LTC Max H. Gooler

1901 – 1991

EARLY YEARS

Max H. Gooler was born 0n April 26, 1901 in Devil's Lake, North Dakota. After completing his public-school education, he received an A.B. Degree from the University of North Dakota in 1922. He married Dorisann Lond on February 9, 1925.

MILITARY SERVICE

Allied soldiers from different services and units often crossed paths during WWII when captured and placed in POW camps. Two of these encounters occurred between Lt. Col. Max Gooler, U.S. Army, and U.S. Air Corps Colonel C. Ross Greening at Chieti in Italy and U.S. Army Captain Clarence Ferguson at Oflag 64 in Poland.

Greenling's book, *Not As Briefed From the Doolittle Raid to a German Stalag,* recorded his memories of an experienced B-26 pilot in the Pacific, then his reassignment across another ocean where he continued to fly missions during the North African Operations until his luck ran out. Avoiding flack and canon fire from the ground, Greening's aircraft was hit near a smoldering Mt. Vesuvius, his parachute directing him to the ground. Wounded and disoriented, he and other airmen who had bailed out were soon sequestered by German soldiers, enduring the same angry reception other Americans had received through the streets of Naples. Eventually carried by train to Chieti, Ross summarizes his initial encounter with Gooler.

> *We were taken to report to the senior American officer Lt. Col. Max Gooler of the Infantry Corps, who had been a prisoner for many months. After such a long period, however, he didn't appear to have grown to like the place any better. Frankly, I was flabbergasted to see anyone who'd been a prisoner for a long time could be as sane and good natured as he was. I soon learned lessons about patience and self control from Col. Gooler. He was an all-around fine gentleman and would have made the war tougher for the Germans had they not caught him when they did.* (p. 80)

Later, as a passenger on one of the numerous prisoner trains headed north, Gooler escaped as the next chapter of his survival continued in Clarence Ferguson's book, *Kriegsgefangener 3074 (Prisoner of War).* Lt. Col. Gooler became a fellow Kriegy in Oflag 64 on 18 November 1943 and after being vetted concerning his identity, he was assigned first to a room in the Big House and then to a barracks with Ferguson and others.

> *At the outbreak of the war, he* [Gooler] *with other intelligence personnel, had been dispatched to Cairo where they would gather information, especially about the North Africa campaign. He was immediately attached to the British Eighth Army and moved with their forward echelons as they oscillated in their encounters with Rommel's Africa Corps. He was Regular Army and was trained in the operation of ground forces. We were in dire need of information on weaponry, deployment, and troop movements. In order to get this information, Gooler felt he should observe first hand. Consequently, he attached himself to the combat units of the British who were actually engaged. He was with them when Rommel successfully surrounded the unit at Tobrok.* Gooler's surrender with the unit occurred on June 21, 1942, making him the first captured American soldier in World War II. (p. 143)

> *As they were moved to the rear, Rommel was at a crossroads in his command car. When he observed that the prisoners passing were British officers, he ordered them to be halted, and he came alongside in his vehicle. He was interested in talking with them and during the interlude he critiques the operation in which they were captured. There was no arrogance in his criticism, and he discussed it as though he was talking to some of his own officers. Gooler was impressed with his appearance and military bearing, and admired him as much as he would allow himself to respect an enemy commander.* (p. 143)

> *The colonel was transported to Italy and placed in an Italian prisoner of war camp where he remained until Italy capitulated. Before the Germans could take over the POW camp, Gooler escaped into the mountains in a sparsely settled area. He found a family of sympathetic natives who shared their meager supply of food with them. During the daytime he remained in the woods and came only to his benefactors when he knew it was safe.* (p. 143)

Ferguson next commented about the cooking of meals which took place outside over an open fire; the mother formed a dough which was flattened out on a pan and covered with cheese and other available food items. This common dish was handed down verbally through generations, the recipe later transported to the U.S. through Italian immigrants and given a name now known as an icon food—pizza. (pp. 143 – 144)

> *Gooler felt that the invasion of Italy would progress rapidly once they had surrendered. There was no doubt in his mind that within a few days he would be able to contact Allied troops. His wait was exasperating and the Germans moved with disquieting efficiency in consolidating their complete domination of the country of their former ally. Six weeks of freedom was all that the colonel could squeeze out of his escape before he was recaptured. It was heartbreaking but it toughened his determination to survive in the face of hardships to come.* (p. 144)

Ferguson's observations about Lt. Col. Gooler included a unique portrait of this high-ranking military leader which were in some ways at odds with others' experiences. Not being a West Pointer, he worked harder to achieve his rank which *'bespoke of his professional merit'* yet in doing so, *'he had divorced himself from the civilian structure of society and had little knowledge of how it functioned.' (p. 144)*

> *Whereas he was odd to us, we were equally enigmatic to him. We were civilians turned soldiers, and although we trained hard to master the essentials, we continued to think like civilians. We were engineers, farmers, automobile salesmen, soil conversationists, textile engineers, architects, lawyers, politicians, carpenters, teachers, grocerymen, railroad clerks and college graduates with embryonic professions interrupted by war. We did not expect to remain soldiers but were interested in returning to our respective occupations.* (p. 144)

LTC Gooler performed well as their barracks SAO and was present and attentive at discussions on many topics—including one which affected their employability after the war. Additional remarks by other writers indicated that he mentored younger officers, carried out assignments made by other senior officers in an efficient manner and honored requests by others.

Paramount among his arbitration strengths, Gooler was instrumental in his cool-headed handling of a barracks prank in which a LTC from another barracks was pursuing a court martial against LT Berlinkski and LT Wingate concerning a barracks prank. Neither officer was charged.

Gooler was also considered a safe source, for example, when others confided in him on personal matters and a security issue when told of the escape attempt plan by Captain Richard "Dick" M. Rossbach and Captain Joe Frelinghuysen.

Another avenue in which Gooler displayed his incredible analytical skills involved the game of chess.

> *We had some good chess players in our group; and although Gooler could play, he was not an expert. He immediately canvassed the camp and found a number of books on the game. One would have thought that he was cramming for an examination in a college course by the way he studied; and within a week, it was remarkable how his game had improved. He fussed, he hesitated, and sometimes he requested permission to refer to one of his books before making a questionable move. If after all of these deliberations you could checkmate him, his reaction was a transient conglomerate of incongruous profanity, punctation with arms and leg movements that sometimes upset the chess table. His reaction was so comical that his adversary was not offended in the least. He became more and more difficult to defeat; and before we began the long march, he was an expert.* (pp. 145)

> *At bridge, it was another matter. He was good, and there was no possibility of triggering his pyrotechnic display by him in this game. His opposition usually were the ones requesting delays for the review of proper techniques to counter his play*. (p. 146)

Gooler's name later appeared in Ferguson's writings concerning the preparation and participation in The Long March. The population of Oflag 64 had grown to around 1500 men—most slated to march.

THE LONG MARCH

During his incarceration Gooler developed a heart condition which affected his barracks SAO duties, but taken to the White House for complete rest, he recovered and resumed his duties. This medical history had sidelined and entitled him to stay with the hospital group when the march order was given; he chose instead to join the column, his assignment then designated as march commander. Standing in the freezing weather on January 21, 1945, German Camp Commander Schneider made the following announcement:

> "*Gentlemen, I have orders to march you from here into Germany. I want your cooperation; but whether I get it or not, I will take you out of here."* (pp. 241 – 242)

Extreme weather conditions, insufficient food and unheated rest stops would combine to make this never-ending journey the subject of nightmares for many who were forced forward.

As the Oflag 64 marchers mingled with other groups along the road system, the marchers learned to contend with the inhumane conditions as each day moved toward nightfall. Deposited in farm outbuildings, they spent restless nights in freezing conditions with some being offered the opportunity to be placed in the stay-behind group. Debating both sides of this issue (remain there or take his chances with his friends) Ferguson (still frail from his malaria episodes) and Gooler chose the latter. Moving off again in the cold misty morning, they encountered more human wagon trains. Every step was a nightmare. (pp. 241 – 245)

The next day was a longer march, the night spent in a commune-type farm complex with the temperature in the area recorded at forty below zero—the promise being that additional survival supplies would arrive soon. (p. 246)

Early one morning, the men were awakened with shouts of "The goons have left! We're alone!" Soon it had been verified. There was not a German anywhere.

Gooler sent for Colonel Jones and instructed him to bring him (Ferguson) with him to the main house. Gooler had already reserved two rooms in the building to be used as headquarters. Briefing those in attendance, he confirmed that no one knew when the guards had gone except that it was after midnight—presuming that the Russians were very close and the Germans preferred not

to be captured themselves. This knowledge prompted Gooler to organize groups according to the U.S. Ground Forces Tables of Organization—enough to make two infantry battalions.

Colonel Jones would man the headquarters and Ferguson would supervise a roster containing the name, rank, and serial number of every person present. Gooler would continue to be the troop commander and he would designate others to be unit commanders.

Colonel Goode was still the SAO and he with a group of specially trained men were working on a plan to contact the Russians. Everyone had a job and glad to be in command of American troops again.

Unfortunately, a small cadre of robot-type storm troopers appeared to again take control, much to the disappointment of the Americans. The end was near, however, and soon the war would be over. (p. 249)

LOBSENZ

Arrival at Lobsenz. Guards' posture was observed to be more relaxed while the men waited to be housed in another large farm complex—some fortunate enough to stay in the basement of the manor house.

A propaganda announcement made by the Germans that the war was over was met with skepticism and proven to be false by the next morning. Moving forward again after a three-day-stay as the last unit on snowy roads proved to be difficult for both marchers and their guards. Approaching another large farm complex, many became increasingly ill, including a young guard who died at the doorway to the barn. (p. 253)

> *Jones came up as we were getting ready to move to our assigned places. Again Robinson, Forster, Colonel Jones and I* [Ferguson] *were given a space in the hay loft. Gooler came up the ladder and over to where we were. "Colonel Jones," he said. "They have notified us that there are railroad cars on the track we crossed a mile back for the ones who are so sick they cannot go on. I've put your name on the list. If there's anyone else you know of, I'll add them." After a discussion it was decided that Jones, Robinson, Foster and Ferguson should go.*
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> *"Just stay where you are, when the list is complete, I'll come back and tell you where to assemble," he said.*
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> *We assembled our packs and lay resting. Soon, the word came to meet at the gate. On our arrival we found Colonel Gooler waiting in the cold. This great man who three months ago was diagnosed with a serious heart ailment looked better than he had for a year. He had a reserved sort of smile that masked his pain and exhaustion.*

This was a sad moment. The four of us were his closest friends, especially Jones and me [Ferguson]. *We had begged him in the loft to go with us, but he couldn't. I was the last to tell him goodbye, each promised to search for the other if we ever got home. I was convinced I would never see him again.*

We were formed up and marched out the gate.

I looked back and Gooler stood looking as we disappeared in the darkness. (pp. 254 – 255)

EPILOGUE

Colonel Max Gooler remained with the column for about five weeks. At Hammelburg General Patton sent a task force composed of armored weapons in an attempt to liberate those POWs. A fierce battle was fought there, and although our forces initially liberated Colonel Gooler and his group, the Germans counter attacked and recaptured them. In the battle, both of Colonel Gooler's ankles were broken when he was wedged between two tanks.

After the war he remained in the army and did some duty as a Professor of Military Science and Tactics at colleges and academics for Reserve Officer Military Training courses. Because of his health, he later retired and at last account lived in Florida. (p. 294)

TAPS

Colonel Max Gooler and his wife are buried at Ft. Sam Houston National Cemetery. Her name and designation are present on the reverse side of his marker.

Biography written by Kriegy Research Group writer Ann C. Rogers