

LTC John Huff Van Vliet, Jr.

(3rd Battalion 168th Infantry Regiment / 34th Infantry Division)

1914 - 2000

John Huff Van Vliet Jr, nicknamed “Jack” or “Van”, came from a military family. He was born in Texas City, Texas and lived on a variety of military bases and foreign postings. Graduating from West Point in the Class of 1937, he followed in his Great Grandfather’s (Class of 1840) and father’s (Class of 1913) footsteps. He was commissioned in the Infantry. He followed a typical career path for an Infantry officer until September 1941



Van Vliet Jr at West Point.



Van Vliet Jr in Iceland in 1941.

which found him in civilian clothes in the United Kingdom observing the British Army and taking specialized British Army courses. Van Vliet Jr briefly returned to Fort Benning Georgia as an instructor at the Infantry School before traveling again to the U.K. to take command of 3/168th Infantry and to lead it during the invasion of North Africa and the Battle of Kasserine Pass. That command ended on the North African plain as the German soldiers took charge of their fresh prisoners of war.

Dawn broke on the morning of 17 February 1943 and revealed a column of German armored vehicles, artillery and infantry moving along a road. The Germans were directly between a group of American forces and their objective. The Americans, the 3rd Battalion 168th Infantry,



168th Infantry Regiment.

were seeking to return to Allied lines after having been encircled by Rommel’s forces in the opening stages of the Battle of Kasserine Pass in North Africa. The battalion had defended DJebel Kasira near Faid Pass, and had thoroughly blunted the one serious attack the Germans launched at them. Having failed to kick the Americans off their ground,



34th Infantry Division

the Germans moved on, cutting off and encircling all

of the American forces defending near Faid Pass. Days later, a light aircraft dropped a message instructing the Americans to break out that night and rejoin Allied lines. The night was their friend, and the Americans trudged through the darkness, evading a German armored force, and arriving at dawn near their objective, but confronting that German column.

Tired, hungry, thirsty and without any anti-tank weapons, the exhausted soldiers watched the German armored vehicles deploy from the road and open fire. Without any means of stopping a tank, the Americans saw the battle dissolve into a round-up. Virtually all of the committed forces of the 168th Infantry Regiment had just been captured. For LTC Van Vliet Jr, commander of the 3rd Battalion, 17 February 1943 was the start of a period of captivity marked by boredom, hunger, three escapes, and, significantly, a trip to the **Katyn** Forest to observe the results of the Russian massacre of thousands of Polish officers.

The Germans searched and disarmed the officers and men of the 168th. The new POWs were formed into a marching column and found themselves on the road back to Faid Pass. They all suffered from thirst and were greatly relieved to be “watered” at the end of the day. They were

processed, separated, and shipped across the Mediterranean to Italy where trains took them on to their POW camps. Van Vliet Jr and several of the other officers ultimately arrived in Szubin, Poland where they were interred in Oflag 64.

Camp life at Szubin was orderly. The Germans had their required roll call formations, and the POWs filled the rest of the day with a mixture of activities all conducted within the command structure established by the POWs. Officers with skills or knowledge would conduct classes to pass on what they knew. Instruments provided by the Red Cross permitted the creation of a band. Serious discussions took place about how to prolong the usefulness of the limited number of razor blades. (Can you really sharpen a razor blade by stropping it along the inside of a water glass?) Food, or its lack, was a major issue. POWs were authorized a subsistence ration the Germans provided to people who could not work. (The officer POWs were in that category as, under the Geneva Convention, the Germans were not permitted to use officers as workers.) Jack would later tell stories about food in the camp. The thin daily soup filled seventeen carefully counted spoons full. The meager German rations were supplemented by food from precious Red Cross parcels. (Jack would faithfully make contributions to the American Red Cross for the rest of his life.)

Jack focused his thoughts on escape. The American officers, naturally enough, organized escape efforts and created escape committees to coordinate activities to spring some of the men. Jack was involved in several escape attempts, and quite a bit of information has already been published about those attempts and the support for those attempts. Jack steadfastly refused to share many details about those attempts and about the support. He was furious at those men who “spilled the beans” by talking about techniques, ideas and experiences. LTC Van Vliet



The "Escape Artists" (Van Vliet Jr is 2nd from right).

Jr later told his son, “Son, a POW has nothing to do all day except to find a way to escape. If a way can be imagined, the POWs will find it. Guards, on the other hand, just have the normal incentive to do a job. Why help future guards by giving them a book with all sorts of ideas about how POWs escaped in the past? Nuts!”

Jack’s time as a POW included his and CPT Donald Stewart’s connection to events in the **Katyń** Forest. One day, German authorities asked LTC Van Vliet and CPT Stewart to accompany them to the **Katyń** Forest to observe the exhumation of thousands of bodies of Polish officers who had been murdered by the Russians. The two Americans wanted nothing to do with what they imagined would be a propaganda event. They refused parole, declined to go, and were then ordered to go. Their story is told in other places, but the essential part of it is that their personal observations confirmed the fact that the Polish officers had been murdered by the Russians.

The Red Army had captured thousands of Polish officers as it invaded and conquered the eastern half of Poland while the Nazis were conquering the western half. Those officers represented educated elements of the Polish people, and the Russians saw them as a threat to their plans for future domination. Accordingly, Stalin had almost 22,000 of them murdered and buried in mass graves, including one in the **Katyń** Forest in Russia. When Hitler invaded the USSR, his forces occupied the area around Smolensk, Russia and were directed to the site



Van Vliet Jr is the 3rd from the left behind the man in glasses in this 1943 Katyn Forest exhumation photo.

of the mass graves. German officials wanted allied officer POWs and others to come to the grave site in order to observe what the Germans had found. The Germans searched the bodies for letters, diaries, newspapers and anything with a date on it to show the men had been murdered while the area was under Russian control. LTC Van Vliet Jr and CPT Stewart worried about deception, but they independently confirmed the time frame of the murders by noting the condition of the uniforms, particularly the boots. They had learned to judge a person's time in captivity based

on the condition of the uniform, and all of the signs confirmed the Polish officers had only been in captivity a short time, which matched the paper evidence. LTC Van Vliet Jr and CPT Stewart made no statements and refused to cooperate in any way with the Germans. Even so, the event was shocking, and they knew the information needed to be shared with the US government. Both men were U.S. Registered Code Users and began sending coded messages to MIS-X at Ft. Hunt, New Jersey from Oflag 64 in July 1943 detailing the Soviet responsibility for the murder of the Polish officers found in the **Katyn** Forest.

Jack escaped from the POW camps three times. As he would say, *"That tells you something about the effectiveness of the first two."* After his last escape, he made it through German territory, entered American lines, and quickly made his way to Washington where he reported details of the **Katyn** Massacre to MG Bissell, Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence. In Washington, he was ordered to say nothing about **Katyn**, an order he followed until he was called to testify before Congress.

LTC Van Vliet, Jr. was awarded the Silver Star for his actions in North Africa and the Bronze Star with V for valor in recognition of his actions while a POW. He later fought in the Korean War and retired from the Army as a Colonel. He died in February of 2000, survived by his three daughters and his son.

In March 2015, President Bronisław Komorowski of Poland recognized LTC John H. Van Vliet Jr and CPT Donald B. Stewart for their actions associated with **Katyn** and posthumously awarded them the Officers Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland, making them the first American Army officers to have received this award from the Polish Government. A granite plaque was erected in front



Officer's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland.



Granite plaque at Oflag 64 honoring Van Vliet Jr / Stewart.

of the former Oflag 64 POW camp site commemorating their 1943 trip to **Katyn** and the coded messages they sent while POWs at Oflag 64 to U.S. Military Intelligence in Washington D.C. informing the U.S. Government that the Soviets were responsible for the murders of the Polish officers found in the **Katyn** Forest.

This biography is based upon a biography LTC John H. Van Vliet III wrote about his Father in 2018.