

2LT Robert J. Oshlo

1915-1999

Early Years

Robert James Oshlo was born on May 25, 1915, the son of Charles and Catherine Oshlo of rural Council Bluffs, Iowa. He was the middle of three children in the family, all boys. He grew up farming with a team of mules and learned the value of hard work. This served to shape one of his life-long defining characteristics: He was not afraid of work. He was also known for his magnetic personality, infectious laugh, and quiet leadership.



Bob as a Young Man

Robert (Bob) attended Council Bluffs public schools and excelled in sports. As a senior, he was named the Council Bluffs athlete of the year due to his prowess in basketball, football, and track. After high school, he first attended Creighton University where he played football as a freshman. He then transferred to the University of Iowa where he competed in football and track. Unfortunately, he suffered career-ending knee injuries playing football and ultimately left college to return to work in the Omaha/Council Bluffs area. While working for Roberts Dairy as a delivery man, he met his future wife Evelyn where she was working for the Union Pacific Railroad.



Military Life



Bob in Dress Uniform

Bob enlisted in the Army in August 1942. Assigned to the 168th Infantry Regiment, 34th Division, he was shipped to Scotland to train for an amphibious assault. That invasion occurred in November 1942 when he was part of Operation Torch which was America's first major foray into WW2. His leadership earned him a battlefield commission to 2nd Lieutenant in the Second Battalion of the 168th.

Capture and Internment

On February 14, 1943, the Second Battalion was in position at Tissouda, just in front of Faid Pass and was attacked by three German Divisions in what became known as the Battle of Kassarine Pass. By the evening of the following day, they were surrounded by German forces. At dusk the same day, a friendly plane dropped orders to evacuate the area and return to American lines. Bob and others snuck through and then walked about two hours when they ran into German resistance. He and several other men were quickly pinned down by enemy fire. They managed to crawl into a deep wash which provided some cover. Other Americans



Bob's POW Identification Card

trickled in and joined them in the cover. Two attempts were made to escape to the American line and failed. As dawn of the 16th approached Bob picked out what appeared to be the line of least resistance through the encircling German forces. During the day, the plan was solidified. At dusk on the 16th, Bob and about 40 men executed their plan and got through the German line without a mishap. They were cold, tired, hungry, and thirsty. They had few arms and ammunition. They headed northwest because the belief was that there would be fewer Germans in that direction. After ~20 miles of nighttime march under forced march conditions, a tank was blown up in front of them and they sought cover. They had no more than gotten situated when the Germans opened fire on their position. They were surrounded, out of ammunition, out of water, tending to wounded, and exhausted. The only option was surrender. In addition to Bob and the men with him, Colonel Thomas D. Drake was also captured in this battle.

Bob would spend the rest of the war primarily at Oflag 64 in Szubin Poland. He would later speak little about his time as a POW but would comment that he was always glad he was a prisoner of the Germans rather than the Japanese. As an officer, he would simply say that his treatment was reasonable. He worked to learn enough German to converse with the German guards. Conversations that would humanize the situation and perhaps (he



Bob (2nd from right) and others at Oflag 64

hoped) would lead to better treatment and more rations. He found that walking was his best therapy so he would endlessly walk the perimeter of the camp.

Almost two years of his life were spent here under conditions that Americans today cannot fathom or understand.



Szubin Water Tower circa 2020. Likely the first thing prisoners saw upon arrival

Escape

By January 1945 the Russian Army had destroyed Warsaw and what was left of the Polish Army and headed west. This prompted the Germans to begin marching the POWs, under guard, west towards Germany. Conditions were brutal: No food with long days of marching. The nights were worse with no place to bed down in the bitter cold January weather. In these conditions, there was no chance for the men to recuperate for the next day's march. As they walked, some of the men began to think that the Germans would probably line up them up and shoot them as the Russians got closer. They wanted to escape but had been told to not go east because the Russians would

shoot them. However, after over two years of the Germans, they thought that they would rather be shot by the Russians on the move than be shot by the Germans up against a wall. They walked for three days and considered three different plans for escape. Opportunity then knocked on the door. The prisoners were put up in a big Polish farmyard for the night. Bob and three of his fellow officers got into a barn to sleep in the warm cow manure. They looked up and discovered that the hay loft floor above them was composed of concrete. There were openings in the floor for hay to be dropped to the cattle below. They decided that if they could sneak into the hay loft without being seen, the Germans wouldn't be able to shoot them with small arms from below when they discovered they were gone. Bob, and three of his fellow 2nd Lieutenants (Duane Johnson, Arthur Detmers, and Lt. Spaulding), seized that opportunity and snuck into the hay loft. The Germans left without them but soon sent patrols back to search for the escapees. They shot up the barn, but the concrete floor saved the four Lieutenants.



Model of Oflag 64 displayed at MOAS, a boys' school located on the former site of Oflag 64

The men hid in the barn for the next seven days, befriended by the Polish farm family. A Russian patrol entered the barnyard and eventually, the barn. The Americans dropped through the hay chutes and grabbed a few of the Russians so they couldn't be shot. They shouted they were American Officers but were not believed by the Russians. The Poles told them that they were Americans and probably saved the men's lives. The escapees asked for a ride, food and clothing and were given nothing. They were called "capitalists" and told to walk. They were forced to join the Russians who were marching east into Russia. They were moved from one Russian Company to another as they advanced toward the Elbe River. The Russians were relentlessly brutally antagonistic. Bob and his companions steadily made their southward along the bloody trail the Russians were carving with the goal of reaching Odessa which they knew to be a warm-weather port. They eventually reached their destination goal where they boarded a British ship to Istanbul, Turkey and, eventually, to Naples, Italy where they were repatriated into the American Forces.

Post War

Bob left the Army in 1945 and in the same year he was married to his sweetheart Evelyn who had waited years for his return. His early married life took him from Texas to Indiana to Idaho where they initially settled. There they owned and operated an Automobile Garage. Bob also spent some time working in Uranium mines in northern Idaho helping to find the necessary ingredient for the fledgling Uranium industry that would fuel the commercial nuclear power industry.



Bob & Evelyn

He and Evelyn and their still growing family of four children left the mountains of Idaho for the plains of Nebraska and settled in Grand Island where they owned and operated a motel while Bob continued to work other jobs to help fund the needs of their family which would ultimately reach

six children: Four sons and two daughters. His professional career culminated with a job with the United States Postal Service and Bob retired in the late 1970s with 20 years of service.

Bob and Evelyn retired to southern Missouri where they raised horses and welcomed family visits.



Bob in his famous Iris Garden

Along with the horses, Bob continued his life-long hobby of raising and cultivating Iris. An avid gardener, his flower gardens were the marvel of any who were fortunate enough to see them and give Bob a chance to talk about the many different varieties he was growing.

He was initially reluctant to attend the POW reunions but was ultimately drawn to them to re-connect with his fellow Kriegies. Over time, he began to look forward to these get-togethers and the camaraderie that they fostered.

Bob was not defined by his military experience, but it was a shaping factor in his post-war life. A private man, he seldom discussed his war-time experience. However, he often said that he never wanted to be hungry again and his mantra regarding the family budget priority system was, “first we eat”. An efficacious man, he did whatever he had to do to provide for his family. He held his family close and in the highest regard. Bob’s biggest love was always his family. “Can’t” was a word that he never used when encouraging his children and his many grandchildren. A selfless man, he would always put the needs of his family above his. His sincerest desire was for his children to have a better life than his.

Bob passed in February 1999 and was buried with full U.S. Army Military honors in Arlington National Cemetery. He was decorated with the European-African-Middle Eastern (EAME) Campaign Medal along with two Bronze Stars and the World War II Victory Medal. In his lifetime, Bob Oshlo’s personality, trust, leadership, integrity, work ethic, and love for his family defined him. His was a life well-lived. For all these reasons, he will be forever remembered by those who were fortunate enough to know and love him.



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