2LT John Robert Rodgers

1923 ~

(101 years as of 2024)

EARLY YEARS

John, Sr. at about 6 months - 1923

John R. Rodgers was born in Temple, Texas, on February 9, 1923. His father was a railway mail clerk and John remembers that they moved frequently. When he was six years old, he moved with his mother, brother and sister to Paris, Texas. They had many relatives in the Paris-Blossom Texas, area. For a short time, he attended kindergarten and first grade in Ft. Worth. The rest of his public education classes were taken in Paris (grade school from 1929-1937), followed by four years of high school where he graduated in June1940. In April of this year, he learned that the Texas National Guard had organized a medical company in Paris and on April 13, he took the oath and became a "Buck Private" in Company B, 11lth Medical Regiment, 36th Division.

> *I joined the National Guard so I could collect a dollar for a one-hour drill period once a week. I lied about my age to join the Guard and mom gave her permission.*

Next stop: August 1940 when the 36th was sent to Louisiana for month-long maneuvers. Following these, Rodgers was promoted to Private First Class and a 6th Class Specialist Rating of Surgical Technical—a 1st 6th. In November his unit was called to active duty and convoyed to Camp Bowie at Brownwood, Texas. Other training sent him back to Camp Bowie then to Fitzsimmons General Hospital in Denver, Colorado for Medical Technical Course, which promoted him to Medical Technician 5th Class, transferred then to the 304th Hospital at Fort Bliss, El Paso, Texas. In February 1942 Rodgers learned that the Army Air Corps had dropped the college requirement for pilot training, so he sought out the recruiting station at Bliss, took and passed the exams and became an Aviation Cadet. His appointment came through on April 13th. His lucky day.

PILOT TRAINING AND AIRCRAFT CHECKOUTS

Concerning Rodgers' flight training, this was held at Kelly Field, Texas; Primary at Coleman, Texas; Basic at Waco, Texas; and Advanced at Brooks Field in San Antonio, where his class was expanded to train Rodgers' group as Recon Pilots and was held over for one class to fly the 0-52 for the following class.

I was graduated from flight training with the class of 42K on December 1942 and following the oath of office, I was commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant in the US Army Air Corps Reserve and received my Pilots Wings. At this time, I was nineteen-years old and it was one of the proudest days of my life.

In Early 1943, he was assigned to Will Rogers Field in Oklahoma City where he checked out in the P-40. His next assignment was to Northern field at Tullahoma, Tennessee, where he flew the P-39. Later he checked out in the P-51 (no model designation). These aircraft were held out from those produced for the British and had British seat belt and shoulder harnesses which US aircraft did not. The fuel was also in imperial gallons. When orders came through, Rodgers packed his bags for Camp Patrick Henry via train ride.

A number of GI trucks met us at the station on which we and our baggage were loaded. We off loaded at a barracks in the main camp where we were told we'd probably be there for a few more days. The following day I was given a list of several hundred men and the barracks to which they were assigned. Since I was an officer, I was to be responsible to see that they got on the ship. I decided a roll call was in order so I could see who was there. From this I found about a fourth of them were missing and no one knew where they were. This was not surprising since we were all replacements and hardly anyone knew anyone else. I didn't know what to do so I reported this fact to the orderly room where no one seemed to care.

About three days later, everyone (who showed up) was loaded onto trucks with their bags and boarded the *SS Mariposa,* a Pacific liner converted into a troop liner. Rodgers recalls that 6,000 personnel, including Red Cross ladies, made for tight quarters as they zig-zagged across the ocean "*during the height of the U-boat menace."* Next stop: North Africa. They sailed into port at Casablanca on 25 June 1943 and were relocated in a tent camp at Cassez Airport.

COMBAT MISSIONS AND CAPTURE

In July 1943 I was flying the A-36 (nee P-51 Mustang) dive bomber in the 27th Bomb Group. I had been based on Korba North, Cape Bon of Tunisia, North Africa. Soon after the invasion of Sicily we were moved up to Gela on the south coast of Sicily. The move up was quite interesting. We didn't have transport so we rolled all our belongings in a bed roll and tied it to the under-wing bomb rack. Had we been attacked by other aircraft, we would not have been

able to drop the bed rolls. After arriving in Gela, our missions began right away.

On my eighth mission to North Sicily, my bombs were dropped and I was heading south to shoot targets of opportunity. As I neared Mt. Etna, I was hit by ground fire which set the aircraft on fire. I bailed out and shortly thereafter was captured on July 29, 1943. From this point on I was marched two or three miles over the hills to an old church and joined a collection of other prisoners. After dark, we were all loaded onto trucks and moved to Messina. From there the next morning we crossed over to Reggio, Italy, and began marching north.

The next day about halfway to Naples, we were again loaded onto trucks and taken to a camp at Capua, north of Naples. It was here that I met my future brother-in-law, 2Lt Harry E. Evans. At first we didn't hit it off and were not friendly. Harry was very much one-of-one for observance of military protocol. At the time I was very dirty, wearing nothing but a T-shirt, tan pants and low quarter shoes. I knew a classmate of mine from the 27th had been shot down a week before and when making inquiries about him I was directed to a certain tent. In it I found Bill Korber, my flight school classmate, and we greeted one another enthusiastically. Bill introduced me to Harry who assumed I was an enlisted man, resented my familiarity with officers and later told me so. I also told him what I thought of him but we later became great friends.

It was here that I had my first taste of horse meat. It wasn't much but it was enough and tasted good. We were served some kind on stew once a day which I was told contained some of the same meat. I remember having to wait until someone had finished eating so I could borrow his utensil.

We remained here for about two weeks until the Italians capitulated. At this time the Germans loaded all of this camp's occupants on boxcars and we were headed northward. We must have entered the rail yards in Rome around 10 AM and there we sat for two or three hours. We were concerned for we knew the Rome yards were being bombed daily. Fortunately for us it didn't happen this day. The guards did open the boxcar doors so we could get some air and we could readily see the damage earlier bombing had done.

I had a black cloth bag in my rear pocket and it contained 2000 in Italian Liras, money for escape purposes. So, when some fruit vendors came around, I spent it all. The back end of our car was loaded about two or three feet high with all kinds of fruit. It looked a lot, but with about 40 people in the car it didn't last long.

We all assumed we were being moved to Germany but did not know the destination. I don't know what happened to the others,

but three days later, the officers were off loaded in Schubin, Poland.

DESTINATION OFLAG 64

2LT John Rodgers, 2nd row, 2nd from left

This camp had previously been used by British troops but was now designated for American Ground Forces Officers. Rodgers remembered that it contained those captured in the Africa campaign and later, those from the Battle of the Bulge. His group arrived on August 10, 1943 and was quartered in the main building called the White House. Other buildings included barracks, supply, etc. One building contained Russian prisoners who worked around the camp. A fence separated them from the Americans. Eventually approximately 1500 people would occupy the camp.

Officers were not allowed to work as this was against the Geneva Convention and this prompted Rodgers to consider another possibility as well:

> *They didn't trust us. They didn't want us out of the camp. If we were working someplace, we would have the opportunity to escape.*
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> *Now we did work. We built/dug tunnels. I wasn't involved in any of it, but we had them. At one time we had three tunnels going at the same time, but when the British made an escape and Germans caught them all and killed many, we got orders from U.S. authorities not to make any escapes, so they shut down the tunnels and stopped digging. One of them was practically completed. That took care of that.*

One POW at Oflag 64 did escape by purchasing railway tickets to consecutive towns, but he had the bad fortune, eventually, to sit next to a German Officer and was returned to our camp.

Mail and packages were priorities among Kriegies and their families. The example below is a reflection of its importance to readers of newspapers as well:

Hospital Apprentice Second Class Joe Rodgers has recently been promoted from Hospital Corpsman to the Naval Hospital at Oakland, California. He is the son of Mrs. Madge Rodgers, 100 S. 30th Street. His brother, Lt. John Robert Rodgers of the Army Air Force is a prisoner in Germany. She has received 2 letters from Lt. Rodgers in the past six weeks. He asked for warm clothes and praised the Red Cross. He is doing fine and for her not to worry.

Asked about the relationship between the Senior American Officer (SAO) and the German Colonel Kommandant, Rodgers replied that Colonel Thomas D. Drake worked well with his counterpoint and this "*made life a little easier."*

He also related that the Americans did not interface with the local guards but were interrogated at a town near Berlin:

18 or 20 of us were put on trains and sent to Luckenwalde, an interrogation camp. They put each of us in a small cell by ourselves and the door was locked and we couldn't get out. Harry Evans was next door, so we hammered on the door and talked to each other by standing on our bed frame heads and shouted out of the small window on the outside wall. If we had been caught, the window would have been shuttered and we would be left in the dark for an indefinite period. I was there a total of 18 days and was interrogated by Hauptman Williams. He had lived in the States for seventeen years and spoke good American English."

When Lt Rodgers was questioned by Captain Williams, Rodgers either refused to answer or lied when he "confessed" that his squad used 45 caliber pistols and 50 caliber machine guns. Rodgers also admitted to being in the Air Force and flying a Spitfire. When Williams asked how he got a squad of men in a Spitfire, Rodgers answered, *"That's a military secret."* This enraged Williams and since Rodgers had a discarded First Division helmet he had previously picked up, *"thinking I might use it during air raids"*, he was marched back to his cell and the men were returned to Oflag 64 several days later.

We had a Security Committee headed by one of the LTC, probably Waters. This committee acted on all security matters, from the posting of guards to alerting us on the approach of the Germans, to the approval of escape plans. Anyone in camp who dreamed up a plan, by which he could escape, submitted it to the committee. It was then determined if it was feasible and how many prisoners it could accommodate. Everyone in the camp, even though not having an active part in the plan, was expected to contribute to its success. This might be nothing more than standing guard or being a lookout, providing bed slats to shore up a tunnel, planting a garden in which to hide tunnel dirt and also providing food items for the preparation of escape rations.

Another important function of the Security Committee was the establishment of a tailor shop. Ostensibly, its purpose was to keep our uniforms in good condition and the man running the shop did

do that. Another little-known function was to alter an item of uniform and dye it so it was a copy of civilian dress. He was good at this. A pair of trousers and jacket could be altered so it looked like a civilian suit and you'd never dream it had been an item of uniform. Another function that fell under the Security Committee was our counterfeiters. It was very secret so I don't know how many or who was involved, but we were able to produce maps as needed and even more important, false identity papers with all the proper stamp[s] and signatures.

There was one other operation that everyone knew about and no one ever acknowledged or spoke of and that was our radio. From parts constructed from local materials and others that guards had been bribed to obtain, a radio receiver had been put together. Selected personnel listened to it every night at a certain time for a broadcast by BBC, made notes and went around to different parts of the camp and read the latest news. We all looked forward to this and got the latest war news which was often at variance of what the Germans put out. For instance, the BBC might report that the Allies had advanced to a position. In the Volkersher Baobacter (a propaganda paper we received in camp) the Germans might state their troops had taken up new positions to entrap the Allies. This statement doesn't say they had retreated or lost ground which in fact was the case.

One way to reduce stress and boredom was to outfox their captors. Around 9 PM each night the lights were turned off and guards came through with flashlights to check on prisoner status. Bridge players would pretend to continue playing the game, even in the dark, so when the guards appeared, they would bid "two spades" which amazed the guards with their ability to see in the dark. *"Eventually I think they caught on. It was our way of gettin' even with them."*

THE LONGEST MARCH

On January 21st, the Russians were making their drive toward the West and they were getting too close. So, the Germans marched us out of there and, at that time, we went on what I was told later was the longest forced march of World War II. We marched out of there, out of Poland, up to the Straits on the Baltic, North Sea, and Swinemunde. From there over to Sigelkow, which was somewhere not too far from Berlin. Supposedly we marched over 300 miles in 47 days, I think it was. Marchers finally made it to Hammelburg, well within Germany, and they were there when Patton made his move over to the East.

The passage follows with descriptions of the Task Force Baum, a plan instituted by Patton to rescue his son-in-law, LTC John K. Waters. Rodgers stated that he did not believe the rumor, but the force did arrive and chaos

erupted within the camp with shooting taking place from both directions, POWs caught in the middle. LTC Waters was also shot while trying to bring order to the situation but recovered and became a four-star general. Kriegies like Rodgers and Harry ran into the forest or climbed aboard vehicles. Eventually, the situation became desperate, so the new SAO, Colonel Paul Goode, suggested that everyone return to camp.

The next move was to Stalag 17B Moosburg near Munich, a march that took two to three weeks, and by this time (mid-April) the war was almost over. Rodgers remembers a very scary event during the march: the column was marching down the autobahn when a flight of American P-47s attacked. Everyone ran for the trees and several were killed, but when the lead aircraft recognized them as American POWs, they broke off. *"Every day after that we were checked for progress by a reconnaissance P-51."*

> *While the column went through the town of Moosburg, Harry and I broke off from it and took a side street, knocked on a door, intending to barter something for the heavy overcoat that was no longer needed. We were met by a couple who served us coffee and cake after which we returned to the column. Patton's Armed Forces came in and liberated us again. This time it stuck. And finally, we arrived at a camp called Camp Lucky Strike, not too far from La Havre. We were given a brief physical, shots, baths and clean uniforms. My weight was down to 134 from 180, but I think all that marching took a lot of it off.*

One memory concerning the French is not a positive one:

> *When I was first released as a POW, I and others were sent to camp at Reims and leaving there were put on a well-marked hospital train and sent to Camp Lucky Strike at Le Havre. Sometime during the night, the train was stopped for a time and during this period some of the French reached in and stole clothing and other items from some of the other prisoners who were undressed and asleep. Fortunately, that did not happen to me, but that didn't make it any less despicable.*

HOMEWARD BOUND AND CONTINUED MILITARY SERVICE

At La Harve they boarded the *Monticello*, a troop transport, and after a brief stop in England, they joined a larger convoy crossing the Atlantic for eleven days. Arriving at Brooklyn Ship Yard, they were transported to Camp Dix, New Jersey, processed through the system and given a ninety-day leave.

> *Harry Evans and I became good friends as POWs and upon our release and on the way home for R&R, we stopped in Trenton, New Jersey and Harry called home in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Apparently, his sister Faye answered and I heard, 'What are you doing tonight sis? Well, break it because I am bringing a friend*

home.' We went out that night on a double date, me and his sister. Later that night when we were alone, I asked Faye if she would wear my wings and she said, 'Does that mean anything?' and I said 'Yes, will you marry me?' She didn't say yes but she didn't say no either. I made three trips from Texas to Pennsylvania to see her and we were married on July 29, 1945. I remained in the Air Force and we had a wonderful 62 years together.

Captain Rodgers became Regular USAF in 1945 and served in the US and Germany. In 1962 he retired as a Major after a distinguished career. His ultimate comment concerning his career is centered on being a pilot: "*I did get to fly the F-84 and think I would have loved the F-86".*

ONCE A PILOT, ALWAYS A PILOT

After retirement, we bought property in Florida and I took a job flying for a large community development company. With it I, as chief pilot and with others, flew the Cessna 172, The Cessna 310 with twin engines and a DC-3 and others. I continued flying until a few years later when I failed to pass the hearing test. This company, The Gulf American Land Corporation is the one that developed the land for the City of Cape Coral and others.

Faye Hope Evans Rodgers passed away on July 1, 2007 and is buried in Barrancas National Cemetery at Pensacola, Florida.

SOURCES

Ein Oflag 64 Kriegsgefangener (Prisoner of War), Five Part Series by John R. Rodgers

Personal records and extensive correspondence between John Rodgers, Sr. and his son, "Chip"

Witness to War Project Interview between John R. Rodgers, Sr. and Martin Madert.

Biography written by Kriegy Research Group writer Ann C. Rogers
Photos from Oflag 64 Remembered, John Rodgers' files and Google Images