

## **2LT Louis William Otterbein**

**1916 – 1966**

### **EARLY LIFE AND ARMY INDUCTION**

The birth of Louis William Otterbein, Jr. was recorded as 27 January 1916 in Newark, Essex, New Jersey. He attended Bloomfield High School and was Captain of the 1935 football team that won state championship honors. Coached by legendary Bill Foley, they finished the season undefeated, untied, and unscored on. The team accumulated 206 points in one season. In recognition of his extraordinary athletic abilities and leadership qualities, Louis Otterbein was inducted into the Bloomfield Hall of Fame in 1987. Choosing between two schools of higher learning (Annapolis and Rutgers), Otterbein received the prestigious Upson Memorial Scholarship offered by Rutgers University and graduated in the class of 1940. Later, he was employed on the office staff of the American Colortype Company in Allwood, New Jersey, before he was inducted into the U.S. Army on 21 February 1941.

While attending jump school at Ft. Benning, Otterbein met and married Lieutenant Jean Rogers on 12 September 1942, an Army nurse attached to the fort hospital. Commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in 1943, he was deployed overseas in May of 1943, and flew missions over North Africa and Sicily with the 101 Airborne. His wife and family resided in Silver Springs, New York, during his absence.

### **CAPTURE AND KRIEGY LIFE AT OFLAG 64**

The evening of 9 July 1943, Louis posted a letter to his parents stating, “*big things are doing.*” Though his location was not included in this message, the invasion occurred in Sicily and Louis was among the first Americans to touch down. Known as one of the largest paratroopers’ drops in the history of the U.S. Army, Louis was captured on 10 July 1943; he and many other captured Americans were sent north to a location south of Berlin. Otterbein described in his own words his trials there while being kept in solitary confinement: “*A Nazi captain used every method on me from cajolery to mental torture. Daily my life was threatened.*” The food was so deplorable that he developed a severe case of jaundice and was sent to Oflag 64, arriving on 10 August 1943. Fortunately, he regained his health and strength and used his considerable talents in ways which benefited every Kriegy in the camp.

Oflag 64’s official camp newspaper was called *The Oflag Item*. The following article appeared on page 2 in the October 1, 1944 original *Item* issue:

## Kriegie Sketches

*Chief carpenter and handiest man in camp is 6-ft. Paratrooper Louis Otterbein of Bloomfield, New Jersey, who can do anything with a Klim tin can except make it talk. The man who built the stage of the Oflag Little Theatre is responsible for most of the sets, furniture, props, and sound effects for the productions of the past year.*

Otterbein's talents were recognized in other camp activities too, as noted by author Stephen Dando-Collins in his book, *The Big Break*. The theatre was located next door to the tunnel where "Tunnel King" Bill Cory and his fellow diggers were adding a new underground structure to the camp—only this one was 25 feet down and headed toward the camp's enclosure wire.

*Lou Otterbein was the Oflag 64 escape committee's gadget man. Following the footsteps of the Asselin tunnelers, but independent of his predecessors, Otterbein built bellows to pump air into the tunnel and air lines made from linked Klim milk cans. When Cory's shaft began to fill with water, Lou Otterbein built a suction device that efficiently sucked the water out.*

Other Kriegies also added accolades to Louis Otterbein's talents:

In Tom Holt's autobiography, he stated: "*The Hardest POW in the theatre group was the very talented set builder, Lou Otterbein. What he could do with Red Cross boxes, pieces of cloth, anything the POWs contributed to the effort, was simply 'ausgezeichnet' (outstanding).*"

Barbed Wire Hobbies on page 3 of the November 1, 1944 *Item* mentioned that "*all-around Lou Otterbein makes badges that would put some of the commercial firms to shame.*"

On page 92 of Frank Aten's book, *Name on the Wall*, he states: *Lou Otterbein of Bloomfield, New Jersey, with the aid of a few YMCA tools and hours of patience, actually made a roulette wheel we thought was as good as any in Reno.*

Through his ingenious conception and completion of construction projects which greatly improved the morale and quality of Americans' lives at the Oflag 64 Prisoner of War Camp, Lt. Louis W. Otterbein was awarded the Bronze Star.

In addition to his many creative talents, Louis, often called Lou around the camp, also demonstrated a sense of humor as recorded by the following comment taken from Col. Doyle R. Yardley's book, *HOME WAS NEVER LIKE THIS*:

*Early today the Germans sent word into camp that a boxcar full of Red Cross food parcels was at the Schubin railway station. POW morale jumped sky high. Upon investigation, however, it was discovered that the car contained lumber from the "Y" in Geneva for*

*our Little Theater! Lou Otterbein, stage master, says, 'Well, we'll saw it up and have Pine Pie!'*

Extraordinary irony was also present as demonstrated by the discovery that during their encampment, four men who found themselves in the same POW camp, Oflag 64, also found that they had simultaneously attended Rutgers University in Brunswick, New Jersey. Their names were First Lieutenant Zoltan Takacs, Second Lieutenant Louis Otterbein, Second Lieutenant Thomas Mitchell Jr., and Second Lieutenant George L. Durgin. This commonality and camaraderie became their goal to "*petition the Rutgers Alumni Association for a charter to form a Rutgers Club in the German camp, according to John Kirkwood, alumni secretary. The request was written on a post-karte sent Luftpost from Oflag 64.*" This was to be the first Rutgers Alumni Club ever formed in enemy territory.

In January of 1945, as the Russian Army drew near, Kriegies and staff members of Oflag 64 packed their belongings and began the long, bitter-cold march to Hammelburg. Louis was not among them as he had been hospitalized with an infected foot. According to *OFLAG 64 The Fiftieth Anniversary Book*, Colonel Drury, the hospital commander, made evacuation plans and "*on January 28, 1945, the men left Schubin by truck and were taken to Rembertov, arriving January 31, 1945.*" Finally, on February 22, 1945 patients and staff boarded a train for Odessa where Otterbein began his way home on a New Zealand ship, HMNZS Monowai. When Lieutenant Louis Otterbein arrived in the U.S.A. he was given a long furlough to reunite with family members.

## **CIVILIAN LIFE**

After being discharged from the Army, Lou Otterbein became a partner of the Montclair Arts and Crafts Press in 1957 and in 1958, he founded his own company, Otterbein Press, Inc. in Montclair, New Jersey.

Otterbein was a member of the Mountain Lodge 214, F&AM, the West Essex Fellowship Bowling League and the B-M 25 Club. He was also a member and former deacon of the First Presbyterian Church of Caldwell. Unfortunately, his creative life was cut short by the discovery of a brain tumor and he died 24 August 1966 at the age of 50. Burial occurred at Mount Hebron Cemetery.

Family members include his wife, Mrs. Jean Otterbein; three daughters, Linda Lou Otterbein Rimer, Olivia Jean Otterbein, Leslie Ann Otterbein; a son, John Lester Otterbein; and a grandson.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

In an article written after Louis Otterbein was liberated, he expressed optimism for the whereabouts of servicemen not accounted for:

*A message of hope for families of prisoners and missing servicemen was given today by 2Lt. Louis Otterbein, Jr. formerly of 26 Fairview Place in Bloomfield, home after being liberated by Russians from a German prison.*

*“Tell mothers not to worry,” he stated. “Things are so disorganized overseas that it is hard to get information through promptly on prisoners. The boys can take care of themselves and I feel sure they are safe in 99 cases out of 100.”*

Biography written by Kriegy Research Group writer Ann C. Rogers