



1LT James Riley Shoaf II

1918- 2007

COLLEGE AND MILITARY SERVICE

Jim Shoaf's photo is displayed with his OCS class at West Virginia University in Morgantown, WV., the date, 1940. His enlistment date was 21 July 1940.

After joining the military, he was assigned to the 16th Engineer Combat Battalion of the 1st Armored Division. His assignment upon boarding a troop ship was North Africa. According to the *OFLAG 64 The Fiftieth Anniversary Book*, Jim was captured at Sidi Bou Zid on February 17, 1943. When his unit was overrun by German tanks, he said, "I thought I was pretty safe in the hole I was in, dug with my mess kit lid, just before the Panzer ran over my legs in the soft sand of the cactus patch. Then the Feldwebel's Lugar was at the back of my head and with a German voice said, 'Come out mit your hands up!'" (p. 108)

Transported across the Mediterranean, Shoaf made his way with many other American ground force officers to several POW camps via train cars, eventually arriving at Oflag 64 on 9 June 1943. After surviving the processing-in dictates, he was assigned to *Zimmer 10* in the White House. Captain Shoaf's talent with electronics paved the way for the assembly of a listening device called "The Bird" which enabled the Kriegies at Oflag 64 to keep current with war news.

INSIDE THE WIRES OF OFLAG 64

The following information was borrowed from a book by another Kriegy, J. Frank Diggs entitled *Behind the Barbed Wire WWII: INSIDE A GERMAN PRISON CAMP*.

"Prisoners Who Made a Difference"

The camp was especially fortunate in having a number of talented and energetic Americans who were willing and able to take on roles that made a difference in the lives of the rest of us. (p. 43)

Three kriegies were mentioned in this article including LT John Creech, the Greenhouse "Green Grocer" and LT Don Lussenden, the camp cobbler.

Another indispensable kriegy at Oflag 64 was young LT Jim Shoaf. He was a quiet electronic genius who kept us in touch with the outside world by creating a workable secret radio out of the unlikely stuff available in a remote prison camp, plus one smuggled-in vacuum tube. While at a British officers' camp at Rothenberg, Jim learned how a radio could be built. With the help of a Pentode (five-element) tube sealed in a biscuit tin, which the British officers gave him, he set out to build ours. So at Oflag 64, the American prisoners immediately started collecting old cigarette packs to make a foil electrode and wax paper from Red Cross parcels to make a thin homogeneous insulator. The necessary "resonant-coil" wire was obtained from an abandoned camp speaker, with a field-coil type magnet found in the White House.

Lt. Shoaf insisted that all this plan was simple. In any event, the first crystal set he built in Oflag 64 was made from these elements and worked quite well on its first trial. Then he went on to collect other needed items with which to make a "one-tube" set. This one became "The Bird" installed in the attic of the White House and tuned into the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) newscast from London. Every day at 2 p.m., the news was received over "The Bird" and taken down verbatim by Lt. Frank Maxwell, who knew shorthand. This went on undetected by the Germans, for two years until the camp was evacuated. Then "The Bird" was carried along by the marching kriegies to keep them up to date on the long march back to Germany. Jim operated it then in a series of haylofts, manure piles, pigpens and cellars.

At the camp, the news was read to four or five kriegy newscasters every afternoon. Then it would be read by them that evening after lights-out to men in their own barracks. The White House broadcaster was my bridge-playing friend, Howard Holder, a former radio newsman. He was always called "Boomer" because of his fine, strong voice, which he used often. Boomer also wrote a column in the campus paper. After the war he returned to radio broadcasting and eventually own and operated three radio station in Athens, Georgia.

News from Jim's radio called for a special performance on D-Day of the Normandy invasion. Early that morning, the four broadcasters

were called in and tipped off that the invasion had begun and where the landing hit. Thus, the news spread rapidly around the camp from their brief radio announcement several hours later. As soon as the Germans got the word, our Daily Bulletin news sheet, which I was editing, came out with a special edition. The big headline read: "INVASION" and the story covered as many details as the German radio divulged.

By an almost unbelievable coincidence, the camp had planned a big celebration on that day for the first anniversary of American kriegies in Oflag 64, where they had arrived a year before. This celebration consisted of sports tournaments of all kinds, plus an all-day show put on by the theatre group. At the end of the big performance that night, the actors spread across the stage, each carrying a large letter which spelled out, 'LETS GO IKE'. The Germans never believed that our celebration that day was a coincidence and assumed that we knew the date of the D-Day invasion well in advance. (pp. 44, 45 47)

According to the Oflag 64 POW Database, Captain Shoaf was later sent to Luckenwalde where he spent the last few weeks of the war including his repatriation.

CPT James Riley Shoaf was discharged from the U.S. Army on 17 March 1946.

LIFE AFTER WWII

Excerpts from the article "Ex-POW Stays Young" by Leo F. Bach were taken from the EX-POW BULLETIN, June 1993.

Interviewed at his Palm Beach home, Bach found this 75-year-old gentleman, James Riley Shoaf III, to be active and alert.

I learned he is an ex-prisoner of war, member of a dozen clubs, active in veterans' affairs, experienced in plastic and electronic engineering with his own company, plus being a notary, tax preparer, photographer, distiller, and owner of several patents.

But specially engaging are his horrendous tales of prison camp experiences in World War II. As the compound doors slammed with a clamor at his first moments in the German enclosure, his Baptist

training supplied words from the book of Job: 'My days are swifter than a runner. They slip away like an eagle that swoops on its prey.

These he repeated daily in the hope and faith his incarcerations would not be too long in the German prison of western Poland, called Oflag 64. It was well he could not foresee the next 27 months of extreme hardship and despair, sickness, cold and starvation, lice and torture, depression and always the barbed wire. But through it all, a prevailing courage and nobility, and faith in God.

CPT James Shoaf was included among the first 100 officers to be imprisoned in Tunisia; by the time of his release, this figure had grown to 200, many from the biggest conflict, Battle of the Bulge.

One skullduggery of the prisoners was repeating the alert, "The bird is going to sing", whereby they could now receive a BBC broadcast, imminent over a secret camp radio. Some of their message system was obtained by use of their radio crystal sets we knew in the 1920s. Ten months before his capture, Shoaf was given special security training, in remote chance of being taken prisoner one day. They found places to hide equipment (one tube set) most daringly in haylofts, manure piles, pigpens, cellars, and in one prisoner's bagpipe. For outgoing mail, guileless plain postal cards were used with the first letter of each fifth word carrying a message.

Asked about their food, Shoaf's answer mirrored those of other POWs at the camp. *"Ersatz coffee, dry bread from burnt barley; also watery cabbage soup and potatoes."* Weight loss was prevalent among the men as well. James dropped from 125 to 95 pounds.

Red Cross parcels and those sent from home being main sources of nutritious foods and supplies were regular in the initial stages of their incarceration, but as the war extended, some were either delayed, damaged or absent entirely.

Typical of the disasters of war are the casualties and Jim landed in a hospital when his jeep suffered total destruction; saddest of all was that his wife was notified of his being killed in action. Twice the Purple Heart was awarded to him, once for an arm and elbow wound, and one for abdominal surgery.

"More critical was the boredom. The mental stress; we used to call it battle fatigue. It required steady attention, even through my later years. So as a safety measure I take lithium carbonate, so it won't occur."

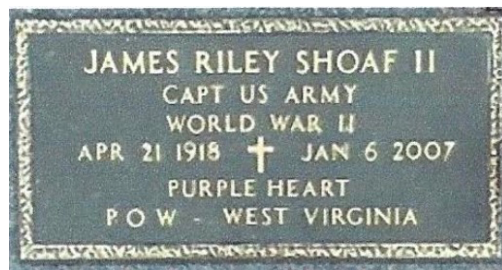
So these fifty-odd years have given us much time for discourse and contemplations. General Patton claimed we shall always have war; a sad reflection for all the veterans and kinfolk who lost so much through the wear. We should salute and acknowledge everyone who accepted his or her responsibility to answer the call and pay homage to the ex-prisoners of war who received almost zero public notice. There are thousands of them, with only their service serial numbers for being recognized.

Where there are still some able WWIIs with us, a special attempt should be made to specially exploit their acquaintance, with a resultant fulfillment for all.

Instead of viewing the depleted exhausted features of shoppers at the grocery checkout counter, I'll be looking for the inspired personality of another Jim Shoaf, eagerly waiting to take over with the grocery cart Mrs. Shoaf has dutifully and faithfully filled.

TAPS

Captain James Riley Shoaf died on June 6, 2007 and was laid to rest in Beverly Hill Memorial Park in Morgantown Mongolia County, West Virginia. The metal plaque accompanies his grave with his name, dates of birth and death, WWII, and his Purple Heart medal.



James' wife Doris' picture was sketched by another Kriegy on June 6, 1943 by C. Simmons who at the time was at Oflag IX A/Z.



Biography written by James' daughter-in-law, Clair Shoaf in collaboration with Kriegy Research Group writer Ann C. Rogers