

## **T/5 Robert Edward “Bobby” Levin**

**1920**

**(Age 103 as of 4/1/24)**

### **EARLY YEARS**

Robert Levin was born on 30 April 1920 in Brooklyn, New York. His parents were Jacob and Edith Levin. After Robert graduated from high school, he attended North Carolina State College as a textile major under Dean Nelson. His father imported textiles, so this was a natural choice for him and his major interest. According to Levin during the VA interview, when a student enrolled at college it was compulsory to be in ROTC; the war had begun as he graduated. He also stated that very few women attended college classes on his campus.

### **MILITARY SERVICE PREPARATION**



First sent to Camp Upton on Long Island, Levin was then assigned to Camp Wheeler for training. Located close to the city limits of Macon, Georgia, it served as an Infantry Replacement Training Center where new recruits received basic and advanced individual training to replace combat casualties. As a college graduate, he applied to OCS and was accepted but had to wait until a new class started at Ft. Benning.

Acknowledging that he would be sent overseas, Levin requested and received permission for one week's leave to see his family in New York and reported back to Baltimore where he and hundreds of other soldiers were loaded onto a train. Robert thought it interesting that the train stopped momentarily at his college town, and he imagined leaving the train for a sight-seeing trip of the campus, especially his dorm, Number 7. Ironically, he would return there for grad school after the war.

Joining multiple cadres on a boat, they landed in North Africa where he visited the town of Casablanca which was quite an adventure. Soldiers were encouraged to write letters, so he wrote his father that he was on the same British ship that his dad had taken to Japan (without disclosing specifics).

Since the war had shifted to mainland Europe, Levin remembered being transported from Oran to the Naples area with the 36<sup>th</sup> Division, also known as the Texas Division.

## COMBAT

Traveling north to the mountain areas north of Naples was his first encounter with war—life and death combat with the Germans. During this time, he made PFC which he referred to as **P**raying **F**or **C**ivilian.

The situation was deadly with Americans on one side of a mountain, Germans on the other, with artillery in between. This battle configuration was where Robert experienced “digging a foxhole and living in a foxhole”.

Enduring the impacts of German artillery shelling made quite an impression on the new, mostly young recruits—something they had never experienced previously: that a specific artillery shell “could have their name on it”.

Robert’s direct contact occurred during the Battle of the Rapido River near Monte Cassino. Noting that the waters moved rapidly, the name was appropriate. Their mission was to establish a bridgehead on the far side of the river. Germans were in force above them with Americans below, so their positions were less than ideal. Levin was in the lead company across the river—the only one. *“The use of boats had been tried the night before, but this did not work, so my group crossed over on a pontoon bridge on the 21<sup>st</sup>. We were getting bombed by German artillery while trying to radio American artillery to lay barrages against the enemy, but no help came.”* Suddenly from nowhere, a German came up behind him and said, *“Hands-up. Come quickly”* on 22 January 1944. Exiting his foxhole, he stamped on his rifle, trying to destroy its worth to the enemy. During the bombardment, Levin had received a shrapnel wound which was cleaned and wrapped with gauze. Many others were badly wounded, dying or dead.

Approximately 90 Americans were rounded up and loaded onto trucks. While trying to retain his balance in a vehicle with no seats, he told an officer that hand grenades were in his pockets. *“Since they will not help us in this situation, my advice is to get rid of them when you can.”* Levin agreed and emptied them on the ground when he followed others away from the truck convoy.

Curiously, the Americans were not searched when they arrived at the camp. Each was handed a card for his name and serial number. Sections were marked POW, Wounded or Not Wounded with room for his US address labeled on the card. His parents learned from a *New York Times* newspaper that Robert was MIA (Missing In Action). Later, a card was delivered to their address in New York stating he was a POW.

Robert was a PFC when captured and when told that he might have to work if he were enlisted, he stated that he was a Buck Sergeant (NCO). Although he was Jewish, he listed himself as Protestant. Levin also remembered that

they passed through ‘a number of transit camps, Stalag IV B, to II B, and finally to Oflag 64.’

## **OFLAG 64**

Arriving on 14 October 1944, the POWs were marched from the train station in Szubin, Poland, and entered the gates. Asked about the camp’s atmosphere, Levin explained a major issue. They were not tortured, but were deprived of food.

*‘The German guards could be disruptive, but not a real problem. When the SS troops who were taken off the front lines for rest, they became the camp guards and were ruthless. You had to watch yourself around them. They also took Red Cross Boxes meant for the Americans and ate what they wanted. The rest they threw away. We were very hungry and this was hard to watch. Now, when I see homeless people eating out of garbage cans, I empathize with them because I have eaten out of garbage cans and know what real hunger is. Eating out of garbage cans to stay alive was sometimes necessary.’*

The Senior American Officer organized the camp. One of his duties was to assign committees, and of the most important was the escape committee. All escape plans were run through them and if they were credible, a ‘go ahead’ was given.

Another action which affected Levin concerned his life and events at another camp. After the Belgian Bulge or Battle of the Bulge, Oflag 64 could not accommodate the number of Americans captured, so an additional camp was utilized. Lt. Col. Yardley was asked to provide support for establishment at another camp, and he asked Levin to accompany him to Oflag 64Z, located 70 KM south.

## **YARDLEY’S ACCOUNT OF OFLAG 64-Z**

*January 14-Schokken, Germany, Oflag 64-Z*

*‘An auxiliary camp has been set up here at Schokken, Germany, for American prisoners of war. A staff from Oflag 64 has been sent here, including Capt. Amelio B. Palluconi, who speaks Italian fluently, Lt. Craig Campbell, who will be my adjutant, from Houston, Texas, Lt. George Muehlbauer, who speaks German fluently, Lt. Pete Lampru, from Jacksonville, Florida, eleven orderlies and myself.’*

*'This camp is to be Oflag 64-Z. This was an orphanage in peacetime, and there are 200 Italian generals and admirals interned in this camp. Col. Gen. Geloso is the Senior Italian: Gen. Blasio, the Executive; Gen. Ationi, Supply Officer; Col. Dulchi, Adjutant, etc. They have been interned here since the Italian armistice, September 1943.'*

*'The Americans are to live in one of the four big buildings. Our building, Block No. 1, is a fairly nice building, warmer than any of the barracks at Oflag 64, Szubin, Poland.'*

*'American Colonel Hurley E. Fuller from San Antonio arrived the next day with 87 American officers. He had warned the Division Commander of the 28th Infantry Division about the "imminent German offensive in the Bastogne sector" but had been shouted down, the brutal attack had taken place, and his regiment was demolished and he was captured. The 87 officers with him were only a small part of the 1800 Americans captured.'*

*'On January 20, Yardley and Col Fuller were called to the office of Kommandant, Hauptmann Martz and told, "Gentlemen, due to the grave situation for the Germans, the camp is being evacuated at 4:00 AM tomorrow. We have no available transportation, consequently, the Americans and the Italians will be ready to march."*

*'On January 21, 94 Americans, 30 Italian Generals and admirals and their orderlies, and the German company under Hauptman Martz, moved out. The temperature was 15 degrees below zero.'*

*'To describe the Italians in their comical, almost pathetic appearance would require an experienced chronicler but briefly, they ranged in age from 45 to 71: soft, physically unfit from eighteen months of interment, and like babies—trying to carry all their personal belongings, including boots, pictures, clothing, canteens, plates, etc.—in one, two, or three suitcases, marching a hundred miles or so.'* (Yardley, p. 231)

Yardley further states that as the American group followed next, they soon stumbled over suitcases and treasured items dropped by the formerly, royally-treated superior officers who now struggled to keep up—some collapsing and dying by the road side. Twenty-seven miles later, they arrived at a large estate, were fed and slept in a horse barn. (Yardley, pp. 229 – 232)

## **MELTESEN'S ACCOUNT OF THE MARCH**

*'Oflag 64Z was evacuated on 21 January 1945 and marched toward Wugarten. The Schokken march column of POWs reached Wugarten on 28 January, a march of 122 kilometers in eight days. On 29 January the German Commandant left the column at 0630 hours and at 1030 hours a Russian unit with a Captain and a Lieutenant arrived. The German Commandant had left a paper with Col. Fuller which protected the Americans and Italians from other German troops rampaging through the area'. (Meltesen, p. 229)*

### **LEVIN—A CELEBRATION SALUTE**

Levin recalled hearing artillery fire from every point of the compass. When the Russians arrived, two Russian sergeants poured vodka from a jerry can into four glasses and saluted “Roosevelt, Churchill, Stalin” handing one to Levin and the fourth to another. Levin did not remember anything until the next day.

### **MELTESEN—TO RUSSIA WITH LUCK AND HOME**

*'The Wugarten group waited until 5 March for trucks to move them to Wrzesnia, then by rail through Warsaw to Odessa, arriving on 15 March. They sailed on the HMT Circassia on 25 March. On board were 149 officers, 747 enlisted men, 1 merchant seaman, 1 civilian, and 10 stretcher cases. While in Odessa they were billeted in a school house and isolated from the other POWs.'* (Meltesen, p. 229)

Arriving in the port of Boston the day after Roosevelt died, they were taken to Camp Miles Standish in New Jersey. Being familiar with the area, Levin took a train to New York and a subway near his parents' apartment at Riverside Drive and 72<sup>nd</sup>.

When Robert reached street level, he encountered large crowds and when conversing with a policeman was told that President Truman was about to pass by. Explaining that he had just returned from the war in Europe, the policeman shouldered his 50-pound duffle bag and ushered Levin to his family's door. He will always remember that his sister, Nancy, saw him from their apartment window and alerted the family. She was the first one to welcome his arrival!

### **CIVILAIN LIFE**

The Adjusted Service Rating Score was a point-based system used by the U.S. Army at the end of WWII to determine soldiers' status to be discharged from

military service. Robert Levin was eligible based on the points he accumulated while being in the following areas: North Africa Campaign, Italy, European Invasion, and Russian Combat Zone.

His decorations include the Purple Heart and the POW Medal for the 13 months he spent as an American in Prisoner of War Camps.

Civilian Levin resumed and completed graduate work in North Carolina State and started working for the Dan River Mills in Danville Virginia.

Along the way, he met Carlene Hardy as she worked at the First National Bank in Danville and married her on 22 October 1949. Seventy years later they are still together.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

Levin learned to be more independent and to consider options when making life decisions.

“Keep moving” is a major lesson, according to Levin, and to prove the value of this, he will be 101 in 2021 because he has continued to be active by taking multiple exercise and strength classes. Carlene accompanies him to some classes.

He continues to be in good health and has only one main malady: macular degeneration. Expressing high praise for the VA, he appreciates the equipment provided which enables him to see and read items he might not be able to view.

## **REMEMBERING A CHRISTMAS** by Bob Levin

Listening to Christmas carols in the lobby of our Club House now triggered a memory of a Christmas spent in a POW camp in Schubin, Poland in 1944.

Major Jack Dobson decided we should have a Christmas dinner by combining our Red Cross Christmas parcels. Present were four officers and three enlisted men. Major Dobson, Lt. Lynn Hunsaker and Lt. Patrick Teel were from the 1<sup>st</sup> Ranger Battalion, and Lt. Stanley Peters from the 36<sup>th</sup> Division. The enlisted men were Harry Sauter and Harry Warner from the 1<sup>st</sup> Ranger and I was from the 36<sup>th</sup>.

The meal consisted of fried Spam and gravy, mashed potatoes, biscuits, chocolate pudding pie and coffee. We thought it was a great meal. I made a menu for the seven of us so we could sign each other's. Of course, we all took

part in preparing the meal. After the meal we gave thanks that we were able to celebrate this event, while hoping that in the near future we would be able to celebrate Christmas with our own families.

It is hard to believe that this event took place over fifty-seven years ago.

## **SOURCES**

Emails and phone conversations between Mr. Levin and the Oflag 64 Remembered team

VIMEO Videos recorded with Dr. Emler on Nov 2019 for the Durham VA Health Care System entitled "My Life My Story"

*HOME WAS NEVER LIKE THIS* by Col. Doyle Yardley

*ROADS TO LIBERATION FROM OFLAG 64* by Clarence R. Meltesen

Biography written by Kriegy Research Group writer Ann C. Rogers