very textbook in appearance, and 50 tanks strong!

Off we went as ordered with Lt. Col. Alger leading with "D" Company on his left flank spearheading the assault on Sidi Bou Zid; "F" Company was on his right flank to monitor potential hostile enemy fire from some low hills to the south; and "E" Company followed in the wake of "D" Company to exploit the breakthrough in Sidi Bou Zid, and also to provide rear guard support as required. In all fairness to our Air Force comrades we did see one P-38 Reconnaissance airplane flying low, wagging its wings as a sign of a friendly aircraft, and streaking to the rear!

This noble enterprise became seriously disrupted shortly after the jump-off order was given, however. A flight of Stuka JU 87s streaked in low over the rear of our formation and released their bombs. Explosions, sand plumes, and dust permeated the area. Fortunately, not one of our tanks was hit. The end result of this first encounter with the enemy was that our Artillery, Infantry and Reconnaissance support troops in the open half-tracks decided this was no place for them to be, so they turned back and headed for the rear.

In retrospect one could envision this episode as the first move in a big chess game. Here were the brave knights all decked out in their shining armor charging forward against the enemy! Then disaster; within four hours they were relegated to the status of pawns in the conflict. No horses (tanks) left!

The next obstacle to be overcome was to traverse a giant ouadi (wadi), or deep, dry streambed, in the desert floor which was about 15 feet deep and 100 feet wide. We had to find suitable places to break down the steep sandy sides to get our tanks into and out of these defiles. Quite a trick and rather time consuming.

The Germans were aware of these obstacles and had zeroed in on them with their long range HE (high explosive) artillery shells. It made for an interesting obstacle course. During this phase of our advance one of my tanks became mired down in a muddy low spot in the bottom of the ouadi. I radioed my first tank leader, Sergeant Tony Tocci, to drop back and attach a tow cable to the bogged down tank and pull it out. This he did successfully, even under the imminent risk of HE shells being lobbed in.

By this time the beautiful, parade-like formation positioning of our battalion was completely disrupted and we became engaged individually with identifying sources of enemy fire and attempting to neutralize them.

In contact with the tank commanders of my platoon I directed them to spread out farther to the left and right flanks and be alert

for any enemy enveloping movement. The platoons up ahead of us were really starting to catch enemy fire now as a tank could be seen blowing up here and there.

I received a call from my right flank tank commander, Sgt. Gott, who reported he'd located one of the problem areas. Apparently the Germans had emplaced AT (anti-tank) guns in and around the cactus enclosures of Arab huts. I guess the German reconnaissance units had figured out our plan of advance from the previous day's battle. Well, now we had target locations we could take under fire and we did destroy some of the emplacements. They had been quite successful in knocking out some of our advance units from the rear. Now it was our turn! I contacted Captain Machus and my other tank commanders and reported the latest information to them.

Whenever we were hit by an enemy shell, the impact on the turret made one feel like you were inside of a gigantic bell; the reverberations were mind-boggling.

My thoughts took me back to those days at Ft. Knox when our OCS artillery officer instructor used to pound it in to us the importance of estimating the range, or distance, of various objects. He told us to make estimates in terms of football field lengths. We all knew a football field was 100 yards long, so just think in terms of multiples of that figure. He would march us out to the reservation and have us make estimates of the distances to various objects he'd already calculated; old barns, rock formations, and so forth. These lessons were very worthwhile. All we needed was bigger guns to reach some of the enemy emplacements we were encountering! Our instructor also told us to exercise our eyeball muscles by alternately looking at distant objects, then close-in ones.

During this period I had my head sticking out of the top port of the turret using my binoculars in attempting to locate enemy emplacements and/or tanks. The tank commander also had a control lever which enabled him to rotate the 75 mm gun turret in the general direction of a potential target, then fire a volley of 30 caliber machine gun tracers for the benefit of the gunner whose field of sight was very limited. The gunner could then take over control and adjust the gun accordingly. We soon found out that the enemy guns firing on us could not be reached by our guns within the range of the telescopic sights. I then directed the gunner to elevate the gun by counting the number of hand wheel rotations between firings. By my watching the tracer flare at the base of the shell until the detonation of the HE projectile occurred,

I could tell him to either increase the number of turns controlling the gun elevation or decrease them. When artillery guns are adjusted in this manner it is designated as "indirect fire". Sort of like General Washington's artillery officers in the Revolutionary War must have done! This worked fine on stationary targets but was useless against a moving enemy tank. We just fired away at them anyhow hoping the HE shells would either damage the enemy tank tracks or his periscope gun sights. Our AP (armor piercing) shells were essentially useless because the German armor plate was so thick, plus our shells did not have the penetrating effectiveness of the German guns. Not too good a situation! Much to my chagrin, I now saw my own platoon tanks gradually being neutralized. It was most devastating to see our tanks being blown up and the crews, who we now had known very personally, being lost with them.

Another unique observation was that the German tanks were painted a light sand color and were difficult to spot at a distance. Our American tanks were painted a dark olive drab color that contrasted nicely with the light tan color of the desert sand. Furthermore, on the side of our own tanks were painted very large white 5-pointed stars, ostensibly to help inform Allied air and artillery support troops that we were their friends. It also, unfortunately, gave the Germans a rather clear target for them to zero in on!

The closer we came to Sidi Bou Zid the more "kills" the enemy was able to make. Our rear guard tanks had been ordered to close up which made us the advance force now. We never did make it into town and those ahead of us those who did never made it out! As we were taking more HE shells above our tanks now, it was prudent to close the turret hatch where my head had been protruding. There were vision slots around the inside of my turret hatch ring. It was possible to see through them, but with difficulty. We were much closer to the main German defense guns now so were able to use our HE shells more effectively.

At this point I could see some of our tanks up ahead backing away from the town, what was left of them that is. The Germans had figured out our range to perfection by this time and were picking us off like ducks in a shooting gallery. The end result of this debacle is that within minutes I could see but a few American tanks still active on the field of combat. Scanning the area around us I could see a double-enveloping maneuver picking up momentum on either flank, which appeared to be a company of German medium tanks on each side. Contact with Captain

“Mac” had been lost some time back. The rest of my platoon tanks had been wiped out during the afternoon, the flanking enemy tanks were too distant to engage, so I started maneuvering back to a slight defile behind us that might afford some protection so we’d have a chance at a few more German tanks as they got closer. At this time I spotted one lonely battalion tank maneuvering toward me. I was able to make radio contact with it and determined it was Lt. Holder’s. I told him my game plan and to come over to the defile just in back of me. Ammunition was getting low and this is the first time it was driven home to me that we were really in big trouble. I’d been so busy with the business at hand that no time was available for evaluating the big picture situation, or even thinking about our personal welfare.

At this time loud explosions occurred and Lt. Holder’s and my tanks got wiped off the combat arena. My tank took a whopper in the turret ring that prevented any further rotation of the gun. At about the same time we took another round right through the front slope plate. The armor piercing shell came on through the front drive differential and transmission and lodged under the turret floor. In the process it broke through the transmission casing and spewed hot oil and unbreathable fumes throughout the tank. We were fortunate the ammunition stored under the turret floor was almost gone; otherwise it could have blown up too! Our day of combat was through. I gave the crew the order to dismount and hit the dirt, or sand, as it were. I yelled for them to lie down, play dead, and do not run. We all got out and I led them, crawling, to a very shallow ditch. Lying out there completely exposed on the desert floor drove the message home that we were not in a very tenable position. Everything grew eerily quiet and we could now see all of the tanks around us either burning or disabled, as was ours. There were no more sounds of shell fire. All was quiet on the Eastern Front!

We could see in the distance the enemy tanks and support infantry slowly maneuvering over the area, apparently looking for survivors. Machine gun fire was audible and as the tanks got closer they zeroed in on our tank. My very young assistant driver started crying hysterically, panicked, and tried to get up and run away. I was able to grab him by the ankle and pull him back. The rest of the crew then grabbed him and held him down. The machine gun fire just over our heads sounded like loud popcorn as the bullets tore through the air.

I was hoping for darkness so we might be able to slip away, but this was not to be. The time was about 5:30 pm and darkness was starting to fall. Well, one can dream can't one? Within minutes of Lt. Holder's and my tanks being destroyed, the German tanks and infantry came moving over the battlefield like hungry wolves.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see a MK IV Panzer tank slowly approaching us. I told the crew to lie very still and play dead. My memory harked back to the word previously received that the Germans did not take prisoners. For some silly reason I began to wonder how they were going to dispose of us. Were they just going to machine gun us down, drive the tank tracks over us, or make us run so they could have fun picking us off? Not too happy a choice! I recall at the time saying quietly: "Oh God, is this all there is?!" My thoughts harked back to memories of my dear wife and me spending our last night together and of our plans for the future and the raising of a family. Please dear Lord, make it be so! These musings were ended very quickly.

The German tank slowly pulled up to within about 15 feet of us and stopped. We were covered by the tank machine gun and by a Lieutenant in the gun turret pointing two hand guns at us; one a German standard Luger and the other a 45-caliber Colt, no doubt taken from another American casualty. In a very clear voice the Lieutenant barked out the command: "Oppschtanden!" Well, we weren't too familiar with his Anglicized German, but we did get the message! We stood up; was there a choice?! The next command barked out was: "Hahnds Opp!" Amazing how well we could understand him now! Yes, we put our hands up. The next step was for his crew to dismount, run over to us with sub-machine guns pointing at us, and remove our side arms. We were then directed to climb up onto the back of their tank. The Lieutenant glared at us and said: "Fur zee der Voor ist oober!" We got the message. With the guards' pistols pointing at us, we were driven the short distance into Sidi Bou Zid. This was not exactly like a victory parade, for us that is! Here we had a firsthand view of part of the cause of some of the problems we encountered during our advance. Nicely camouflaged within the cactus patches and small clay block Arab huts near a Muslim mosque were several gigantic German MK VI Tiger tanks. The 88 mm guns looked like telephone poles compared to our 75 mm guns.

The MK IV tank carrying my crew and me continued moving ahead until we reached the courtyard of a mosque where we

were motioned to dismount. We were then taken in to the courtyard which apparently was the collecting point for the dead, the wounded, and the prisoners. It was a most distressing sight to see; what just a few hours before had been our hale and hearty comrades, all were now laid out either dead or severely wounded. Over to my left, leaning back against a wall, I spotted Corporal Garibay, the gunner of my second section's lead tank. He was gasping for breath and shivering violently in the cold night air. I went over to him and he told me Sgt. Gott had been killed when their tank was hit, and that he was barely able to climb out of the turret hatch of the burning tank before the ammunition exploded. I gave him my combat jacket and helped him put it on. He was a terrible purplish color and was retching violently from having inhaled so much of the poisonous fumes. I did not think he would make it. I learned later from other comrades that he did die that night. The German medical aid facilities and personnel were over-taxed as could be expected. They naturally were tending the needs of their own wounded first and ours had to wait. Sad, but that's war.

At this point, 2LT Durgin's memoirs sadly ended. His failing health prevented him from giving firsthand accounts of his POW experience. The following accounts are taken from both CPT Machus' and 2LT Holder's fine books.

THE POW EXPERIENCE

After experiencing the extremes of desert weather for the next two days and nights, they were finally loaded onto crowded trucks, taken to the Tunisian seaport of Sfax, and unloaded into a schoolyard, a temporary POW prison. Offered some food and drink, they were again transported by truck to Tunis, this time to a French school. Interrogations continued with answers limited to name, rank, and serial number. Thankfully, the French Red Cross was allowed to provide food, for which the Americans were grateful; their generosity was repaid by contributions of francs, meant to cover expenses for future Americans who would pass through.

February 19th they were marched to the Tunis airport where they viewed hundreds of planes. Lined up in groups of 16, they boarded a JU52 and were flown to the Naples airport. Durgin's memoirs also recounted his plane ride.

The pilot appeared to be sixteen or seventeen years old. That's how the Germans were going to kill them—by dumping the plane into the Mediterranean: Before takeoff, they were given red wine and figs. Take off was extremely bumpy, roller-coaster style.

Someone took off his pith helmet and passed it around as a puke bucket. Amazingly, the kid pilot actually got them to Italy.

Durgin's memory of the truck ride through Naples was equally stressful. Rocks and curses were thrown at the men through every street, byway and neighborhood. How ironic that some POWs onboard these legions of trucks were of Italian descent and had family members in the Naples area. Next stop: Capua with its "expanse of barbed wire and dismal looking tents" would be remembered for its "filth and unprincipled characters."

Marched to the train station two weeks later, Durgin and Holder found themselves assigned to a first-class coach instead of a boxcar. Beautiful landscapes appeared through the windows—a welcomed change from what lay behind them.

Finally, on the third day of their trip, they reached Moosburg, Germany, where they were unloaded and marched to their next "home". Holder recalled their first impression:

From some distance away, we could see the high towers surrounding this gigantic camp, which was one of the largest in Germany, and soon we saw the usual wide expanse of barbed wire which we were to know so well. Here we were divided again. The field officers were lodged in one place, the company grade officers in another, and the enlisted in still another. The barracks were alike so it was merely a matter of a German procedure.

All through our stay at Moosburg, the Germans kept calling out one name in our group to which no one answered. It was the name of LT Frank Aten who had escaped in Italy in the Brenner Pass. Even when we lined up to leave the camp they were still calling, 'Aten—Aten.' They were, we thought, trying to make it look as if he had escaped on the way out to our new camp, and thus try to evade the responsibility for signing him in when he hadn't really arrived.

The day following our false start, we were again lined up and checked off. Again, we had no idea where we were going except that it was to an officers' camp someplace in central Germany. (Holder, p.30)

Oflag IX/AZ at Rotenburg became their next home. Welcomed by the British, a sense of comradery was achieved in the picturesque area "hardly touched by war" but this experience was not to last. Ten weeks later they were moved to a new camp—the destination secret. During the journey, Durgin and his best buddy, Holder, contemplated their chances of survival after successfully escaping, finally abandoning their plans as the train

pulled into a small Polish town called Altburgund. This was the German name, the Polish called it Szubin. Marched down the street, Holder's book paints a descriptive portrait:

Again, there was that now familiar impression of unending lines of barbed wire, but standing out from the drabness of the rusty grey mass of barbed wire was a twenty-foot-high brown and white lattice-work gate. Atop this structure was the inevitable German eagle perched in flat-winged dignity looking stonily down upon us as we stood just outside the gate. Looking through this mixture of wire and wood, we saw no large, modern-looking building such as we had seen at Rotenberg. Instead we saw a large, three-storied building splotched with scaled off patches of stucco revealing the ugly red brick wall underneath. Instead of a model camp to impress us, this ancient, run-down structure was to be our home for nearly eighteen months. (Holder, p.59)

OFLAG 64

Upon their arrival on 9 June 1943, this newly designated camp for Americans became host [initially] to a group of 150 American officers, including 2LT George Durgin and 2LT Howard "Boomer" [referring to his booming voice] Holder. They had been marched from the train station, having been transferred from other camps; their previous one, Oflag IX-AZ, was at Rotenburg. After being photographed for ID and vetted at this new camp, they were assigned to several areas during their stay; one was on the first floor and one on the second. Room 28 was a forty-bed dorm in the White House—a central admin building in the camp.

Durgin and Holder were almost inseparable as both settled into the daily camp life as Kriegies. *Oflag 64 The Fiftieth Anniversary Book* describes some of Durgin's activities during his encampment:

He spent his time learning German, preparing maps for escapees and for 'The Daily Bulletin', helping John Creech raise plants in the greenhouse, reading books in the library, playing bridge, and participating in stage skits in which Carl Hansen was the U-boat commander and he was his pet mascot, 'Pluto.' (p.92)

This became his camp nickname—sometimes shortened to Plute. Durgin had a severe case of eczema on his hands which became infected. Fortunately, a German doctor had given him a special salve and wrapped his hands in gauze bandaging, enabling him to have the perfect "paws" for playing Pluto in the skit.

Escape planning was an eternally discussed topic, one which caught the attention of these two able lieutenants, Howard Holder and George Durgin.

It would take months of planning and the official blessing of the security committee. In addition, avoiding capture and possibly death meant being prepared including a carefully planned exit with “tools of the trade”, such as maps, directions, food, canteens, currency, clothing, compass and doable destinations. For these items, Durgin, an engineer, designed a knapsack 18 inches long, 15 inches wide and 4-5 inches deep, made from gunny sacking and an old army jacket dyed in ersatz coffee for storage of the food and water they would need. Choosing the closest port, Danzig, 100 miles away, they planned to walk there, catch (as stowaways) a Swedish freighter bound for its home port, then locate the American consulate and be rewarded with passages home.

Accepting the fact that the double barbed wire fencing and electronic sensing equipment encircling the camp made escaping within the camp nearly impossible, they chose exiting through the front gate late at night during a summer storm. This received the official blessing and by late April, they were physically fit and prepared. Compulsive room-checking by the German guards delayed their plans, and in May, they learned that Durgin’s severe eczema episode ceased to make him a participant, so Lt. Duane “Andy” Johnson took his place. Chances dwindled as their first escape ended in the compound.

We were covered in mud, at least we had no bullet holes. We had not been discovered [by Germany guard] although we were extremely vulnerable. We waited up until dawn but there was no more rain. We were disappointed once again.

*Although they continued to stay up night after night, no occasion to escape presented itself until it was too late—three days after a no-escape order was given to everyone in the camp by the SAO [Senior American Officer]. This occurred after the fifty escapees from Stalag Luft 3 were recaptured and murdered on Hitler’s orders. [The movie, *The Great Escape*, was based on this travesty.] Col. Drake reasoned that the risk was too great to permit any more escape attempts to be made this late in the war. (Diggs, p.40).*

The D-Day invasion and decisive engagements like the Battle of the Bulge increased POW numbers at camps and gave the Germans incentives to punish POWs in a number of ways. American uniforms were confiscated, men stood in *Appell* [roll call] for hours, food rations were reduced, and one group was to face the ultimate sentence, the result of which became a defining moment in Oflag 64 history.

Four of my closest Kriegy friends fell victim to this new attitude in a big way. Lts. George Durgin, Seymour Bolten, Jack Rathbone, and Pat Teel were being escorted under guard to the railway

station in order to get medical treatment in a nearby town. Outside the gate, they were ordered by the guard to walk in the gutter instead of the sidewalk. Seymour said that they were American officers, not criminals, and they refused. 'OK,' the guard replied, 'then walk on the sidewalk.' They did so, but when they returned to camp later, the guard told the German commandant what had happened and the Oberst queried Berlin to ask for directions.

Hitler replied that the Americans had disobeyed a direct order from a German soldier and, thus, should be shot. First, however, there must be a trial. The four soldiers were taken to a German army court in another town and were assigned a German lawyer as their defender. He made a good case of it, citing the Geneva Convention and German officer traditions. Then, much to everybody's surprise, the Americans were acquitted and sent back to camp.

This acquittal infuriated Hitler, who immediately ordered another trial. A retrial was held on January 25, 1945, without the Americans being present, as the retrial happened five days after the camp had been evacuated. This time, all four officers received the death sentence, but fortunately, they were by then all off on the long march to liberation and so lived to survive the war. (Diggs, pp.79 – 80)

THE LONG ROAD HOME

“The Forced March”, which began on 21 January 1945, is one of the most emphasized events in Kriegies’ writings. Names, destinations and timelines all share the common denominator of freedom, but every POW had his own story, each one poignant and unique.

March Day Sunday dawned gray and cold. Standing on the Oflag 64 *Appell* ground, Kriegies stamped their feet and hugged their bodies to keep warm, wondering why they had not left. Saturday’s message had been to pack what they could carry. No trucks or trains would take them to their destinations—they would walk. Many, realizing the effects of weather on the human body and mind, wore multiple layers of clothing—all they owned, along with other carried items they would need (like food rations) and/or important keepsakes. The column which stretched from the front gate to the last barracks finally left around 10AM.

Half of these GIs were married. More than half had attended college. One had a Ph.D. They were from every state in the Union, and the Territory of Hawaii. The youngest among them

were just nineteen. Their average age was twenty-seven. And all of these men just wanted to survive the Nazi, and the winter, and get home. (Dando-Collins, p.91)

Source: Figures from a survey appearing in *Oflag 64 Item*, January 1945.

Actual numbers vary from 1200 to around 1500 marchers.

Colonel Goode was leaving more than a hundred of his men to an uncertain future—two dozen sick men in the hospital at Wollstein and ninety-one men in the Oflag 64 camp hospital. The men in the Schubin hospital include seventy-eight sick and injured American officers, tended by US MO Captain Robert Blatherwick, who'd won the assignment after splitting a deck of cards with another camp MO. Blatherwick was joined by Catholic Chaplain Father Stanley Brach from Newark, New Jersey, who had volunteered to stay, and ten of the fourteen enlisted men who had been serving as hospital orderlies. (Dando-Collins, p.98)

An uncounted number of POWs hid—their plans included escaping on their own as the guards paid less attention than usual for all were aware that the Russians were coming. When asked about escaping, Colonel Goode told those who expressed an interest to wait until the march was headed west.

Some enterprising Kriegies made sleds from bunk slats to haul their belongings. Durgin and Holder had constructed theirs from Little Theatre stage timber, lining the runners with metal bands from Red Cross boxes. Unfortunately, once on the road, their sled, well-built but too heavy, was abandoned—like many others—the lieutenants keeping only food, one blanket and one greatcoat each. Other items were dispensed to those who wanted them.

Fortunately, Red Cross boxes were made available on the previous Saturday and again on Sunday, providing the men with better nourishment than they had seen in weeks, so they ate heartedly and secured food for the long journey ahead.

The road west became a major exodus of refugees, animals, wagons and long streams of other walkers. The Kriegy column spent their first night in the Rosen estate barns, where “let the escapes begin” became a common occurrence. The second day, the column marched 15 miles and the men began to hear explosions off to their right. In a small town of Netzthal (Polish: Osiek na Notecia), bakery owners shared their goods and told the Americans that the Russians had taken Schubin. This lifted the Americans’ spirits considerably.

The second night was spent in barns at Eichfelde (Polish: Polanowo). As more Americans fell out from pain, illness, and exhaustion, Colonel Goode

with Oberst Schneider's consent arranged for them to sleep in the local church and return to Oflag 64 in procured wagons. More amazing news was spread as Oberst Schneider and his men left to fight the Russians. In addition, Colonel Millett received permission to return to Oflag 64 with about 100 men to search for the Red Army instead of waiting at Eichfelde. Fortune turned to alarm as the hated camp security officer, Hauptmann Zimmermann, appeared with a unit of Waffen-SS to take control, leading them toward Berlin. This news prompted Durgin and Holder to seek cover and stay hidden in a hay barn.

Separated but meeting again at an abandoned bunker, Durgin and Holder returned to Schubin, the very place from which they started, and were soon identified and secured by the NKVD (the Russian Secret Police). Making their collective ways to Rembertov and as American military personnel, they became members of an overcrowded, unsanitary displaced person's camp for many civilians across Eastern Europe, before eventually arriving in Odessa. On the 10th day there, they were told that their ship had arrived and they must hurry to catch it. Holder had been admitted to hospital with pneumonia, so Durgin ran to rescue him and on 5 March, Kriegies departed the harbor on the British steamer *Moreton Bay*, the first Allied troopship carrying freed Schubinites away from the Soviet Union. (Dando-Collins, pp.150).

<p style="text-align: center;">CLASS OF SERVICE</p> <p style="font-size: small;">This is a full-rate Telegram or Cablegram unless its deferred character is indicated by a suitable symbol above or preceding the address.</p>	<h1 style="margin: 0;">WESTERN UNION</h1> <p style="font-size: x-small;">A. N. WILLIAMS NEWCOMB CARLTON J. C. WILLEVER PRESIDENT CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD FIRST VICE-PRESIDENT</p> <p style="font-size: x-small;">1204</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">SYMBOLS</p> <p style="font-size: x-small;">DL = Day Letter NT = Overnight Telegram LC = Deferred Cable NLT = Cable Night Letter Ship Radiogram</p>
<p>The filing time shown in the date life on telegrams and day letters is STANDARD TIME at point of origin. Time of receipt is STANDARD TIME at point of destination</p>		
<p>EVN7 79 Gov't Wash. DC 2:04 PM March 14th</p>		
<p>Mrs. Virginia M. Durgin, 303 W. Broad St., Palmyra, N. J.</p>		
<p>Am pleased to inform you report received from U S Military mission in Moscow states your husband 1st Lt. George L. Durgin previously reported a prisoner of War has been released from a German prisoner of War Camp The War Dept. invites submission of a message not to exceed 25 words for attempted delivery to him message should be addressed to casualty Branch AGO room two five one five munition building further information will be furnished when received.</p>		
<p>Ulio Adjutant General</p>		
<p style="font-size: small;">DELIVERED THROUGH VERNON W. STONE 129 W. BROAD STREET PALMYRA, N. J. PHONE - RIVERTON 1208 WESTERN UNION AGENCY</p>		
<p>THE COMPANY WILL APPRECIATE SUGGESTIONS FROM ITS PATRONS CONCERNING ITS SERVICE</p>		

The ship sailed to Istanbul, Turkey, then across the Mediterranean Sea to Port Said, Egypt. Treated to long showers, new uniforms and Egyptian money, their next stop was the mess hall for New York sirloins and apple pies with ice cream. After five days spent with Army and C.I.C. investigators,

Durgin and Holder journeyed to Naples, Italy, for a week, and then home to America.

HOME AGAIN WITH LIFE SIGNS AHEAD

Home from the war and reunited with his wife, Virginia, 2LT George Durgin returned to Ft. Knox, Kentucky, remained on active duty for three more years and was promoted to First Lieutenant. Using the GI Bill in the Fall of 1948, Durgin completed his Bachelor of Arts Degree in Agronomy from Michigan State College (now University) located in East Lansing, Michigan, in 1952, and was promoted to Major in the US Army Reserves. Other moves included Wisconsin, New Jersey, with a final one to California in 1955.

Durgin's intrinsic intelligence and his years of experience working on motorcycles, automobiles and tanks, paired with his independent study of calculus and engineering principles, ensured his position at Aerojet-General Corporation, where he was a systems and control engineer working on the Titan, Apollo, Delta, and Space Shuttle projects. After a very rewarding and successful career, he retired in 1983 but acted as a consultant on various projects until 1987. As a lasting salute to Durgin abilities at the time of his retirement, Aerojet-General's prerequisite for hiring was an MS in Engineering and Durgin (with the "Aggie degree") became the new hires' trainer.

George Durgin died on 28 June 1995. His loving and devoted mate, Virginia Durgin, followed him on 3 May 2012. During their lifetimes together, their family of two expanded with five children: Beth, Scott, David, Susan, and James.

MEDALS AND CITATIONS

2LT George Durgin received the following decorations: Bronze Star, European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign with two Stars and an Arrow, Prisoner-Of-War Medal, American Defense Medal, World War II Victory Medal.

CITATION FOR BRONZE STAR MEDAL

Second Lieutenant George L. Durgin, while held prisoner by Germany, at great personal risk, performed duties which resulted in valuable information reaching the War Department. His services were also of vital importance to his fellow prisoners of war.



ARMY SERVICE FORCES
PHILADELPHIA QUARTERMASTER DEPOT
PHILADELPHIA, PA.

*It is an honor for me to forward this decoration
which is being sent to you by direction of
The Adjutant General of the Army*

Roland Walsh

ROLAND WALSH
BRIGADIER GENERAL, U. S. A.
COMMANDING



FAMILY STORIES AND FACTS

This story, a version of "Love at First Sight", is being shared from George Durgin's memoirs by son David Durgin.



A few days after I arrived in Palmyra, my father, Frank L. Durgin Jr. drove up from Washington, DC. To visit with Sis and me. He was very proud of his son's accomplishment and just had to make certain he showed me off to family and friends. I could understand his feelings and tried to be most obliging. We had a great time visiting with each other and Sis. He took us to dinner and it was the first time we three had been together since Mother had died. It was time for Dad to return to Washington and he insisted upon leaving his car at my disposal. How could I refuse an offer like that?! He took the train back to Washington and the arrangement was that I would leave his car at grandfather Durgin's and he would come up and get it the following week.

That car provided me with much-appreciated wheels which enabled me to visit friends farther afield. I dropped by one of my Army friend's house to tell his parents I had been with their son, Melvin Mays, a few months before and that he looked great and was doing fine. His mother was home and very pleased I stopped, but the father was working on the other side of town. She was so excited about this little bit of news that she begged me to go tell Mel's father too. I agreed, naturally. I had no idea that this small act of consideration would open the door to the most rewarding experience of my life!

I drove to the small machine shop where Mel's father worked and pulled up in front of the little building I recognized as Mr. Seel's Print Shop. Mr. Evans' machine shop was located in the basement. One must realize that this was truly a small town. Everyone knew, or knew of, most everyone else, it was most unusual by today's standards. I greeted Mr. Evans, the machine shop owner, and Mr. Mays. They were machining military parts

for the Frankford Arsenal over in Philadelphia. Since Pearl Harbor, the attitude of the people throughout the country was quite a bit different than in 1940. Patriotism was back in style, and as a soldier in uniform I was welcomed everywhere I went. This made me feel pretty special.

As I walked through the snow to the front of the building to get into the car, I heard a man's voice calling to me. I turned around and saw it was Mr. Seel. He said "Aren't you Frank Durgin's son?" I replied that I was. He then asked me to come on in out of the cold; he'd like to talk with me. By this time, I was getting "visited out", but could not ignore the man. He had grown up with my mother and my father. So, I climbed the steps up to his printing facility and entered.

Now say what you will; fate, chance, destiny, spiritual encounter, whatever comes to your mind, but the devious route I had taken this afternoon brought me face-to-face with the girl I was going to marry, although I did not know it at this time, of course. Mr. Seel introduced me to his secretary. I was duly courteous but could not avoid observing that she was a very attractive and shapely blond young lady with a pleasant voice, a beautiful smile, and sparkling eyes! We spoke animatedly and I answered questions put to me by both Mr. Seel and his secretary, whom I now knew to be Miss Virginia Tees. We laughed a lot and I could not resist looking at the third finger of her left hand; it was lacking any sign of jewelry! Now why would that be any concern of mine? Marriage was the farthest thing from my mind. There was a war in progress, I was assigned to a combat division, my chances of returning in one piece were uncertain; what am I doing? I'm crazy! Well, who said anything about marriage; at least she wasn't spoken for at that time! Full speed ahead! In retrospect, I must admit there was a definite aura of magnetic attraction about my future bride to be, and there still is! I looked at the clock and it was 4:40 pm. We had been visiting for 20 minutes and I wanted it to be longer, and alone. Why not ask? So I did; I said: "Mr. Seel, do I have permission to escort your secretary home?" He hesitated a moment and then allowed it was a bit early, but if she delivered some papers to Mr. Warner's insurance office, and dropped the mail off at the post office, he figured it would be alright. Zoom off Miss Tees went to the cloak room and brought her coat back to me. I can only presume she wanted to check to see if I would have the good grace to help her on with it. I did! Her beautiful long hair would have been covered by the coat collar, so I gently lifted it over it. I could feel myself starting to swoon and attributed it at the time to the lovely aroma of her perfume. I admitted to myself later that the perfume was not the cause of my dilemma; I had been smitten by the young damsel! Speaking of later, it must have been twenty-five years later while

reminiscing and enjoying the memories of those courtship days, my dear wife suddenly realized I had not asked her if I could take her home, but had asked her boss! I jokingly informed her that I already knew by the look in her eyes she'd accept my offer; and besides, just having been commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant, I had to first go through channels to get approval for my request! We've chuckled over that one ever since.

We bid farewell to Mr. Seel and walked through the snow to my Dad's car. She was impressed. The car was a relatively new 1941, forest green, Chevrolet coupe, and I've been partial to Chevrolets ever since. We took off and I made a U-turn at the end of the block. I was so distracted by the fair young lady to my right that I could not quite make the turn, so I had to back up and repeat the maneuver. I thought she'd think I didn't know how to drive. It didn't faze her one bit; she had other things on her mind at the time, thank the Lord!

We completed the errands for Mr. Seel, dropped off the mail, stopped at a store to get some large drinking glasses for her mother, met a couple of friends, and then cruised slowly toward her home, taking the long way around. In that short period of less than an hour we covered the waterfront; it was a non-stop summary of each other's families, schools and friends. I wanted madly to have a date with my newfound friend "Ginnie" that night, but I was to be at Grandma's and Aunt Emma's for dinner that evening, and I certainly could not, or would not, stand them up. Ginnie understood and I made a specific date for the next evening, which incidentally was the last night I had remaining of my leave, how fortunate a circumstance to have one last chance! So the date of our first meeting has gone down in our mental book of historic events in our lives as Wednesday, 14 January 1942, and I could never forget it.

Family Facts offered by Beth Durgin Ward:

When Virginia returned home, she announced 'That's the man I'm going to marry.' The feeling was mutual for on 16 May, 1942, 2LT George Durgin married Virginia Myrtle (aka "Ginnie") Tees at the Palmyra, New Jersey, Central Baptist Church two weeks before his deployment to Africa in June 1942. She spent the war years working as a switchboard operator, wearing a black armband that enabled her to go to work at night, as her communications role was considered critical to the war effort. After the battle at Sidi Bou Zid, 2LT George Durgin was listed as MIA (Missing in Action) for six months. Ultimately, mom was notified that he was a POW. Our parents did not see one another for almost three years but remained married for 52 years.

2LT Durgin's uncle, Admiral Edward T. Durgin, was leading a convoy of ships carrying troops across the Atlantic. When the admiral discovered that his nephew was aboard one of the ships, he invited his nephew to dine with him and sent a boat to ferry him to the flag ship.

The news article below was written in 1983.

Ex-War Prisoner Given Letters After 40 Years

WASHINGTON (UPI) – George Durgin recently got his first look at letters written to him almost 40 years ago, when he was held at a German prisoner of war camp in Poland. The letters, written in 1943 – 1944, were handed to Durgin and his wife, Virginia, at a ceremony at the Polish Embassy.

“A mere thank you seems most inadequate,” said Durgin who came to Washington with his wife from Sacramento, California, to accept the letters, found last summer in the walls of an old building in Poland.

Then, grinning, Durgin added, “My wife is grateful also because she wants to see who wrote these letters.” Joking aside, Mrs. Durgin was certain she had written most of those letters as a bride.

Durgin, 65, an engineer now retired from the aerospace industry, was a young tank officer in North Africa when he was captured in 1943 and sent to Oflag 64, a prisoner camp run by German soldiers in Szubin, Poland. Durgin's letters were among 176 found and addressed to him and Howard H. Holder, a former prisoner who now lives in Athens, Georgia. Holder was unable to attend the ceremony. The Polish Embassy said it held the presentation ceremony as a reminder of “the cruelties of war and fascism.”

SOURCES

Personal accounts and stories from Durgin family members

Oflag 64 Archives, and official military documentation

Paraphrased and directly-quoted passages taken from multiple publications are also used as sources including the following: *Escape to Russia* by Howard Randolph Holder, *Turmoil to Triumph the Odyssey of Captain Harris O. Machus Through Six War Devastated Countries in Search of Survival* by Angus Duncan McKellar, *THE BIG BREAK* by Stephen Dando-Collins, and *Americans Behind the Barbed Wire* by J. Frank Diggs.

Biography written by Kriegy Research Group writer Ann C. Rogers in collaboration with the Durgin Family

