1LT Royal Irvin Lee

1916 – 2014

Notation: The major source for this biography was captured from the October 3 interview of Royal Lee at the 2002 Oflag 64 Reunion in Columbus, Georgia, sponsored by the Veterans History Project. The very able interviewer was Robert Babcock.

Common knowledge cultivated throughout the camp was also shared at reunions and in letters read and conversations held long after the last homeward bound ship or aircraft had left Europe for the USA; this body of facts, figures and emotions became a legacy of honor within those who endured it.

BACKGROUND

Royal Lee, the son of Irving and Christina (Severson) Lee, was born on August 28, 1916 in Madison, South Dakota. During high school, he joined the National Guard, continued his education at a two-year Madison college then transferred to and graduated from the University of South Dakota in 1939, where he met his future wife, Harriet Knox. They remained engaged until he returned from World War II, their marriage taking place on June 23, 1945.

MILITARY SERVICE

Royal was commissioned in August 1940 after serving 7 years in the South Dakota National Guard and having attended a series of courses. In 1941, he was sent from Camp Claiborne to Ft. Belvoir to attend an Engineer Officers Refresher Course. War having been declared against Germany and Japan, Royal's division was sent to Ft. Dix, New Jersey, and departed on troop ships from the New York Port of Embarkation in 1942. Both North Ireland and Scotland were the next destinations where they continued training, bivouacking, and awaiting orders to depart for Africa.

While serving in the Army 109th Engineer Battalion, 34th Division, Lee's convoy arrived at Oran, Tunisa in November 1942, their assigned area. Unfortunately, during the Battle of Kasserine Pass, American units were outmaneuvered and outflanked by the veterans of the 21st Panzer Division,

causing the surrender of many Americans in this, their first round of German engagements.

During this time period, Colonel Thomas D. Drake, was Regimental Commander of the 168th Infantry Regiment. His unit received orders to withdraw, prompting 1LT Lee's unit to unload their heavy equipment but keep a half-track and hand-held weapons. Following Drake's lead with 400 men and realizing they were isolated from other U.S. units, a night march was attempted, covering about eight miles before they observed a German motorized column and made a last stand.

A short time later, they heard the German call in English. *"Come out. We know you are there and our next call will be with hand grenades."* The date was 17 February 1943. Fortunately, their surrender came with badly needed drinking water before spending the night bedded down in local sands. Lee also replied in the interview that several were wounded and taken to an aid station. As a conscientious leader, he regretted that he could not do more for his men.

Loaded on trucks the next morning, they were transported to a German headquarters where they spotted Colonel Drake, now a captive as well. Housed in an enclosure area amid many Allied soldiers, they were then packed onto boxcars where they were given canned meat. Taken next to Tunisia, the men were kept at a school building surrounded by a high wall and interrogated including information on their dog tags. *"At this time, the back of my dog tag contained my father's name, address and my blood type."* Several days later they were again moved, this time to the Tunis airport, where they boarded a JU-52 aircraft. Lee remembers that LTC Van Vliet thought he could fly the plane across the Mediterranean to an area north of Naples, Italy if the German guard could be subdued, but the plane was at 200 feet flying across the Mediterranean so it was too low for that plan to work.

Capua, a collection point for POWs, is bitterly remembered as the low point of their incarcerations. Filthy living conditions with poor quality food and water were daily norms. Hoping for more humane treatment, they were loaded into boxcars once again for Stalag VII-A, the largest NAZI POW camp in WWII, located just north of Moosburg, Germany. [By the end of the war, this camp housed 90,000 POWs]

OFLAG 64 – HOME BASE FOR AMERICAN GROUND OFFICERS

Trains and camps became routine expectations as these Americans moved northward toward Oflag 64. Finally, on 9 June 1943, they disembarked, formed up and marched to the gates of Oflag 64. Once processed and vetted as to their true identity, each man was assigned to a barracks bunk and began his time as a POW Kriegy for the rest of the war. 1LT Royal L. Lee became Room Commander

and worked in the Parcel Hutch—its importance becoming historically memorable as noted below.

Train arrivals were crucial to camp Kriegies as they were the main delivery system for Oflag 64.

> *When the Germans were advised that a freight car of parcels was awaiting unloading, consequently, Captain James H. Dicks and Lieutenants Royal Lee and Amon Carter were driven under guard, over two miles of cobblestones, to the depot in an old German Army truck.*

The quote above (page 115) was taken from a publication which provided the inside scoop on a top-secret operation practiced within its walls and included in a book written by Lloyd R. Shoemaker titled *The Escape Factory: The Story of MIS-X, The Ultra-Secret Masterminds of World War II's Greatest Escapes* (New York: St. Martin Press, 1990).

Lee and Carter then packed the parcels in the truck and unloaded them at the camp. Lee's interview continues:

> *"These were specially packed boxes, containing false names, which contained items such as compasses, maps, money, counterfeit papers, a weapon or two, etc. which could be used in escape attempts. Colonels Waters and Algers were in charge of security and they oversaw the operation.*"

Years later when the secrets of this secret project became known, many thought it should have been kept secret.

Lee also clearly remembers the Code of Military Conduct which Colonel Drake quickly established. *"We were still American soldiers and as such were told to dress and act accordingly."* Asked by the interviewer, Bob Babcock, about camp details, Lee replied that many activities became available including sports, the establishment of bands and orchestras with musical instruments, etc. theatre presentations, and even courses taught in many areas of interests. Any Red Cross boxes and mail from home were common subjects discussed among the Kriegies as all hoped for a quick end to the war.

THE LONG MARCH

January 1945 was to hold another "surprise" for camp members. As the sound of Russian howitzers and tank guns moved ever closer to Oflag 64, camp POWs and guards were told that they would exit the camp tomorrow morning, January 21, march several kilometers and be picked up by a train. When no train appeared, they joined other travelers fleeing the "*red menace*" through the worst weather conditions in many winters. Lee remembers marching 225 miles often

on snowy and icy roads while spending cold nights in barns and sheds and trekking each day from sunup to late afternoon.

As the war fell apart around them and when the opportunity presented itself, Lee joined 15 others jumping over a high barbed wire fence surrounded by Russian guards and hopped a train to Luckenwalde, a town southwest of Berlin. He remembers seeing soldiers from many other countries in the area including British, Italian, French, Norwegian and Russian.

Jumping inside one of the armored cars, he and other Americans crossed the Truman Bridge into American held territory.

> *"I was in Reems, France, the day the war ended. A great day for us all."*

Departing personnel were told to discard their clothes in a designated area, keeping belt, shoes and personal items in exchange for new uniforms. The old ones were discarded and burned.

> *"While waiting for our names to be called, several took a trip into the city, but I didn't want to miss my chance, and on 30 May my name was called and I hopped a train to Paris, then Le Harve for passage onboard ship which sailed to New York. There I was able to call my parents and Harriet."*

Lee remembers the trip to Hot Springs, Arkansas, and his September assignment to Ft. Logan in Denver where he was processed through the War Department Personnel Center. He was released in October of 1945.

LIFE AFTER THE WAR

Royal and Harriet married June 23, 1945 and moved to Mankato, Minnesota, where he was employed by the Mankato Free Press from November 11, 1945 until 1956. They had two children, a son Robert and later a daughter Deborah. He later created the Royal Agency and was self-employed as a property/casualty insurance agent retiring in September 1982.

Royal and Harriet became involved in community activities, travel and quality time spent with family members and friends. They were members of the First Presbyterian Church where he served as a Deacon, Elder, and Trustee. He was a past president of the Mankato Exchange Club, a member of the American Legion and Mankato Lodge#12, AF and AM, Scottish Rite and Osman Temple Shrine. He also served the Boy Scout at the unit, district and council levels and was awarded the Silver Beaver Award by the Boy Scouts.

TAPS

Royal I. Lee was buried beside his wife of 67 years, Harriet, at Glenwood Cemetery, Mankato Minnesota.

Full military honors were provided by the American Legion at a family burial ceremony.

Memorials were held at the First Presbyterian Church in memory of Royal.

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The following is a record of Royal's involvement in the MIS-X Project and was submitted November 2001 for publication in the Post Oflag 64 Item. The author is unknown.

MIS-X

The old German army truck bounced down a cobblestone road in northwestern Poland. Lieutenant Royal Lee and two other U. S. Army officers bounced along in the back of the truck, guarded by two German soldiers. The guards were in an easygoing mood. They were happy to have an afternoon's duty away from the nearby prisoner-of-war camp. Lee and the other two POWs would be doing all the work.

Lee tried to look relaxed, too. POWs would naturally have been pleased to be spending a day outside their cramped, barbed-wire world. The day's errand was a happy one of picking up a shipment of packages for the camp-packages from home.

But Lee wasn't feeling relaxed. He was "concerned"-an emotion he says he felt frequently during his two years in Nazi POW camps. "You were concerned," he says, "because you didn't know what would happen if you got caught doing what you were doing.

It was June 1944, the month the D-Day invasion of France began the decisive Allied assault against Nazi Germany. A thousand miles behind the battle lines, Lee and his fellow POWs also continued waging the war, fighting as best they could along what was called the "barbed-wire front."

The humanitarian packages that Lee and the others were to pick up that afternoon would include two fraudulent parcels sent by the U. S. War Department. These would contain not sardines, cigarettes, and coffee, as most packages did, but two .22-cabiler automatic pistols. Lee's job was to help sneak the guns past the Nazis.

Lee was part of an elaborate, top-secret network that kept American and British POWs well supplied with contraband and constantly attempting escapes throughout World War II. Only in the 1990s was the story of the "Escape Factory" made public, allowing veterans of the effort to share their long-untold stories.

Lee was born in 1916 in Madison, South Dakota, the only child of middle-class parents. He attended the University of South Dakota and graduated in 1939, the year of World War II broke out in Europe. Lee immediately joined the military, commissioned as a second lieutenant because of his education. In the winter of 1942-43, in North Africa, he was among the first American troops to take on the Nazi war machine. In those early battles, the Americans were outgunned and outmaneuvered. Lee was in command of a fifty-man infantry platoon in February 1943, when a German attack overran American forces in Tunisia. Lee and his men were trapped forty miles behind German lines. Taken prisoner, they were marched to a temporary POW enclosure, where they joined thousands of other captured Americans. "It looked like they had the whole damn army," Lee remembers. Life as a POW began with interrogation. Lee refused to tell his Nazi questioners anything beyond his name, rank, and serial number, as required by the Geneva Convention.

Later, he says, "One of the boys in my platoon came over and said, 'Lieutenant, I'm going to be your orderly. The Germans asked me if I knew any of the officers out here and what unit they were from. They said if I could identify them, I could go along with them as their orderly."

"It was just a ruse," Lee says, to discover here various units had been deployed, a valuable bit of military information. "He didn't go with me as my orderly."

Officers and enlisted men were soon separated. On cargo plane carrying some forty captured officers to Italy, Lee got his first glimpse of the ceaseless battle of wits that would be waged between POWs and their captors.

There was only one guard on the plane, and the prisoners quickly hatched a scheme to overpower the guard and the pilots and fly the plane to freedom. But the Germans knew what they were doing. The plane crossed the Mediterranean at a frighteningly low altitude, just a few feet above the waves. The hazardous altitude made any attempt to attack the pilots suicidal.

In May 1943, having crossed Europe by boxcar, Lee arrived at Oflag 64, a prison camp for American officers near the town of Szubin in Poland. There, he was soon drawn into an intercontinental escape conspiracy.

When the old army truck pulled up to the railroad depot in Szubin, Lee and the two other POWs got busy unloading humanitarian parcels from a freight car. Their guards found a shady spot to lounge and enjoyed the cigarettes the Americans had given them.

The POWs made a list of prisoners receiving packages. But they were careful to make no record of two packages addressed to POWs named Grimm and Howard.

There were no POWs by those names at Oflag 64. These were the phony parcels containing guns, sent by a mysterious military-intelligence service agency called MIS-X.

Lloyd Shoemaker, who worked for the agency, first told the full story of MIS-X in a 1990 book, The Escape Factory. Publication of the book has freed veterans, such as Lee, to talk about experiences they had kept to themselves for half a century. Sworn to secrecy when he was discharged from the military service, Lee had never even told his wife, Harriet, whom he's married in 1945.

The idea behind the secrecy was that MIS-X tricks might come in handy in some future war if the techniques remained unknown. MIS-X was established soon after America entered the war in 1941. It was modeled after a British operation. The purpose was to stay in contact with POWs throughout Europe by means of coded letters, and to help them attempt escapes, largely by smuggling "escape aids" into the camps.

Maps of the regions surrounding POW camps were inserted between the cardboard layers of chess boards or glued in fragments to the backs of playing cards. Baseballs were wound around radio components. Tiny saw blades and compasses were hidden in shaving brushes or cribbage boards. Money, cameras, travel documents, clothing, flashlights, and much more were successfully slipped into POW camps by MIS-X not to mention pistols.

The packages addressed to fictional POWs Grimm and Howard were what MIS-X called "super-dupers," according to Shoemaker. These were used when the contraband that POWs needed could not be effectively camouflaged. Super-duper packages were addressed to non-existent POWs, and it was left to the prisoners themselves to somehow sneak the "hot" parcels past their Nazi captors.

Heavy with POW parcels, the old army truck entered Oflag 64 late in the afternoon. It passed through the single gate in a double barbed-wire fence that stood eight feet tall and stretched about three hundred yards long on each side of the camp.

The prison compound surrounded a former boarding school for girls. One of the old brick dormitories housed the "tin stores" where POW packages were received and inspected.

"Tin" is a British term for a tin can. At the tin stores, German censors would inspect every package arriving for POWs and would puncture every can containing food. This prevented POW from building up a supply of food to use in escapes.

"Super duper" packages had to be slipped past the Germans uninspected. Lee and the other tin stores workers would stand at one end of a table, opening parcels and pushing them down the table toward the Nazi censor.

Then Lee, remembers, "You can remember, you'd start stacking the parcels up. You'd get so many stacked up they couldn't keep track of them."

“Then, you’d offer the guard a cigarette. Somebody would suggest brewing a pot of coffee. You’d distract them, and then somebody would pick up the hot package and quick move it over to the pile of packages by the door that had already been checked.”

In this way, the automatic pistols sent by the MIS-X entered Oflag 64 unmolested.

To Lee’s knowledge, no contraband was ever intercepted at the camp.

Many guards at Oflag 64, as at many compounds housing American and British POWs were older soldiers. Often less than fanatical Nazis, many were also less than perfectly hostile to Americans. “You’d be surprised,” Lee recalls, “how often they’d say, ‘Hey, I’ve got a cousin in Milwaukee,’ or ‘I’ve got a sister in Nebraska.”

The success of MIS-X in Europe owed much to the comparatively humane treatment Germans often extended to American and British POWs-at least in allowing humanitarian parcels to reach prisoners. In the Pacific war, the Japanese were much harsher to POWs, as Japanese military culture considered surrender dishonorable. MIS-X accomplished little in the Pacific Theater, according to Shoemaker.

Meanwhile, Russian POW’s, Polish civilians, and, of course, Jews and many others were brutally abused by Nazis, as Lee sometimes witnessed. On occasion, he says, Oflag 64 would be visited by “mean suckers” from the Gestapo or the SS.

But Oflag 64 inmates often succeeded famously in fooling and manipulating their everyday guards.

“Most everybody is subject to a little blackmail,” Lee says. Guards were bribed with cigarettes, coffee, candy bars, and other wartime luxuries that POWs possessed. (MIS-X made sure they had plenty.) Oflag 64 POWs built a radio, called a “bird,” with parts obtained through such bribes, Lee says. When the bribed guard became fearful and refused to bring any more “bird” materials, Lee says he was told: “By God, you better bring what we need, or they’re going to find out where we got the rest of this stuff.”

Once maneuvered into such a helpless position, a guard was called “tame.” Escape efforts, Lee says, were constantly in motion. A group of five senior officers approved or disapproved all escape schemes. Tailors fabricated civilian clothes and German army uniforms for escapes. Documents were forged. Keys were fashioned from pieces of tin cans.

To safeguard such doings, an elaborate deployment of “stooges” was maintained. POWs would station themselves at key points throughout the camp, each stooge within sight of one other. Prearranged signals-closing an open book, shifting from sitting to a standing position would indicate approaching guards or other dangers. The warning would be instantly relayed be all the stooges across the compound.

Often, POWs harassed their captors mischievously. They would throw cans or other debris into the barbed-wire fences to set off alarms and “irritate them a bit” (as well as to monitor how the guards respond). During roll calls, especially in darkness, POWs

would change positions in line to confuse the guards' count. They would plant cigarettes or other items being stolen and demand that camp personnel be searched.

Escapes seldom succeeded. Shoemaker reports that of some 96,000 American POWs in Europe, 737 made "home runs" - escaping captivity and returning safely to their commands.

But the antic of MIS-X and the POWs had a serious military purpose-to enlist prisoners as still-active combatants, causing the Nazis as many headaches and distractions as possible. Eventually, the strategy became so successful that the Nazis struck back.

The most ambitious escape attempts usually involved tunneling. At Oflag 64, Lee says, a 150-foot tunnel was dug that began beneath a barracks stove, stretching out beyond the camp fence and into a nearby wood.

Not the least of the many challenges in such an uncanny project was disposing of the dirt excavated from the tunnel. POWs used what they indelicately called "peekers"-long cloth tubes that could be filled with dirt and concealed in one's pant leg. Pulling on string would open the tube's bottom and release the dirt onto the campgrounds where many tons of soil were thus concealed.

Though the Germans never discovered it, Oflag 64's tunnel was never used. In spring of 1944, senior officers canceled plans for a mass escape, citing the atrocious consequences of what became known as "the Great Escape," an event immortalized in books and movies.

On March 24, 1944, seventy-six British air officers escaped from Stalag Luft III in eastern Germany through a 335-foot tunnel. All but three of the escapees were soon captured, but the venture had been only too successful in traumatizing the Nazis.

Adolf Hitler was so enraged by the mounting audacity of POWs that he ordered the Gestapo to shoot fifty of the recaptured British officers. This was done. Soon thereafter, notices went up at all POW camps, including Oflag 64, announcing that escape would no longer be considered "a sport."

Yet within months, an even more ambitious escape was plotted at Oflag 64. The new scheme called for a coordinated POW uprising and commando assault that would rescue the entire camp and carry four hundred POWs to freedom aboard B-17 aircraft that would land in nearby fields. It was for this operation that the automatic pistols were requested and sent.

But in the end, the rescue attempt was also canceled. The U. S. Secretary of War refused to approve the dangerous mission, fearing Nazi retaliation against other POW's.

By January 1945, Soviet forces were closing in on Oflag 64. The POWs were marched some two hundred miles to the west. They joined thousands of civilian refugees

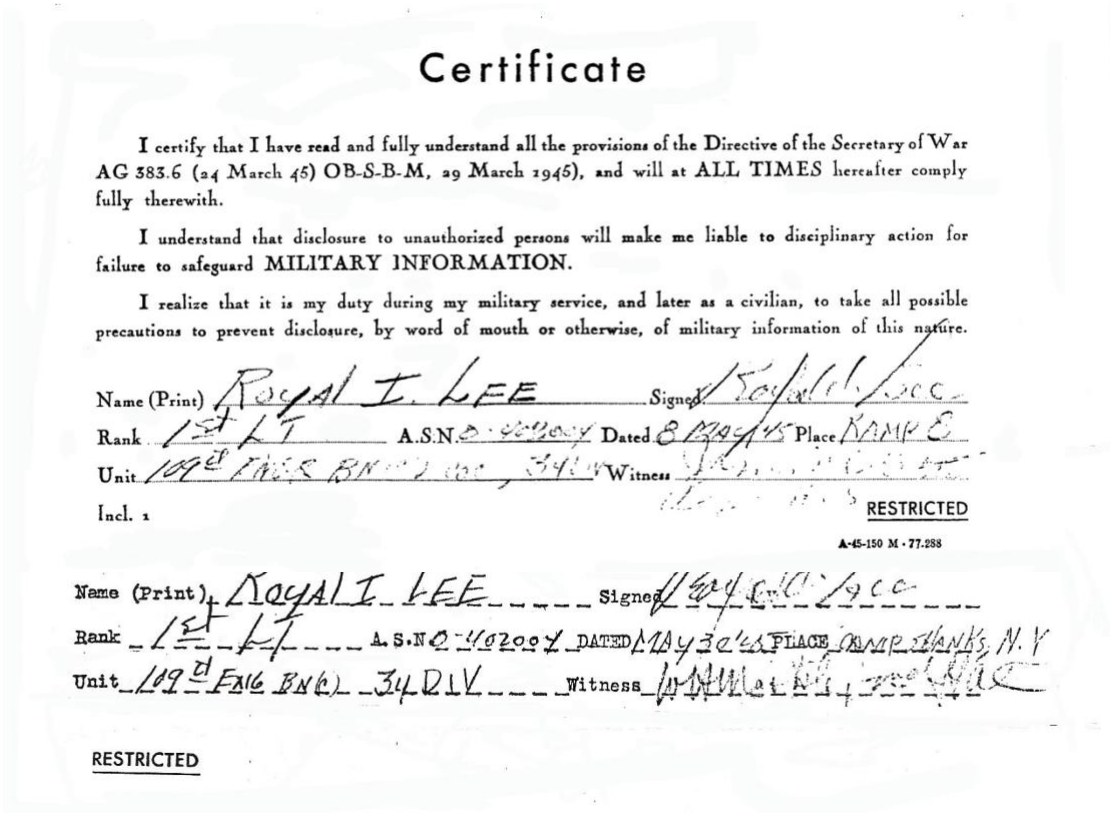
trudging across a bitter, war-scarred winter landscape, sometimes living off the flesh of the dead horses.

At a large camp south of Berlin, Oflag 64 POWs were thrown together with some twenty-five prisoners from many countries. In April, Russian troops overran the region and took control of the camp.

It quickly became apparent that this “liberation” did not mean immediate freedom for Americans. The Soviets intended to exchange American POWs for numerous Russian soldiers in American hands that did not want to be sent home.

Lee didn’t wait around to be used for trade. After two years as a rebellious prisoner of the Nazis, he finally made up his escape from Soviet custody. When an American reconnaissance unit passed by, Lee and some fellow POWs scrambled over the barbed wire and were free at last.

Though proud of the secret war waged by World War II POWs, Lee dismisses any suggestion that he suffered or contributed more than any American soldier who saw combat service in any war does. In fact, Lee says one of the benefits of the war along the barbed-wire front was that it smoothed the “little guilt complex” POWs suffered over having allowed themselves to be captured. “You wondered sometimes: Did I really do my job? Did I do enough? Could I have done more?” POWs, Lee says, needed ways ways of continuing the fight. “A lot of guys got killed, you know.”



Certificate

I certify that I have read and fully understand all the provisions of the Directive of the Secretary of War AG 383.6 (24 March 45) OB-S-B-M, 29 March 1945), and will at ALL TIMES hereafter comply fully therewith.

I understand that disclosure to unauthorized persons will make me liable to disciplinary action for failure to safeguard MILITARY INFORMATION.

I realize that it is my duty during my military service, and later as a civilian, to take all possible precautions to prevent disclosure, by word of mouth or otherwise, of military information of this nature.

Name (Print) Royal I. LEE Signed [signature]

Rank 1st LT A.S.N. [illegible] Dated 8 [illegible] 45 Place KAMP E

Unit 109th FA Bn 34th Div Witness [illegible]

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Name (Print) Royal I. LEE Signed [signature]

Rank 1st Lt A.S.N. 0-402007 DATED May 30 '45 PLACE CAMP HANKS, N.Y.

Unit 109th FA Bn () 34 Div Witness [signature]

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Biography written by Kriegy Research Group writer Ann C. Rogers in collaboration with Royal's son Robert Lee. Other contributions by Elodie Caldwell