

# **Edward Arnold Graf**

**1922 - 2023**

This biography was written using information from the Veterans History Project based on written resource materials concerning Oflag 64 history and on two oral interviews. One was held on 3 October 2002 between Ed Graf and Robert (Bob) Babcock, President of the Americans Remembered during the Oflag 64 Prisoner of War Group Reunion in Columbus, Georgia. The second interview took place with Ed Graf on 11 February 2008 for Calvin College. Some first-hand accounts have been paraphrased.

## **EARLY YEARS AND THE ROAD TO COMBAT**

Ed Graf was born in Chicago, Illinois, 7 January 1922 and moved to Jackson, Michigan, in 1942. He tried to volunteer for the draft but surgery delayed his entrance until October 1942 at Fort Custer. After indoctrination, he was sent to Camp Polk, Louisiana, then Camp Barkley, Texas, with the 210<sup>th</sup> Signal Depot Company. Promoted to Corporal, Graf was sent to Camp Wheeler where he became a Technical Sergeant and received his orders for OCS at Fort Benning, Georgia, assigned to the 20<sup>th</sup> Company of the 3<sup>rd</sup> STR (Student Training Regiment). Having suffered an injury during training, he was reassigned to another company and graduated from OCS on 7 September 1943.

Joining the 313<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 79<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, Lt. Graf was with the Recon and Intelligence Company at Camp Phillips, Kansas, followed by arrival at Myles Standish New Jersey, an embarkation port. Through ironic circumstances, when the officer Lt. Graf had replaced returned to the unit, Graf became unassigned but remained onboard for deployment and was given a private suite on A deck. His experiences during the ten-day trip remain memorable.

Next Stop: Glasgow, Scotland, where they boarded trucks and were taken to Ashton and Mackish Field for night training. Assigned as a Platoon Leader of G Company, 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon, Lt. Graf was requested, while they were bivouacking, to come to the tent of Sergeant Samenski. Concern turned to admiration when the assembled squad leaders expressed gratitude that he would be their combat infantry leader. Graf stated during the interview that this memory still moved him as he recalls the demanding requirements he placed on his platoon and himself. Arrangements made with a cannon company, heavy weapons company and a chain company, combined with classes on the rudiments of other weapons, would save their lives and they came to appreciate Graf's leadership abilities.

March of 1944 found Graf in England. Awaiting orders and living in pup tents, he and his men were made aware of the current situation in England:

*While at Plymouth, ready to embark, we were given, first of all, an outstanding thing in my mind. You could have as much food of any kind that they had there that you wanted. And I filled my mess kit with fruit cocktail. That's good. But then there were the German V-bombs or rockets going over towards the inner part of England and there was a lot of activity. We were told this was it. You know, the famous thing. This is it! As we were loaded into the landing craft, we saw the barrage balloons and our aircraft flying. There were occasional German aircraft. Why the fools did it, I don't know.*

After crossing the channel, Graf's testimony continues:

*The flap on the landing craft came down and I jumped in the water. We had impregnated uniforms and ODS, fatigue jackets. And we were still in our canvas leggings. The first combat boots I saw was when I was in a prisoner of war camp. We landed on Utah Beach on June 12, D plus six. The Crisbecq and Asnelles batteries were still firing. We ran into pockets of resistance and we camped in foxholes. Dug holes. Slit trenches, really. Not foxholes. We started patrol action almost immediately. And that happened all the way up into Cherbourg. I think I was, if not the first, one of the first into Cherbourg. I took a night patrol, an entire platoon plus a section of light machine guns and a weapons lieutenant, and took it in there, past pillboxes. I found the defenses situation that the Germans had set up at the end of the first few streets into Cherbourg. And at that time, there was a big gravel pit with a big cliff and a narrow path down into the low land going into Cherbourg.*

*I told the defensive people who were there that night that we are going out and didn't know when we'll be back. 'Tell whoever relieves you that we are out there.' When my patrol returned, however, this message had not been relayed to replacements, but we heard the click of weapons pointed in our direction and shouted that we were coming; this action on our parts saved our lives.*

*We departed at dusk and came back just about the crack of dawn the next day. Hadn't lost a man. I had taken one squad and sent back about 40 German prisoners from little firefights in a couple of places, but not as much as I had expected because I set up the light machine guns to fire on the pillboxes that I saw, expecting to get some return fire, to find out what was there but didn't receive any reactions. We did, however, run into some pretty stiff resistance in a group of houses. I used a wall to lob grenades over which resulted in another firefight. I sent one squad back with the additional prisoners and we went back in—farther into Cherbourg.*

Cherbourg fell on 25 June 1944. With this news, Lt. Graf and his men were allotted time to rest and clean up with a shower and a shave. With General

Patton in charge of Third Army and General Bradley a Commander in northern France, Graf's unit was committed again to action which would "*break out of the hedgerows.*" Graf remembers heading over the hedgerow, gathering his platoon by using the "Follow Me" Ft. Benning motto, and finding them out in the open with no cover. His next memory concerns being hit hard enough with something which rendered him unconscious. His helmet and the liner were split "*like a can opener*" and his glasses shattered. Fortunately, his gas mask glasses were still usable. Coming awake, he noted that he was still mobile, his equipment, with grenades, was intact, and a nearby German soldier was telling him the German version of, "For you the war is over."

*I had a Bible that Peg had given me before I went. It had a metal jacket which was scratched. I thought I could see a dent in it and now I can't find a dent. I always told her that she saved my life with that Bible."*

Years later, while undergoing a heart bypass, surgeons discovered an embedded bullet which was passed to him as another souvenir.

Able to walk to the aide station, Graf was treated for bleeding head and neck wounds and leg injuries beneath torn canvas leggings. Then he was taken back to the front where he assisted other wounded American soldiers—one with a much-needed syrette of morphine. All of this occurred with American artillery shelling 15 to 20 feet over their heads.

Later he was placed against a tree and interrogated, but his answers remained the same: name, rank, serial number. One of the German's threats concerned exposing Graf to American's troop shelling but he continued to resist. The next interrogator, a German Captain (Hauptman), could not understand why the Americans were there because they were going to cleanse the human race, and why we were interfering with this?

Still able to navigate, he was placed with 39 other American prisoners and marched away. Graf remembers crossing the Cherbourg Peninsula once or twice to avoid troop movements. Stopping next to a "*knocked out American tank*", the POWs were allowed to gather any left behind equipment. Graf chose a comforter and tent ropes which he used to make a sling. Left at Port Said, Egypt during his escape, he wishes he had kept it.

His next movements as a POW including passing through France at Helonson Prison Camp, where they were given some food and water, then to Chartre where he met Colonel Goode. Graf thought that Goode was "*freshly captured*" and would see him later at Oflag 64. The next stop was at Shalon, a former French Barracks, where he was questioned for several days and replied with the same answers: name, rank, serial number. The German officer then told Graf that he was in the 313<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 79<sup>th</sup> Division. They seemed to know a lot about the American military.

Leaving Shalon, the next stop for these 40 POWs was Limburg, Germany, then in trucks to the outskirts of Paris where the French had given Graf "*some cognac and boiled eggs and crapes they had made. That's another story.*"

Loaded onto boxcars, the Germans proceeded to *“take away the top two buttons of our trousers, belt, and shoe strings. We looked sloppy.”* No reasons were given, but they later learned that American uniforms were collected for German reprisal actions concerning the Battle of the Bulge.

The trip to Limburg lasted a week and the train was strafed many times. Graf was told that the Germans began placing the letters “POW” on the sides of boxcars as a means of transporting equipment safely, ensuring that Allied planes would avoid these trains. This subterfuge was ignored as the planes continued strafing, their real targets, the engines. Several persons were hit. He also recalled that one German guard who had been a British captive in WWI remembered his treatment which prompted him to supply the travelers with apples and water. These gifts were much appreciated

Their last train trip would take them into Poland, to a town called Schubin.

## **OFLAG 64**

Established as a new POW camp for American Ground Force Officers on June 6, 1943, it was officially supervised by a German Kommandant. Day-to-day operations were conducted by American officers who represented and carried out order and discipline.

The actual date of Lt. Ed Graf’s arrival at Oflag 64 is based on two sources. The official date, according to a hand-written record, is 15 September 1944. Graf stated in his interview with Bob Babcock, however, that he arrived on 10 October 1944. Using either date as a salient reference, Lt. Ed Graf was a verified POW at Oflag 64.

He and fellow POWs arrived late at Oflag 64 and walked several miles to the entrance. Having been through multiple camps since his capture in July 1944, this was to be Graf’s final “home” before executing his escape during the enforced march in January 1945. He stated in both interviews that specific recollections concerning details about the camp, other prisoners, and his captors were not as memorable as those who had been long-term residents. Attendance at Oflag 64 Reunions provided him with welcomed information for which he is grateful.

Lt. Graf was processed in, photographed, treated to a hot shower and shave, then assigned to a cubical area with eight sets of bunks. For a period of time, Graf and his activities would have been observed to ensure that he was fully vetted. His fellow Kriegies might be officers he knew or those he had never met. Their hometowns, cultures, religions and status might be diverse, but one commonality bound them together: Americans imprisoned in a foreign land.

An established rhythm asserted itself in every Kriegy from the date of his arrival until an event occurred which dictated his departure. The camp was not silent, nor was it inactive, for Kriegies soon learned about activities which

reduced the boredom through entertainment activities (many items donated by the YMCA) and camaraderie; expanded learning through courses taught, lectures given and library offerings; and opportunities to strengthen their bodies and their health through sports and walks around the camp. The camp newspaper called the ITEM and the BBC news served as lifelines for every Kriegy. A staffed hospital clinic and dental facility were also operational.

Mail Call, with letters and packages, kept Kriegies in touch with family and friends, while Red Cross parcels contained food items which supplemented their meager diets. Breakfast was shared with cubicle-mates and consisted of a loaf of bread cut eight ways (each one took a turn as the “cutter”), a cup of hot water, and a small portion of sugar. Main meals were served in a central dining hall: Graf remembers details of the special Thanksgiving meal (he still has the menu) which brought the entire camp together for this celebration. Inventive camp cooks worked very hard to produce holiday meals, as well as those served on a daily basis.

## **ESCAPE AND EVASION**

On January 21, 1945, the able men at Oflag 64 were evacuated to begin a bitter-cold march into Germany. At least 15 miles were covered that day and when night descended Graf slipped away and slept in many barns during his travels eastward. He remembers the generosity of a Polish family who took him into their home where he saw *“a family that they had been hiding in their house. They were Jewish and thought the Americans were there to liberate them.”* The underground was contacted and provided bloodwurst, soup and bread, but were unable to provide escape assistance.

Based on this information, Graf stayed with them another night and left the next day. Finding himself in a German “pincer” by the Russians, he located and crawled under a white heavy canvas for hours. For additional warmth and protection, he recounts wearing a Polish Army overcoat that reached his ankles with an American flag sown on the sleeve. He made this copy by acquiring a piece of cloth and crayons to draw and color the flag.

Later in another barn, Graf encountered a Russian patrol who gave him directions back to Szubin. Everyone including the hospital unit has been evacuated—only Germans and Russians remained. Graf returned to his cubicle but decided after hearing a serious argument to accompany some Russians into a nearby town where he found a burned-out tank, his next shelter. Needing a drink of water, he discovered a lighted area and entered the dirt-floored room to find Russians drinking heavily from bottles. Excited to learn that Graf was an “Amerikanski”, they shared their drinks while shouting, “Stalin, Roosevelt, Churchill”, also saluting equipment made in America, “Ford, Chevrolet. Dodge.” He does not remember returning to the tank than night but woke the next morning and moved to a basement—another place filled with large casks and drunken soldiers who created a live-

fire shooting gallery. Graf found himself in a difficult situation and had to fight his way out.

Eventually, Graf boarded a truck that took him to Warsaw where he walked over the Vistula River and spent the night in a hospital. Initially, he made contacts with a Polish Colonel who had arranged his flight to Moscow, but overnight the Russian Government had taken over, so these plans were abandoned. His next step was to obtain a visa to go to Lublin, Poland, where he encountered many other Americans. Placed in a camp called Majdanek, he and Lt. Clay Callender broke out together, jumped in a hay wagon and were dropped off outside of a Catholic church.

Fortune continued to follow them when they met a Polish family who fed and housed them for a week. For the Robak family's kindness, Graf gave them all the zloties (Polish currency) he had. It was the equivalent of a month's salary.

The train trip in boxcars from Lublin to Odessa, Russia, was a week long and very cold. Fellow Russian passengers graciously shared what they had which was a piece of fatback. Graf also longed for drinking water but the supply from the engine was rusty and undrinkable.

In Odessa the Russians gave Graf clean clothes for which he signed a statement of charges. He kept the Russian hat and his button compass. He recalled seeing a movie with Robert Taylor, *Song of Russia*, and eating decent foods.

## **HOMEWORD BOUND**

Now onboard the *Mariposa*, Graf remembers one incident distinctly: "*the crew made off with my P38 and another one that looked like a .45 but it was a .38. I'd have liked to kept either one of them.*" Later in the interview he relates the story of how he acquired them:

*I had a couple of arms that I had gotten from Germans during my journey after my escape. I was in a barn when two Germans arrived, a Hauptman and a Hauptfeldwebel. As I climbed down, I thought they were Americans and couldn't see who they were as I had been in the loft. I could see just a little bit of the doorway when it opened up with this pull, letting these people in. I thought I heard English so I lowered myself on a rope down between rafters of interlaced branches. As my feet felt the barn floor, I heard German and I thought, 'Uh-oh. I've got a problem.' I could climb up and they would hear me, or I could stay here and see what happens and or I could maybe go to sleep and snore and they would have me. An order had come out, before we left, that anybody trying to escape or did escape was going to be immediately shot because earlier in the war the Germans had been pretty lenient with prisoners, particularly Americans and British. I decided that I had to do something about it."*

Using a short piece of angle iron, he hit both men, took their guns, secured them with rope, reentered the winter weather (20-below-zero) outside, and walked all night to the next destination in order to catch a train to Warsaw.

Nostalgia set in when he discovered that several of the Kriegies onboard were members of his cubicle, one of them, Major Carl Hansen. Their main topic of conversation was food: their plan concerned meeting in Chicago with planned menus for breakfast, lunch and dinner, for at least a week.

Moving through the rough waters of the Dardanelles at Turkey caused Graf and others to become very sea sick; sleeping in swinging hammocks only increased their discomfort. Arriving at Port Said, Egypt, Graf and the others were taken across the canal to the Sinai side where they showered, received a wellness check, were debriefed and set free. Graf recounted one memory which had complicated matters for some. Americans who had been POWs were given new clothes without insignia and this became a problem for MPs as their job was to arrest soldiers out of uniform. In most cases this issue was solved when explanations were exchanged, but some were arrested—causing unnecessary stress on those who had recently achieved their freedom.

Choosing to cross the canal again to Port Said, Graf, Clay and others ventured into the shopping areas: Graf visited a British silk shop for some luxury items, most as gifts for Peg. Onboard again to Naples they received a second round of examinations, after which, Graf visited historical places like Pompeii before boarding another ship for the States. Arriving in Boston, then Camp Miles Standish, he remembers hearing about Roosevelt's death.

Lt. Ed Graf returned to Illinois to visit relatives and reunite with Peg. He married Margaret Philipp in Jackson, Michigan, on 16 June 1945. She died in April 2005. Ed died in Grand Rapids, Michigan on February 17, 2023 at 101 years of age.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

In the final minutes of the interview, Ed Graf was asked to summarize some reflections of his military experience.

*I am proud of it. And as I was telling Peg, driving through Benning here, just getting in the area of a military installation, I get real GI all at once.*

*I had four years of ROTC and I was head of the ROTC for Chicago. We had a crack platoon drill. We beat Culver Military Academy and all the others, including the Virginia Military Institute and we were good. [This may refer to his position after the war.]*

Robert Babcock then added a heartfelt comment: “*You sound like a man that I would love to follow into combat. I admire you.*”