

1LT Robert Paul Fleege

1915 – 1993

FAMILY BACKGROUND



Robert Paul Fleege was born to Dr. and Mrs. Francis Fleege on October 5, 1915 in Galena, Jo Daviess County, Illinois. With four brothers as playmates, they had their own neighborhood sandlot sports team.

In addition, the word “fleege” is German in origin. Lt. Fleege used his knowledge of German during WWII, especially in situations which involved the safety and/or comfort of his men and himself. It is quite common for other languages to be spoken in homes across the nation as American English is learned in school and used in everyday life.

Fleege’s enlistment date was 30 September 1939; when notified for departure, he then boarded a troop ship bound for the European Theater and took part in the Battle of the Bulge.

Military service was a legacy his father, Francis Henry “Doc” Fleege, passed on to his sons having served as a Captain in the Medical Corps during WWI.

CONFLICT BACKGROUND

Nine days before Christmas 1944 Hitler played Germany’s last card, on which he staked everything to turn the tables in the West. The massive, stunning blow he struck in eastern Belgium caught the Allies totally unaware, yet a week later the panzers had still not crossed the Meuse in the first phase of an ambitious attack aimed at recapturing Antwerp and cutting off the Allied forces to the north.

*The siege of Bastogne...the ‘Malmedy Massacre’...Skorzeny’s commandos...Kampfgruppe Peiper...the varied impact of the Ardennes Offensive assured a lasting place in the history books for the lore of the **Battle of the Bulge** – of events that captured the headlines at a time when the Allies were wrapped up in planning Germany’s defeat (front inside book cover)*

Source: Pallud, Jean Paul (1998). *BATTLE OF THE BULGE THEN AND NOW*. London, E15 3JA, England: Battle of Britain Prints International Limited.

MILITARY ACTIONS

ROADS TO LIBERATION FROM OFLAG 64 by Clarence R. Meltesen provides credibly documented sources of 1Lt. Fleege's experiences within the following timeframe of this conflict and its aftermath.

By the end of the day [December 19, 1944] the units of intermingled German and United States troops sorted out and, in the process, Bastogne was encircled.

The Americans were quickly passing through three phases of defense. The first was fight for survival. The second was fighting to hold the line starting on the 19th. The last phase, fight on to allied victory, lay ahead. The US lost 19000 killed and 15000 as POWs. German casualties exceeded the combined total of US and British casualties. The early success of the German forces was very predictable given their careful preparation and faithful execution of orders. In the hurly burly of the combat, US troops exacted critical losses of soldiers that could not be replaced. (p. 128)

Narratives of Father Cavanaugh and Lt. Robert P. Fleege provide good examples of the German POW evacuation system. A dual chronology is used from 16 December to 2 February 1945.

[Note: Although most of Father Cavanaugh's reports are not displayed below, some overlap statements with Fleege's accounts are included.]

16 December 1944. *Lt. Fleege performed normal battalion duties in CCR [Reserve Commanding Officer], 73 FA Bn [Field Artillery Battalion].*

17 December 1944. *Father Cavanaugh saw the long column of vehicles moving westward through the gap the Germans had made to the north. Lt. Fleege performed normal battalion duties.*

18 December 1944. *Father Cavanaugh indicates the battalion arrived in the vicinity of Schonberg after dark to wait until morning to attack. Lt. Fleege, Survey and Recon Officer 73rd FAB, following a 1600 hours CCR meeting, suggested moving Hq Btry to Mageret. The movement was completed by 2000 hours. He was in the command post at 2400 when Germans attacked and slipped out, avoiding some panzer grenadiers, and saw a Tiger tank destroy the battalion's forward observer tank.*

19 December 1944. *Lt. Fleege hid in a stock barn, was captured and marched to a collecting point. He and the guard had common ground of being Catholic and Panzer. His interrogation was name, rank, and serial number. Later the Captain said, "Your unit was not here at 1700 hours yesterday." Fleege stabilized a concussioned officer and got a coat from one of his barracks bags which the guard let him access in the building. They were marched out of town by back streets between the active combat of US task forces and Panzer Lehr task forces. In single file they saw US soldiers forced to sit on tanks going into the attack. The column*

marched on the parapet of a ditch/trench as the Germans kept firing. Then they were grouped with some German soldiers under artillery fire. Meanwhile he found a spoon and canteen in a wrecked jeep. German marching troops would take good shoes and leave their worn-out shoes at rest stops. He told his Sergeant that he would have to do what the Germans ordered such as helping to bury the dead. At the night stop they were guarded by 17-year-old soldiers armed with potato masher grenades. (pp. 128, 129)

20 December 1944. Father Cavanaugh left Romersheim at 0200 where US medical officers were now assisting in the surgical care of the wounded. Three days later they were killed in the bombing raid at Limburg. At 0400 the ambulance group was put in the upstairs room of a house. There was a stove and the remnants of a meal. They slept then divided the food into two mouthfuls per man. They were all fed some boiled beef, potatoes, a bit of salt, and ersatz tea. All 38 of them joined the marching column. Some men had been going for 48 hours. The town was Roth, Germany. At a rest stop there was a well with no pails to help distribute water. Men slept on the cobbles. They were ordered to leave their "four buckles" (galoshes) so they paired big and little ones, improved rips, and tossed them on a pile. Father Cavanaugh marched on at 1300 hours. In three hours with only one rest stop they were in Prum. Rumors. They kept marching. Two hours later they let a tank, vehicle convoy move to the west. Rain. Wind. At midnight they stopped on a street in Gerolstein. The barns were full. The choice was to stand, lay down, or to sleep in the mud. "It was the winter solstice, the longest night of the year."

Lt. Fleege's group stood a roll call and when a German officer ordered them to help push a German field piece stuck in the mud, they refused. He told the officer in good German that they were protected by the Geneva Convention, and that the US was feeding its German POWs well. The German rode off grunting intelligibly.

21 December 1944. Father Cavanaugh stood or walked all night to avoid getting pneumonia. He consoled men he found most troubled by the most difficult situations. He estimated 5000 men in the warehouses, courtyard and stretched out on the cobblestones. A kitchen was operating but no food was being distributed. A sergeant scrounged food for the Catholic Father as they waited for the word. They would be formed in groups of 60 and given three days of rations (a pound of cheese and two bags of crackers for each group of three). A barter market opened with bread and wurst for cigarettes, an ersatz coffee canteen cup for one cigarette. Some citizens frowned, other were sympathetic. The forming groups of 60 ended in "fun and games" of trying to get favorites into a group. The boxcars had hauled a load of horses

but everybody settled in. The outside temperatures were below freezing and the boxcar walls were frosty and drafty.

Lt. Fleege and a Major talked the guards into getting a truck for the column. Allied planes were very active and the truck had to stop for every air raid with everybody out. They made 10 miles in two hours by road to Dasburg school at 1700 hours. The town had been bombed every two hours by the British during the day. (pp. 129, 130)

22 December 1944. Lt Fleege's group reached Prum and a barn for the night. Earlier they had been told by a German officer that "the Germans were on their way to Paris, General Eisenhower has been captured, the war will soon be over." This was countered by "how come the German soldier has no gloves and no gasoline and where is the Luftwaffe?" Hunger now drove him to get boosted to a high window and evade the guards to reach town and slide into a house. He surprised a little old lady just starting to eat a large pancake. He seized and then ate the pancake with no apologies. The man of the house came in and then locked his 14-year-old son in a closet while he talked. Fleege advised him to leave town before it was bombed and captured; he also explained there were 500 hungry POWs in need of apples, potatoes, or bread that should be set beside the road in the morning. He had some more to eat and then brought three hungry friends back to get something.

Lt. Fleege's group marched past boxes of apples and potatoes (placed there by unknown German families). A small village had just been bombed and strafed. While they fought fires, the townsfolk had put their household goods and Christmas goods in the road. The POWs didn't dare touch any of it as looters were shot on sight. While destroying a bridge, a flight of A-20 light bombers was caught by a flight of ME109s. One plane was downed and the pilot joined the POW group. He was an old buddy of Fleege from Barksdale Field. Another flight of A-20s headed for them and they hit the dirt and shook off the dust from the bomb drop. In the night's warehouse an enlisted man was found with a bruised kidney area, probably from a rock that ricocheted. With no German medical help, he was dead by morning. The German doctor was busy taking care of German wounded. The 73rd FAB surgeon and Fleege tried to get help and induced the gift of a flour and rotten carrot concoction to have something for the 200 men. With a meager mouthful of such grub, morale broke and grown men cried themselves to sleep. (pp. 132, 134)

Lt. Fleege left Gerolstein early. Snow was on the ground and six guards had been killed in the air raid. The Guard Captain added an issue of sausage to breakfast. A half inch of sausage per man except Fleege with the last man splitting the final piece. Then they marched all day into the night. They crossed the Rhine at Koblenz.

The idea was to zig zag to avoid bomb holes. The word was whispered, "hole to the right", "hole to the left". It took an hour of methodical marching to cross. An air raid was going on in Koblenz and the POWs met a westbound column of young "Nazi" soldiers who kept sneaking over to grab galoshes. Fleege resisted a raid and called the soldier a "schwein hund". The Nazi drew his bayonet and Fleege disappeared into the deep dark. By dawn of 25 December [1944] the guards had found the edge of town and off they marched to reach Bad Ems just in time to go to the local air raid shelter. The POWs went to sleep in their assigned place after two days on the road. (p. 136)

Many a German guard assured us after capture that all is better in Germany. We took their meaning that their forced marches with no water and no food would find improvement in the permanent camps/stalags. Had there been a long lull in campaigning this might have happened.

The Normandy landings had upset delivery of Red Cross boxes. The Bulge had filled camps beyond their capacity. The Russian winter offensives soon added to the turmoil of massive columns of POWs moving to the west. There would be no lull. The allied forces would now advance to liberate the people and to occupy Germany. (p. 138)

Lt. Fleege's Journey

The morning of 26 December, the Fleege group was roused at 0500 hours to find that they would march and were accused by civilians in the air raid shelter of stealing blankets from them. This prompted the guards to rush them on their way to streets where German soldiers strolled. This may have been a leave or hospital recuperation area. One soldier stepped out and put his fist in Fleege's coat pocket, finding a gift of 18 sugar squares which he shared with his friends. They reached a marshalling yard and Fleege spoke there to a German Medical Officer on the shortage of food and the fact that the US treated German POWs very well. An order was given to break out cans of Argentine beef and issue them. Then they were loaded in boxcars and some guards came by to claim return of the cans. It was a scam and most cans were already eaten into, one or two surrendered to the guards. Loaded by 1500 they waited in semi-darkness for departure.

It was 1400 hours on 27 December [1944] before the train moved. There had been considerable air movement overhead, overnight, but no bombing of the marshalling yard. Another journey to an unknown destination, to end in seven days with no food or water offered when stopped on sidings or whatever. It was probably the night of 1 / 2 [one or two] January that the train was in the Berlin

marshalling yards. The men began to yell for food and water. The guards and other Germans poked some sharp sticks through the cracks and told them to be quiet. Some forced labor women came over then to push some carrots and cow beets through the cracks. Then an air raid occurred with the bomb line such that the train shook in place. The train moved out of town to another siding and everybody slept. On 3 January the doors opened to "Raus", "Los Schnelle" in a bitter cold. They marched out of the marshalling yard and up a hill to Stalag 11A, Neubrandenburg.

Lt. Fleege was in a state of floating dreaminess and when a rest stop was called part way up the hill, he relaxed into new, powder snow and went to sleep. He was awakened by a "Raus, Marche". The guard prodded him with his bayonet and Fleege crept into the column on all fours to slowly rise and plod the rest of the way uphill. In town a demonstration of civilians leering and spitting and so on made everyone very uncomfortable. The entrance gate was 40 feet wide with the gate guard controlling raising and lowering the structure. At his fixed post, he took station by stepping into wooden shoes with hot bricks placed in compartments underneath.

At the company orderly room, they were ordered to strip in winter weather. They were disinfected for lice by a painting of penis and testicles then given a typhus anti-toxin shot in the breast. Next, they moved on to camp registration with Fleege receiving dog tag, Stalag IIA, Nr 106558. They were then issued a tin soap bowl, spoon and a very dull knife. At the soup kettle they were given a green concoction with 20-30 grubs floating. He tossed out the grubs and tucked into the soup which had no satisfaction in it.

The officers were separated from the enlisted men and went to a barracks just vacated by the Russians. The lumpy hay or leaf mattresses were loaded with fleas. The Germans now brought in a barrel of beer which nobody wanted after their sorry bowl of soup in freezing weather. Fleege was awakened by fleas biting his face and ears, then moving to the table top to get some rest. In the morning he sought some medical assistance. Walking over to the enlisted barracks with no guards in sight, [he felt] a bracing Baltic wind and a barracks stove giving off heat. There he met a sergeant from his outfit captured at Lt Lo and joined the fire circle. The sergeant went off to get some lotion for the bites.

An old German guard sergeant began to ramble on the superiority of the German soldier and the efficiency of the Hitler regime. Fleege stumped him by asking how many people lived in the allied countries and how many Germans are there? The guard left muttering that Fleege must be a propaganda person. Fleege's sergeant then gave him a going away present, a bag of pepper for

cutting [hiding?] his trail when German search dogs were used in an escape.

7 January [1945] He had his hair cut. The Germans saying this was control for head lice, sheared him, then took on a Major, but the shears broke and they left. Probably a joke by the guards intending to leave Fleege vulnerable to death by head cold. The estimated length of stay at IIA was about two weeks. (pp. 141, 142, 143)

On 15 January Lt. Fleege's group was moved to Stalag IVB, Muhlberg. They were issued a Red Cross box (1 for 4 people) in lieu of any German travel rations. All perishables were opened and inspected for contraband so the POWs had to eat the food immediately. The movement was for officers only who formed a column of twos for the march to the marshalling yards. More care was used in loading the boxcars which were divided by wire for guards and POWs. He saw troop trains with antiaircraft guns mounted moving through. Trains carrying civilians had windows blown out and passengers wrapped in their blankets. They did not move until dark.

The air raid alert was on the edge of Berlin. In the marshalling area the guards offered open air latrine service under guard. Hiding in tunnels and other maneuvers meant they reached their new destination at night. Stalag IVB was the point where Train #2 had split off enlisted men with officers going on to Oflag 64. The officers' compound was in the middle of the camp. The message delivered by the British enlisted men was "There are no Red Cross Boxes". Lt. Fleege and a friend made a study of the impossibility of escaping. As a starvation camp, they were to stay for two weeks.

Suddenly the officers were formed up on 28 January and marched back to the marshalling yards. Again, they saw torn up rolling stock, more antiaircraft guns, and seemingly the troop trains were carrying younger soldiers. The prisoner guards were getting friendly without actually fraternizing. The guards settled in their end by starting a fire in the stove and frying their bread in beer. The trip took five days of short movements at night and hiding by day in various sidings and tunnels. They arrived on 2 February [1945] at Hammelburg, Oflag XIII B. (pp. 143, 144)

Note: Lt. Fleege's name appears in three accounts at Hammelburg:

- 1) *There were an estimated 4,000 Yugoslav officer POWs in a compound next to the American officers. The German stores, i.e., clothing supply room, was at the far end of the Yugoslav compound. It was operated by Yugoslav officers and had limited stocks. The Americans were marched over in groups of 40 during*

February [1945] where they had a choice of two items. Lt Fleege took three suits of long underwear for pajamas in his turn. (p. 149)

- 2) *The murder of Lt. Weeks by a guard who was “grieving the death of his wife” when he shot the lieutenant. German guards and officers assembled to be joined by Colonel Goode, Father Cavanaugh, and Lt. Fleege, his section leader. The next day General von Goeckel gave a full apology. (p. 187)*
- 3) *On or about the 25th the Swiss Representative visited the larger. Col. Goode presented the medical/malnutrition situation to him along with other complaints and a full report on the Lt. Weeks incident. The Representative indicated that Moosburg was building up as the main depot from which the White Mice [ICRC food trucks—also known as White Angel] would now be supplying Hammelburg with a shipment any day now. This was good news. With Germans present the Swiss straddled complaints and left us disappointed. Lt. Fleege attended this meeting and was not impressed, saying later, “if you’re leaning on the Red Cross, you’re leaning on a thin stick”. (pp.187, 188)*

Note: Under the title **Some Escapes**, Meltesen included “a record of the complicated moves by Lt. Fleege and his friends in escape”.

Lt. Fleege and 35 friends decided to form up at 2130 hours and go west. He fell in with two blankets, field jacket, overcoat, knife and canteen. They took the road west towards Aschenroth. Some men wanted to kill a wounded German soldier found in the first mile. The leaders said to leave him to the Medics. They hit the ditch from a column of fours on the approach of a German unit. Now they knew the leader was hard of hearing! In the early dawn they moved off the road to the right and climbed a bushy hill. The cannonade to the south told the end of the task force [Task Force Baum]. They stayed on the hill for two days. German patrols found them and used loud speaker messages to convince them to give up. The group caucus decided it was time to break up.

Lt. Fleege met a Lt. Mac from his old outfit and a Sgt. Of the 4th Armored [who] escaped from Stalag XIIIIC to make a trio and go out on 29/30. [March 29/30 of 1945]. There was a river fog. Crossing the road was timed between motor patrols. As they ate some cow beets, they heard the noisy capture of the group on the hill. They marched cross country until 0300 to the Scherendorf district outside of Gemeinden. They checked the bridges, highway and railroad and found a building to hide in. They were in the attic for a day before it opened for business as a scale house for weighing of requisitioned food and livestock.

During the day [March 30] they heard much traffic noise well into the night. After midnight they went out to draw water and also

find some potatoes. They returned to their attic and passed the 31st quietly. They forged on 31/1 and scouted to fix on the bridge locations and their security. One more night in the attic and they were wakened by small arms fire at a far location. That night (April 1/2) they tried to cross the railroad bridge but couldn't get close enough to hear the sign countersign correctly. On the railroad bridge a guard heard them and prepared to fire but they rolled down the embankment to safely and into a hay barn to hide. Two soldiers were billeted in the barn and left a large loaf of bread out while they went off to reveille or something. The Sgt. Then went down and threw the loaf up in a forward pass. The soldiers returned and argued over the missing loaf. Now on 2 April [1945] they moved as soon as the soldiers left. Two hid in a chicken coop and Fleege hid in a woodpile until the chickens had to be fed. He jumped out to explain in German the war would soon be over, they need some food now, and offered a bar of soap. She came back with her daughter and three Easter eggs, some raw bacon, and some bread. Fleege says, "It was like putting ethyl gasoline in a car that was just about out of gas."

They decided to spend one more night in the scale house, and when they woke up on the 3rd, they were surrounded by foxholes and German soldiers. Registering rounds indicated they were due for an 18-battery time on the target (TOT) in the near future. They left early and went back to meet the lady and her daughter as promised at the gate. The daughter had brought a basket of bread and sausage. While eating they worked out a plan to stay in a small local barn which housed two oxen. Having evaded the town patrol, they dozed the night away with one on guard to warn of a surprise search.

In the morning they met the husband before he went to work and learned the garrison was still in town which told them a determined rear action was still going on. Taken to a pig sty and covered with straw, they hoped the pigs would supply the right "oinks" to any passing German. Supplied now with sauerkraut and sausage, word came that the Germans were leaving, but not before a German came by shouting, "Hello American, Hello American!" When five minutes passed with no response as they froze in place, they resumed breathing when he left.

Next came a loud boom. They ran down the street to view the bridge with the center span dropped but not completely separated. Reaching the far shore, they hit the ground as a patrol led by a young lieutenant fresh out of OCS approached, who checked them out and left with the Lt. shouting, "Don't bunch up". They flagged a jeep and learned that the driver was from Freege's home town. They checked into the 3rd Infantry Division and after a briefing were ordered to the hospital.

Fleege weighed in at 98 pounds so the meal plan was planned with small portions. They were rested, barbered, and tested medically. Finally, they were put on a C47 flight to Swindon, England, for more medically controlled diets and a full recovery. (pp. 255 – 257)

PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL LIFE

After repatriation and home leave, Dr. Fleege entered and graduated from the University of Iowa School of Dentistry in 1949. According to his obituary, “children are one of the greatest resources in America and he devoted his professional career to improving and delivering dentistry to children.”

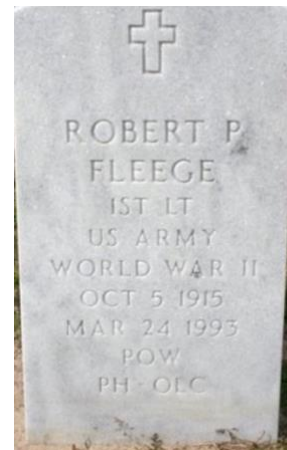
He practiced children’s dentistry in Decatur, Illinois from 1954 until his retirement in 1970. Dr. Fleege was a pioneer in this field and developed regular fluoride treatments for children, new oral operative techniques and began teaching nutritional education for better dental care.

Following in their father’s professional footsteps, four of his sons became children’s dentists.

In retirement, he and his wife became residents of Pensacola and Gulf Breeze in 1978 until his death [on 24 March 1993]. His service to others continued as a member of the Disabled American Veterans and Retired Officers’ Association.

He was also a member of the St. Thomas Catholic Church where a funeral mass was conducted in his honor. Dr. Fleege was buried with full military honors at Barrancas National Cemetery in Pensacola. Two Purple Hearts with Oak Leaf Clusters and the POW Medal were also displayed on his tombstone.

Dr. Fleege was survived by his wife, Margaret Gale Hemperly Fleege, and children, Robert Leonard Fleege, James Anthony Fleege, Dixie Lee Tuzuner, Rebecca Ann Echsner, and Linda Buehler.



Obituary Source: <http://newspapers.com/image/267840149>

[Note: Margaret Fleege died on March 8, 2022 at the age of 97. She is buried next to her husband at the Barrancas National Cemetery in Pensacola.]

Source: <http://findagrave.com/memorial/230905102/Margaret/gale/fleege>

FINAL ADDITIONS

Lt. (jg) Ralph Fleege, Galena, Is Officially Declared Dead by Navy
*Galena, Ill., Aug. 7 – Lieut. (jg) **Ralph** V. Fleege, 25, son of Dr. and Mrs. R. H. Fleege, of Galena, has been declared officially dead by the Navy Department. He had been missing during action in the Pacific since Aug. 9, 1942.*

Lieut. Fleege served aboard the U.S.S. Jarvis when the ship was damaged during action off Guadalcanal on Aug. 8, 1942. The vessel never reached its repair base and search failed to locate the ship or any of its personnel. Lieut. Fleege had been cited for valor during the attack at Pearl Harbor.

Four brothers of Lieut. Fleege are in service. They are Lieut. Robert Fleege, who was a prisoner of war and is now home on leave; Lieut. Herbert Fleege, wounded in action in the Pacific and honorably discharged last June; Lieut. Francis J. Fleege now stationed at Ft. Bragg, N.C., who has been in service for 5 years, and James A. Fleege, seaman, second class stationed at Norman, Okla. Dr. Fleege was a Captain in the Medical Corps during World War I.

Source: <http://www.newspapers.com/image/3234844>

Fleege – Humberley

Galena, ILL., June 13 [1945] – Announcement is made by Dr. and Mrs. Francis H. Fleege, of Galena, of the marriage of their son, Lieut. Robert Paul Fleege, to Miss Margaret Gale Hemperly, daughter of the A.D. Hemperlys of Shreveport, La. The ceremony took place last Thursday, June 7, in St. Michael's Rectory. Rev. Joseph Healey officiating at the single-ring ceremony.

The bride wore a white velvety marquissette gown, made with train, a picture hat of white illusion and carried white roses tied with satin streamers with rosettes of forget-me-nots. Dr. and Mrs. Fleege were the attendants.

Source: <http://www.newspapers.com/image/3167059>

Biography written by Kriegy Research Group writer Ann C. Rogers