

CPT John Francis Slack

1913 – 2002

EARLY YEARS

John, born on June 10, 1913 to parents Charles and Sadie Slack in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He grew up in Asbury Park, New Jersey, and received a bachelor's degree from the University of Pennsylvania.

MILITARY SERVICE AND CAPTURE

According to daughter Margie's eulogy concerning her father's life,

"His strength of spirit was challenged many times but never more so than when he entered the United States Army. He did so on April 16, 1941 as a 27-year-old First Lieutenant and a newly-wed of just four days. In August 1942, his orders took him overseas first to England and then to North Africa in support of the war effort."

Source: *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 21, 2002

The following account in Jack's words were taken from *OFLAG 64 The Fiftieth Anniversary Book*:

"After landing in Algiers in 1943, we were, as a separate Battalion 805 T.O. Bn., moved to bivouac area outside of Algiers for a week or so. We were then ordered to the front in time to meet Rommel's forces as they came through the Kasserine Pass area.

"We were then armed with 75's on a halftrack. The Bn. was split up by companies on a very broad front. As supply officer, it was my responsibility to contact each company to ascertain their supply needs in the field. Working out of Bn. Headquarters, which also reported from the line companies, information was given as to my whereabouts and I was assigned several additional anti-aircraft machine guns on jeeps to take to one of our companies located outside the town of Thala, not far from Kasserine.

"After leaving Thala on January 21, 1943, at about dusk, and proceeding down the road, we were suddenly greeted by flares and tanks, which turned out to be German. It also turned out that at that moment, I heard the famous and well used phrase, 'Für Ibren drer Krieg ist uber.' [The Oflag 64 POW Database lists his capture date as February 21, 1943.]

“We were rounded up by infantry, who didn’t hesitate to push one around. I also learned that another small contingent of British soldiers were captured at the same time. They were to have set up a roadblock to prevent the Germans from proceeding further north on the road where we were traveling. Of course, they didn’t help us any.

“From here we were marched and transported to the rear. Held in barbed wire areas, we were eventually transported to Sfax and then by boxcar to Tunis.

“Here we were taken to the Tunis airport and flown to various points in Europe. I arrived at Palermo, Sicily. Then by train to a POW camp near Naples [Italy]. After about a week, we again traveled by train to Stalag VIIA in Moosburg. From Moosburg to Oflag IXAZ in Rotenburg am Fulda. From here to Schubin, Poland.” (pp. 121 – 122)

OFLAG 64

Previously, this ten-acre camp had been established as a school and for a short time, a camp for British POWs. Now it was occupied by American Ground Officers, the initial numbers small (around 150), but by the time it was abandoned in January 1945, it was the “home” of 1400 to 1500 officers, late arrivals coming from the Battle of the Bulge.

After entering the gates of Oflag 64 and enduring the in-processing regime, John was assigned to the third floor of a building called the “White House”.

John’s own words [as stated in the *Fiftieth Anniversary Book*] “speak” again of his survival during his two-plus years in captivity:

“While at ’64’, keeping busy was my main activity. Always an early riser, I would start my day with a hot shower on Sunday, and gradually decrease to a cold, cold shower by Friday.

“Then off to German classes or running around the track specializing in the mile. From September 1944 to January 1945, I was dining room officer and later was in charge of the kitchen at Moosburg.

“I also kept busy by reading many books for which I was thankful we had a library. The choral group also put up with my off-key voice. Assisting with the operation of the “bird” [hidden and secret radios used to keep the POWs in touch with the outside world] took some of my night hours.” (p. 122)

Everyone’s life changed on January 21, 1945 when Oflag 64 was abandoned due to the rapid advance of the Russian Army. Keys to the front gate were

given by the Oberst to Father Branch, who passed them on to Captain Slack. Daughter, Margie has donated them to the National Prisoner of War Museum in Andersonville, Georgia.

LIFE AFTER THE WAR

Margie's Eulogy, dated 12/21/2002, continues with these memories about her father:

"The prison camp experience at Oflag 64 was to say the very least a difficult and extremely dangerous one. For the men, it took not only their personal discipline and military training, but also their ironclad wills and passion for freedom's ring in order to endure the hardships of daily life.

"Dad drew upon that strong discipline even after the war. Every morning without fail, he could be seen shining his shoes, shining his belt buckle, and then doing his sit-ups before embarking upon his day. He instilled that discipline in us too, encouraging ironclad wills and positive thinking.

*"Dad's discipline and determination also empowered him to single-handedly preserve that indelible bond between the prisoners that had been forged through adversity. Dad dedicated his time and efforts from 1962 to 1995 to continue writing, editing, and printing *The Item*, the newsletter published at the camp. In effect, *The Item* was one of many diversions the men used to combat perhaps the even greater enemies of barbed wire. The *Item's* peacetime role not only enabled the men to stay in touch but also to reinforce those existing bonds. As his POW buddy Don Waful said, 'John Slack was the Christmas tree upon which we hung our ornaments.' Yes, on more than one occasion, Dad was credited with keeping his group in formation.*

"Paramount on Dad's to-do list was attending the POW reunions. These reunions took place every two years and evolved into yearly gatherings due to popular demand and the passing of time. The year 2000 reunion was to have been the last; however, no one was prepared to let go of their special extended family. Although I had attended several reunions through the years, my first being in 1964, my greatest privilege came in 1997 when Dad asked me to accompany him to the Newport, Rhode Island reunion. On October 6th of the year [2002], we returned from our memorable journey to Columbus, Georgia, not knowing then that it would be his last reunion." (p. 23)

FINAL THOUGHTS

For sending information to the Allies from his prison camp at great personal risk, Captain Slack was awarded the Bronze Star.

After his discharge he worked for National Publishing Co. in Philadelphia until establishing his own company in the city.

The company adapted to the needs of business communications, initially offering duplicating services and telephone-answering services. When offices began to have copy machines and voice mail, he offered printing and graphics services for business cards and letterheads.

Mr. Slack retired in 1996 after having heart surgery. That same year he also gave up his editorship of *The Item*.

According to daughter Margie, he was intensely patriotic and always had the American flag flying outside his home.

TAPS

His wife of 56 years, Mary, died in 1997. In addition to his daughter, he is survived by a grandson.

John F. Slack was buried in West Laurel Hill Cemetery, Bala Cynwyd, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania.



Photo taken from Find-A-Grave

Sources: *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 21, 2002

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