

2LT Frank N. Aten

(701st Tank Destroyer Battalion)
1914 – 1987

Frank Newell Aten was born on June 16, 1914, the son of Rev. and Mrs. Floyd Aten of Tyler, Texas and was “Texas to the bone.” Having nine brothers and sisters at home and extended family throughout the state, Frank learned survival skills at a young age, which served him well during his US Army career and as a Prisoner of War in WW II. He was also known for his quiet wit and generosity.



Aten at Oflag 64 in 1943.

Frank attended Tyler public schools and following his family’s professional newspaper careers, he also worked for the Tyler-Currier-Times, but other family connections to The Texas Rangers (law enforcement agency) would lead him to join the military.

Prompted by his love of horses, he joined the Horse Drawn Artillery (Texas National Guard, 112th Cavalry) as an enthusiastic recruit and spent the next eleven years as an enlisted man where he exhibited exceptional leadership potential. These qualities were to have a profound effect on Frank when he was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant. After completing training in the tank destroyer officer’s training school, he continued as an instructor at Camp Hood in the fall of 1942 and departed for North Africa shortly thereafter.

Assigned to the First Armored Division as Executive Officer, Co. A, 701st Tank Destroyer Battalion, Frank’s presence at Sidi Bou Zid, Tunisia, led to his capture on February 14, 1943.

The following text appeared in the Tyler (Texas) Currier-Times Newspaper: *WAR PRISONER— 2nd Lieut. Frank N. Aten, son of Reverend Floyd Eugene Aten, last night was reported captured as a prisoner of war in the North Afrika area where he*



701st Tank Destroyers

has been with the Tank Destroyer Command, United States Army. In a wire to his father, the Adjutant General’s Department stated: “The Secretary of War desires me to express his regrets that your son, 2nd Lieut. Frank N. Aten, has been reported captured in the North African area. Additional information will be sent you when received.” Lieutenant Aten, a native of Tyler,



1st Armored Division

attended Tyler High School and formerly was employed by the Currier-Times Telegraph. He received his commission in October at Camp Hood, Texas, and volunteered for foreign duty shortly thereafter.



Aten Silver Star

Second Lieutenant, Frank N. Aten, was awarded the SILVER STAR for gallantry in action during the WW II campaign against Rommel's Afrika Corps on February 14, 1943 in the vicinity of Sidi Bou Zip, Tunisia. "Selfless actions and concern for his wounded, trapped, and captured fellow soldiers in the face of overwhelming odds reflect credit upon himself and his organization."



Francis Aten accepting Aten Silver Star.

The photo on right displays Frank's wife, Frances Riggs Aten, accepting the Silver Star on his behalf by Brig. Gen. Charles K. Nulsen, Commander of Fort Sam Houston.

His subsequent internment as an American POW for the next 2 1/2 years was spent primarily at Oflag 64 in Szubin, Poland, but drawing on his "riding the rails" adventures during the depression years, his adaptability to diverse environments and his acquired ability to outwit security measures enabled him to endure substandard conditions in multiple jails and camps and execute five escape attempts from such varied locations as moving trains and jails within prison camps. These recounted stories, joining those of many other Kriegies (the German word for prisoner of war, Kriegsgefangenen was shortened by the Allied prisoners to Kriegies), have become legendary.



The Oflag 64 "Escape Artists" (Aten is on the right).

A memorable example involves his first escape. This happened as he was being transported via a German train from Capua, Italy, toward the Brenner Pass. After a station stop and being mindful of the guards, Frank balanced himself on the open window, set his feet in motion to match increasing speed of the train, and managed to jump without injury. Frank's plan was to make his way to Switzerland through the Alps. This first bid for freedom, however, soon resulted in sobering thoughts as he found himself in a foreign land with few resources and adverse weather conditions.

Eventually, locals became aware that he dressed differently and did not respond when spoken to. Alarmed that he could be a dangerous foreigner, the Carabinieri police were summoned. In the midst of this increasingly large audience, an Italian woman with babe in arms exited her house and pushed her way into the crowd while handing Frank a thick venison sandwich and a glass of wine. Signaling his thanks, he told her that he was an American officer as she continued to shout at the crowd.

Many Americans believed that the war was unpopular with average Italians as many had family members in the US and had no love for the pact between Mussolini and Hitler. Her actions, according to Frank, seems to bear this out. That night Frank was placed within a room in the Town Hall as no secure environment had yet been



Aten while at Oflag 64.

established for American soldiers—their entrance into the war was too new. The next day Frank was seated on another train toward Bolzano, Italy, and his first experience with an established P.O.W. encampment, but not his last.

The photo on left shows Frank while a POW at Oflag 64.

Eventually after multiple escapes, the German hierarchy became aware of his Houdini abilities and tagged him as an “escape artist”—not as a compliment but as a reminder that his antics would jeopardize his chances of survival. “Stay in the camp. The war will soon be over and you can go home” they cautioned him. These not-so-disguised threats only encouraged Frank to envision the next escape plan.

Christened “Kid Nitro”, he was active in camp activities including organizing and participating in various sports, abilities he had developed when playing semi-pro baseball in an earlier life. For these initiatives, Frank was awarded the YMCA Sports Badge, awarded by the World’s Alliance YMCA with headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland. This badge has been awarded to few individuals and is “a service which raised the morale of players and fans alike—important diversions for men in forced imprisonment.”



WWII YMCA Sports Badge.

“The major key to survival,” he told his family on his repatriation, “was to stay positive and believe that you will return home.” He also credits his family’s uplifting support through letters and packages during his many months as a prisoner.

He did return to his family and his Texas, and during the remainder of his 20-year US Army career, attained the rank of Captain before retirement. While on active duty, other assignments included a return to Germany in support of the Berlin Air Lift, Administrative and Public Information Officer at the San Antonio Army and Air Force Recruiting and Induction Center, and the Army Security School at Fort Devens, Massachusetts.

Central Texas became not only his permanent home base, but his professional one as well—two of which included his position at the Schreiner Institute in Kerrville and as Manager of the Olmos Tower in San Antonio. His hobbies included involvement in

Kerrville Little League Baseball and “supervising” his home-based workshop. Frank also attended Army Unit Reunions and stayed in touch with many former Kriegies.



Frank Aten died in June 1987 and was buried with full U.S. Army Military Honors in the Fort Sam Houston Cemetery. Honorary pallbearers included family members and members of the Oflag 64 POW Association. Surviving him are his current wife, Frances Riggs Aten and former wife, Noreen Aten, and daughter, Sharron Pacheco. In his lifetime, Frank Aten’s integrity, resourcefulness and code of honor endeared him to all who knew him personally or who had read or heard about his experiences. For these many qualities, he will be remembered and his bravery, honored.

In addition to the Silver Star he received for his actions in North Africa, and the YMCA Sports Badge mentioned earlier, he also received the Prisoner of War Medal, the European-African- Middle-Eastern Campaign Medal, the WWII Victory Metal, the Berlin Air Lift Medal for Humanitarian Action during the Berlin Air Lift, and the Korean Service Medal with two Bronze Campaign Stars.

Many thanks to members of the Aten family for their assistance and for material contributions concerning his biography. A special thanks to George Harcourt for providing the grave marker.

Biography written by Kriegy Research Group writer Ann C. Rogers, niece of Frank Aten