

Durham VA Interview: Robert Edward "Bobby" Levin

Biographical information included the following sources:

Emails and phone conversations between Mr. Levin and the Oflag 64 Re-membered team

VIMEO Videos recorded with Dr. Emler on November 2019 for the Durham VA Health Care System entitled "My Life, My Story."

HOME WAS NEVER LIKE THIS by Col. Doyle Yardley

ROADS TO LIBERATION FROM OFLAG 64 by Clarence R. Meltesen

EARLY YEARS

Robert Levin was born on April 30, 1920, in Brooklyn, New York. His parents were Jacob and Edith Levin. After graduating from high school, he attended North Carolina State College as a textile major under Dean Nelson. His father imported textiles, so this was a natural choice for him and his major interest. According to Robert, during the VA interview, when a student enrolled at college it was compulsory to be in ROTC; the war had begun as he graduated. He also stated that very few women were in college classes on his campus.

MILITARY SERVICE PREPARATION

First sent to Camp Upton on Long Island, he was then assigned to Camp Wheeler for training. Located close to the city limits of Macon, GA, it served as an Infantry Replacement Training Center where new recruits received basic and advanced individual training to replace combat casualties. As a college graduate, he applied to Officer Candidate School and was accepted but had to wait until a new class started at Ft. Benning.

Acknowledging that he would be sent overseas, he requested and received permission for one week's leave to see his family in New York and reported back to Baltimore where he and hundreds of other soldiers were loaded onto a train. Robert thought it interesting that the train stopped momentarily at his college town, and he imagined leaving the train for a sight-seeing trip of the campus, especially his dorm, Number 7. Ironically, he would return there for grad school after the war. Joining multiple cadres on a boat, they landed in North Africa where he visited the town of Casablanca which was quite an adventure. Soldiers were encouraged to write letters, so he wrote his father that he was on the same British ship that his dad had taken to Japan (without disclosing specifics). Since the war had shifted to mainland Europe, Bob remembered being transported from Oran to the Naples area with the 36th Division, known as the Texas Division.

Traveling north to the mountain areas north of Naples was his first encounter with war – life and death combat with the Germans. During this time, he made PFC which he referred to as **Praying For Civilian**.

The situation was deadly with Americans on one side of a mountain, Germans on the other, with artillery in between. This battle configuration was where Robert experienced “digging a foxhole and living in a foxhole.”

Enduring the impacts of German artillery shelling made quite an impression on the new mostly young recruits – something they had never experienced previously: that a specific artillery shell “could have their name on it.”

Robert’s direct contact occurred during the Battle of the Rapido River near Monte Cassino. Noting that the waters moved rapidly, the name was appropriate. Their mission was to establish a bridgehead on the far side of the river. Germans were in force above them with Americans below, so their positions were less ideal. Levin was in the lead company across the river – the only one. *‘The use of boats has been tried the night before, but this did not work, so my group crossed over on a pontoon bridge on the 21st. German artillery was bombing us while trying to radio American artillery to lay barrages against the enemy, but no help came.’* Suddenly from no-where, a German came up behind him and said, “Hands-up. Come quickly” on 22 January 1944. Exiting his foxhole, he stamped on his rifle, trying to destroy its worth to the enemy. During the bombardment, Levin had received a shrapnel wound which was cleaned and wrapped with gauze. Many others were gravely wounded, dying, or dead.

Approximately 90 Americans were rounded up and loaded onto trucks. While trying to retain his balance in a vehicle with no seats, he told an officer that he had hand grenades in his pockets. *“Since they will not help us in this situation, my advice is to get rid of them when you can.”* Levin agreed and emptied them to the ground when he followed others out of the truck convoy.

Curiously, the Americans were not searched when they arrived at the camp. Each was handed a card for his name and serial number. Sections were marked POW, wounded, or not wounded with room for his US address labeled on the card. His parents learned from a *New York Times* newspaper that Robert was MIA (Missing In Action). Later, a card was delivered to their address in New York stating he was a POW.

Robert was a PFC when captured and when told he might have to work if he were enlisted, he stated that he was a Buck Sergeant (NCO). Although he was Jewish, he listed himself as Protestant. Levin also remembered that they passed through *‘a number of transit camps, Stalag IV, to II B and finally to Oflag 64.’*

OFLAG

Arriving on 14 October 1944, the POWs were marched from the train station in Szubin, Poland, and entered the gates. Asked about the camp’s atmosphere, Levin explained a major issue. They were not tortured, but deprived of food as Levin explains in his interview:

'The German guards could be disruptive, but not a real problem. When the SS troops were taken off the front lines for rest, they became the camp guards and were ruthless. You had to watch yourself around them. They also took Red Cross Boxes meant for the Americans and ate what they wanted. The rest they threw away. We were very hungry, and this was hard to watch. Now, when I see homeless people eating out of garbage cans, I empathize with them because I have eaten out of garbage cans and know what real hunger is. Eating out of garbage cans to stay alive was sometimes necessary.'

The Senior American Officer organized camp. One of his duties was to assign committees, and the most important was the escape committee. All escape plans were run through them and if they were credible, a 'go ahead' was given.

Another action which affected Levin concerned his life and events at another camp. After the "Belgian Bulge" or "Battle of the Bulge," Oflag could not accommodate the number of Americans captured, so an additional camp was utilized. Lt. Col. Yardley was asked to provide support for establishment of camp, and he asked Levin to accompany him to Oflag 64Z, located 70 KM south.

LEVIN - A CELEBRATION SALUTE

Levin recalled hearing artillery fire from every point of the compass. When the Russians arrived, two Russian sergeants poured vodka from a jerry can into four glass and saluted "Roosevelt, Churchill, Stalin" handing one to Levin and the fourth to another. Levin did not remember anything until the next day.

MELTESEN – TO RUSSIA WITH LUCK AND HOME

'The Wugarten group waited until 5 March for trucks to move them to Wrzesnia, then by rail through Warsaw to Odessa, arriving on 15 March. They sailed on the HMT Circassia on 25 March. On board were 149 officers, 747 enlistees, 1 merchant sailor, 1 civilian, and 10 stretcher cases. While in Odessa, they were billeted in a schoolhouse and isolated from the other POWs.' (Meltesen, p. 229)

Arriving in the port of Boston the day after Roosevelt died, they were taken to Camp Miles Standish in New Jersey. Being familiar with the area, Levin took the train to New York and a subway near his parent's apartment at Riverside Drive and 72nd.

When Robert reached street level, he encountered large crowds and when conversing with a police officer was told that President Truman was about to pass by. Explaining that he had just re-turned from the war in Europe, the police officer shouldered his 50-pound duffle bag and ushered Levin to his family's door. He will

always remember that his sister, Nancy, saw him from their apartment window and alerted the family. She was the first one to welcome his arrival!

CIVILIAN LIFE

The Adjusted Service Rating Score was a point-based system used by the U.S. Army at the end of WWII to determine soldiers' status to be discharged from military service. Robert Levin was eligible based on the points he accumulated while being in the following areas: North Africa Campaign, Italy, European Invasion and Russian Combat Zone.

His decorations include the Purple Heart and the POW Medal for the 13 months he spent as an American in Prisoner of War Camps.

Civilian Levin resumed and completed graduate work in North Carolina State and started working for the Dan River Mills in Danville, Virginia. Along the way he met Carlene Hardy as she worked at the First National Bank in Danville and married her on 22 October 1949. Seventy-one years later they are still together.

LESSONS LEARNED

Levin learned to be more independent and to consider options when making life decisions.

'Keep moving' is a major lesson, according to Levin, and to prove the value of this, he will be 101 in 2021 because he has continued to be active by taking multiple exercise and strength classes. Carlene accompanies him to some classes. He continues to be in good health and has only one main malady: macular degeneration. Expressing high praise for the VA, he appreciates the equipment provided which enables him to see and read items he might not be able to view.







