

2LT Howard Randolph Holder

(1st Armored Division)

1916 – 2002

Howard Randolph Holder, the son of James William and Charlotte Emily Brega Holder, was raised in Moline, Illinois, where he began a lifelong association with the Boy Scouts, including earning the highest rank of Eagle Scout; these skills became essential elements to his survival as a POW in World II. He also earned an AB Degree in Spanish and Psychology from Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois. After graduation, he began his career in radio broadcasting – a career he enjoyed so much that he later claimed, in spite of 16-hour days, six-days-a-week schedules, he'd 'never worked a day in his life'.

Drafted in 1941, Holder met his future wife, Clementi Lacey-Baker, at a USO dance on Ft. Knox. He was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant on 19 February 1942, and they were married two days



Holder's WWII 1st Armored Division patch.

later. Sent overseas six weeks later with Company E, 1st Armored Regiment, 1st Armored Division, he was captured by Rommel's Afrika Korps on 15 February 1943 near Sidi Bou Zid, Tunisia. Transported by German aircraft and trains through Italy and Germany, Holder



Howard & Clementi Holder.

arrived in Szubin, Poland at Oflag 64 on 9 June 1943, where he gained the nickname "Boomer" for his distinctive voice. This feature was to

serve him well in his broadcast career and service life.

As a result of his wartime experiences, he later wrote a lively memoir about his experiences as a WWII POW, *Escape to Russia*. In the book dedication, Holder stated



This book was written in 1946 direct from my diary notes recorded during the entire time I was a prisoner of the Nazis. This is not embellished by fanciful memory. It is a true picture of attitudes as they really were at that time, and events as they really happened. It is a story of how it actually was.

Holder's writing style enables readers to feel as though they are present (through artifacts, writings, cartoons and photos) with the Kriegies throughout their trials and triumphs. Discipline and hunger are two main elements in his writings. Camp discipline was strictly enforced as it served to bolster camp morale and structure. Care of uniforms, personal hygiene, civility, even permission to plan and execute escape attempts were decided by the Senior American Officer and his camp committees.

Holder reported that meals were often meager, though the U.S. Army camp cooks strived to serve the best portions available (some from camp gardens), yet the men of Oflag 64 were always underweight and hungry. Red Cross parcels were sometimes available to supplement rations and much appreciated by all of the Kriegies. Typical packages contained dairy products, canned meat, chocolate, coffee or tea, sugar, and jam. The Tin Store (used for personal food storage) and the Tobacco Store (storage for cigarettes and cigars—used often for trading and bribes) were important and useful. Keeping warm in the cold Polish months was another issue of concern to the Kriegies; coal supplies were meted out on a weekly basis through the distribution of briquets and lump pieces.



Holder's POW identity card photo.



Holder (in tie) in the 1943

Boredom was addressed through diverse forms of entertainment and enlightenment, including bridge, storytelling, exercise paths (inside the camp and later, controlled parole walks through the forest), casinos, Canteen features, and the establishment of shows. One of the favorites performed was “If Men Played Cards as Women Do”. Other performances included shorter skits, musical programs, (again the Y.M.C.A. provided musical instruments), glee club, guest-speaker talks, Hobby Show, and quiz programs. Organization of The Little Theatre was so effective with these programs that Kriegies had options to occupy their minds and update their morale almost every night of the week. Perhaps the greatest coup was made by SAO Colonel Drake which enabled Kriegies to attend a Szubin movie theatre. German movies and cartoons received mixed reviews, but the newsreels showed terrific action shots, especially after the landings in Normandy.

The presence and accessibility of books became one of the most important Kriegy goals and it began with parcels sent to individuals. As more books arrived, this led eventually to the Oflag 64 library. Other sources included those both received and ordered through the International Students Relief Organization and the Y.M.C.A. By the end of 1944, 7,000 books were available and they needed a “home”. From its humble beginnings on the third floor of the White House, it grew both in volume numbers, readers, and location. Eventually, lectures on a variety of subjects promoted further studies and the Kriegy College was born. Because he majored in Spanish in college, Holder taught Spanish classes during his stay at Oflag 64. Before the war, men who became Kriegies were from diverse cultures, backgrounds, education levels, locations, etc. These differences became the unifying force for high school and college classes in 15+ diverse subjects such as languages, harmony, mathematics, salesmanship, geology, just to name a few. Although participation ebbed and flowed, the Kriegy College greatly impacted the lives of the men of Oflag 64 and Holder thoroughly enjoyed teaching his Spanish classes.



June 1944 *The Item*

Establishment of *The Oflag 64 Item*, the camp’s newspaper, was a vibrant morale builder. According to Holder, it felt and reflected the “pulse of the camp” with published articles, both humorous and serious (many contributed by fellow Kriegies) and a variety of newsy items which reflected Oflag 64 life.

The camp was also blessed with three imaginative cartoon artists—Al Ross, Jim Bickers, John De Martino. Their cartoons were regularly featured in THE ITEM. Another artist, Wilber H. Davis, drew many fine sketches of Oflag buildings. Bickers was also the artist responsible for the official portrait of Oflag 64. Ross drew a cartoon history of the Kriegy’s first year at Oflag 64 which depicted many of the activities in which Holder participated.

Participation in sports activities was practically unanimous throughout the camp due to the variety made available by the Y.M.C.A. The major “winner”, baseball, was played competitively by many Kriegy teams. Other sports included basketball (second only to baseball), horseshoes, volleyball, badminton, golf, and ping pong. Football also became popular during the fall, as the Y.M.C.A. sent jerseys and teams developed with All Americans and college stars participating. Next came soccer with the arrival of some French officers who provided entertainment as their proficiency was amazing to watch. Every positive has a negative side and this was the rumor which implied that sports activities enhanced the life styles of POWs. The Nazi propaganda machine was using American funds and this was a hard pill for the men at Oflag 64 to swallow.



1943 Basketball Champions (Holder is 3rd from right).



Holder award.

In September 1944, Oflag 64 held a big track meet with competitive teams from each barracks—most athletes were in good shape because of summer foods being available. Events included 820-yard dash, 100-yard-dash, 50-yard dash, cross country runs, mile run, 3-legged races, obstacle races, broad jump, high jump, discus throw, shot put, 100-yard low hurdle race, ball throw, shuttle relay, 440-yard relay and 880-yard relay. Other activities included boxing, weight lifting and martial arts.

In his book, Holder described his daily life at Oflag 64. The inefficiency of the local electrical power grid served to encourage the construction of camp-made lights which enabled more nighttime activities. Although letter-writing limitations were in place (three letters and four postcards per month), many Kriegies used their limits and looked forward to incoming mail—which often took 100 days to arrive at Oflag 64.

Water supply was often a camp issue, especially when the camp population reached 1600 men. Showers were short, sometimes infrequent. German army laundry service was negotiated for Kriegy clothes. Camp shops, such as the tailoring and shoe shops, were also vital resources.

According to Holder, "Religion was a major factor in maintaining the good morale of the Szubinite Kriegie." Services were held in THE CHAPEL and in other buildings by both protestant and catholic chaplains.

Medical and dental issues were mostly handled inside the camp. The hospital building was large and well-staffed as was the dental office. Sick call was held every day.

After 19 months of captivity and multiple escape attempts at Oflag 64, Holder was successful on 21 January 1945. During his escape, Holder traveled with the other Oflag 64 Kriegies, including his best friend, Lt. George Durgin, through Soviet occupied territory on his way to Odessa. While feeling bolstered by their camaraderie, the group discovered that although they were ex-prisoners of war, they were only treated by the Soviets as refugees in Poland and Russia, and received few courtesies from the Soviets. The Polish people which they encountered, however, were more helpful. Some spoke English and had lived in America and/or had relatives there. Travel days seemed endless and dangerous and included an eclectic number of "safe houses" and in many Made-in-America Lend-Lease vehicles.



Holder handmade escape backpack.

Rembertov was a collection point for Holder and the other liberated American POWs. Holder mentioned in his book that

Days passed and we were getting no further in our progress toward home. The American Colonel George Millett had sent telegram after telegram to Moscow to let our embassy know where we were but none had been answered. This was disconcerting. We knew from him that the Yalta Conference was in session at that time, and we felt that we were in a very bad position.



Holder Russian shirt acquired by trading at Odessa.

The answer came 10 days later from the embassy; they were aware of the situation, and that resolution would take place within two weeks. Later it was rumored that the Russians detoured messages until the conference results were announced—pro Russian. Holder finally boarded the *HMS Moreton Bay* docked at the port of Odessa with other liberated American POWs on March 7 and left the harbor; he would visit more foreign places, board a second ship, and fly on two aircrafts before he saw the Statue of Liberty. Holder reunited with his wife, Clementi, in Kentucky two days after VE Day.

Holder was awarded the following military honors: Bronze Star with "V" for Valor in Command, European Theater Medal, three African Campaign with two Battle Stars and a Landing Arrow, Prisoner of War Medal and, later, a medal recognizing his 22 years in the U.S. Army Reserve.



Holder as an Army Reservist in 1955.

Ultimately, Holder’s broadcasting career took him and his growing family from Davenport, Iowa, to Louisville, Kentucky, and ultimately to Athens, Georgia, he advanced from announcer to news director and then as owner, president and chairman of the board for multiple radio stations in Georgia and California, including two radio stations in Athens. He was a leader in news and broadcasting organizations state-wide and active in national broadcasting organizations and issues, including eight years on the National Associated

Press Broadcasters Board. He received the first-ever Broadcaster-Civilian Award from the Georgia Association of Broadcasters in 1972, the Georgia Pioneer Broadcaster Award from DiGamma Kappa (University of Georgia) in 1971 and 1991, and was inducted into the Georgia Association of Broadcasters Hall of Fame in 1993.

H. Randolph, as he was known by then, became deeply involved in almost every civic achievement in Athens for 50 years, including improvements in public education, recreation, social services, roads, the arts, racial integration of local public schools, and support for local businesses. He continued his life-long involvement with the Boy Scouts, endowed a gallery of the Georgia Museum of Art and was active in Rotary International (and as District Governor in 1969-1970).



Holder on location radio interview

Perhaps nothing quite captures the personality of this resolutely optimistic Kriegy as two signature phrases with which he signed off of newscasts for the decades after his return from Oflag 64. No matter the weather or state of the world, at 7 AM it was always, “It’s a lovely day to be in Athens!” and at 8 AM, “Keep smiling ‘til 10 o’clock and the rest of the day will take care of itself!”

Howard Holder’s widow, Clementi, passed away in 2013. They are survived by three daughters, Janice, Susan, and Marjory, a son H. Randolph Holder Jr., and three grandchildren.

Biography written by Kriegy Research Group writer Ann C. Rogers in collaboration with the Holder family.