

# **1LT Ted Roggen**

**1918 ~ 2022**

## **THE EARLY YEARS**

Mr. Roggen was a Texan from Houston through-and-through. Born in 1918 to Hyman and Tillie Roggen, they were shop owners of a clothing store on La Branch Street where he worked as a child—a common practice in this era.

When Ted was 15, new interests caught his attention—decisions which would shape his professional life—printing, reporting, and engaging people through his innate PR abilities. As an employee at a local stationary store, he was told by firefighter friends about a local fire, alerted *The Houston Post*, *The Houston Chronicle*, and *the Houston Press*, “fed” them the facts and received recognition when it was printed. On the academic scale, Roggen attended San Jacinto High School and graduated with a Journalism Degree from Louisiana State University in 1941.

## **THE WAR YEARS AND OFLAG 64**

In the same year, The US Army came calling and Ted Roggen joined the 143<sup>rd</sup> Infantry, 36<sup>th</sup> Division, on 22 April 1941. After being trained at the Louisiana Maneuvers, he was sent to Camp Bowie in Brownwood, Texas. Other stations included Camp Blanding in Florida and Camp Edward in Massachusetts. Next stop: North Africa aboard a ship that sailed on 2 April 1943.

Roggen became a participant in the Salerno Italy Campaign on 9 September 1943 and was captured on 14 September with 260 other Americans in Paestum. He would be awarded a Purple Heart for his bravery. His status was later forwarded to Roggen’s mother through Western Union. After a trip through Italy to the Berlin area, Roggen spent nine days in solitary confinement at a POW camp in Luckenwalde. Interred in a small, dark, bitterly-cold cell with no heat, Roggen remembers surviving on meager rations of hard rye bread and ersatz tea and was repeatedly questioned by German Officer Williams, a turncoat from Dallas. Williams was known for using draconian tactics, often relating specific, detailed information about their units—always with the threat of being detained (or worse) at Luckenwalde if the POWs did not answer his questions. Roggen refused to cooperate and thankfully was released that evening with other Americans and transferred to a boxcar for “*their next destination.*”

Train travel across Europe was becoming dangerous as British Royal Air Force aircraft were targeting the interior of Germany. Roggen remembers “*feeling our tiny car swing violently back and forth from the force of the bombs. We never knew if the next slow whistle singing through the sky would be the one to land squarely on our slowly moving target.*”

Finally, arriving at their permanent camp in Alzburgund, Poland, Oflag 64 (American Ground Officers Camp), Roggen's group was assigned and slept in cubicles containing six bunks, each one with a straw mattress and no blanket. Showers were limited to one per week. POW meals consisted of a half piece of hard rye bread and ersatz tea.

*We received American Red Cross parcels on a semi-regular basis, and I am convinced if it had not been for the Nescafe coffee, biscuits, hard chocolate bar, jam and cigarettes packed within them, many of those who endured the camp would not be alive today.*

Mail Call was equally important. Cherished letters containing news from home raised morale and were usually read repeatedly and often shared. Kriegies wrote as often as allowed and these were also cherished and kept as well. Censorship, according to another kriegie, Col. Doyle Yardley, was a nuisance as stated in this passage: "Lt. Teddy Roggen, Houston, Texas, received a letter with plenty of 'black-out', which is obviously ridiculous censorship. An example: 'The Longhorns played (black-out) Bowl'."

In addition to routine requirements and assigned duties, their daily life was often supplemented with Kriegie produced musicals, shows, college and development classes, board games, and sports. Roggen's favorite was ping pong. A new table was supplied which could be converted for the sport, but when Roggen noticed that it was too high, he commandeered a hacksaw and cut the legs. This action produced queries among the Germans which eventually led Lt. Roggen to Lt. Col Waters' office where Roggen confessed. Waters agreed to limit the inquiries' impact and the issue disappeared.

Roggen was also involved in serious works at the camp.

*Every evening after dark I reported to a central place in the camp, which we called 'The White House' to receive news from a hidden radio. After taking down the news, I would go back to our barracks and read them to the other prisoners who could always tell if the news was to be good or bad by the look on my face. This went on for as long as we were there, and the Germans never discovered our little 'intelligence operation'.*

## **THE TUNNEL PROJECT AND HOMEWARD BOUND**

Escaping was an ever-present thought among POWs. Put into practice, Kriegies throughout Oflag 64 were quietly made aware of a plan sponsored by Waters to tunnel toward and under the camp's electrified fence. Roggen, one of the smaller men in camp, volunteered along with 45 others from his barracks.

The starting point was a huge wash pot. This was used by Roggen and the other volunteers as it was closest to the fence. Each night the pot was removed

and the digging commenced. Wooden bed slats were used to shore up tunnel sides, preventing cave-ins. Unfortunately, the tunnel's gains were camp members' losses as missing slats meant fewer support pieces in their bunks.

Red Cross boxes were used to transport displaced tunnel dirt to the attic and on one heavy trip, fellow Texan Lt. Hollis's foot went through the thin attic flooring, leaving a piece of plaster hanging from the ceiling for the Germans to discover. Fortunately, it was patched with thread and white paint and was never noticed by their jailers.

Begun around Thanksgiving, the tunnel was progressing on schedule. By Christmas, it was in the latrine area, the last structure before encountering the fence. Those chosen as potential escapees were prepared with German passports, money, and identification papers, but all of the backbreaking, dangerous work came to a halt when it was learned that the earth under the latrines was damp and soft, making cave-ins a valid possibility, so two days and fifty feet from freedom, the operation was abandoned.

In January 1945, the entire camp was told to pack for a long march because Oflag 64 was slated for evacuation. Only those who were too ill to be moved or unable to walk remained in camp. Roggen was prepared to hide in the camp with friends, but they did not want to risk being shot, so Roggen relented and marched out with the rest. Four-hundred bitter-cold days and nights without sufficient food or water became their survival goal.

Finally, in April 1945, they arrived in Luckenwalde. The Germans, fearing imminent arrival of the Russian Army, had deserted; this reality became an advantage as the Americans were now under the protection and direction of American Officers. During this period of anticipated rescue, Roggen contracted pneumonia and spent a month in a German hospital run by French and Yugoslavian doctors. Here he met a Yugoslav doctor named Gabriel Petrovitch who became a personal friend and benefactor. He spoke English well, including the song, "The Eyes of Texas", which had been taught to Petrovitch by Lt. Henry L. Pritchett Jr. of Dallas, Texas. A small world indeed.

Good fortune also followed Roggen when he received a small red diary from the German YMCA. A highly-valued possession, he recorded the following notes from his second stay in Luckenwalde:

*April 22, 1945 – At ten in the morning I got the greatest thrill in my life when Russian tanks, armored cars, scout cars and American trucks rolled into camp. I stood on a stool and tears rolled down my eyes as the Russians evacuated their own POWs. It was the greatest site in the world. The Russians were well equipped. There are many young kids in their army. The Russian POWs are looting all the warehouses, getting themselves clothes. Last night a plane, we don't know what kind, strafed the camp. The excitement is terrific. I am not very nervous or excited, but I just don't know what*

*to do. It is more than a dream. We are now waiting for the Americans to come get us. God has been wonderful to us all.*

*April 23, 1945 – I went back to visit Cell 31 where I spent nine days in solitary at Luckenwalde in 1943. It was horrible. It stunk, full of disease and vermin. Russian photographers and newsreel men were all over the camp. I saw a Russian truck. The tires said ‘Made in England.’ I shook hands with the driver and he asked through an interpreter if I knew Roosevelt had died. He has been in the army eight years and has been fighting for the last four. He has been wounded several times. I also saw eight dead Russian soldiers who died from their treatment by the Germans.*

*April 24, 1945 – Today I visited the Russian Chapel at Luckenwalde. It was the greatest sight in the world. All [walls] had painted events in the life of Christ. Goose bumps came over me. I also went to the camp to see Dr. Petrovitch. I told him how nice the Russians were to us and when I finished, he hugged me and kissed me on both sides of the cheeks. The Dr. cried when he mentioned his family. He told me that if his family was dead, he would try to come to America. It was the funniest feeling I have ever had in my life. I just can’t describe how I felt when the Dr. cried. He invited me to come have dinner with him.*

Roggen returned to the United States on 29 May 1945 and was discharged in April 1946 but remained in the National Guard. A photo of him with the term “PRESS” supported by his manual typewriter contains the following wording: “Ted Roggen as Press Officer for the 36<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division while at Fort Hood for National Guard Training, 1950.”

Before departing Europe, Dr. Petrovitch had asked Roggen to send American food parcels to his family and his son, a medical student in Strasbourg, France. Roggen fulfilled these obligations until he was visited in Houston by Lt. Pritchett, the “Eyes of Texas” teacher, and asked to stop sending parcels, as the Russians were now in control and very dangerous situations existed.

The following paragraph from Roggen’s book details an interesting event in Roggen’s life which occurred in 1965:

*Two years later, Dr. Petrovitch visited me at my home in Houston. We gave a cocktail party in his honor, and I took him shopping and bought him an overcoat and a suite of clothes. When he departed my home after staying with my family for more than a week, we discovered that some of my wife’s nylons, some towels and some of my son’s sweaters were missing.*

## **BACK TO THE FUTURE**

Following his discharge from the Army, Roggen established the *Ted Roggen Advertising and Public Relations* business, occupying several buildings before purchasing one at 4816 Milam at Rosedale in Houston. His first clients were mostly restaurants and entertainers.

Ted became a modern-day town crier as a publicist and public relations guru. Combining his personal experiences within the circle of who's-who of Houston and the state, he has seen, recorded and reported the life of this great city through its commercial and cultural ventures, its turbulent times, and its public and private figures.

A recent photo in *The Houston Chronicle* displays Ted Roggen typing on an electric typewriter—not the current, sleek, connected-to-the-web model—but a press-the-keys-hard version. This one requires ribbons with which his wife, Sydney, keeps him supplied. According to Ted, “*I grew up with a typewriter*” and he has let neither age nor circumstances control his determination to share his writings. Ted met Sydney on a blind date in 1957, married her within the year and has shared her company now for 63 years.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

Ted Roggen's calendar displayed social events with Sydney, with friends, and sometimes attendance at a musical performance or a ball game. Holder of a very successful business track record, Roggen was often asked for assistance, but declined, always with his signature closing: “Thank you for calling.”

## **SOURCES**

Direct quotes and background information used in this biography were obtained from four sources:

*The Houston Chronicle* interview by Erin Douglas, published September 13, 2019

A selection from Roggen's book, *Press Releases*, entitled, “Chapter Two: Prisoner of War”

A YouTube video vignette covering his new book signing event on October 7, 2019 for *You Too Can Live To Be A Hundred*, accompanied by visual images of Ted Roggen with background dialogue about his life

Information shared between the Kriegies themselves.

Biography written by Kriegy Research Group writer Ann C. Rogers