

## **Robert Foch Bonomi 1918 to 2003**

### **Early Life**



LT. ROBERT BONOMI

Robert Foch “Bob” Bonomi was born on November 5, 1918, to Louis and Chlodene Bonomi in Gem, a community near the town of Wallace, Idaho. He was the second of three sons.

At the time of the 1920 census, the family was living in Spokane, Washington. Bob and big brother Joe Earnest had been joined by little brother Wilford Duff. In 1940, the census records showed the family living in Wallace, Idaho, near Bob’s birthplace. Bob was a student at the University of Idaho in Moscow, Idaho, from which he graduated with a Bachelor of

Arts degree on June 1, 1942.

The University of Idaho had a Reserve Officer Training Corps and Bob may have completed that program and been commissioned a Second Lieutenant upon graduation in June.

### **World War 2 Experience**

2LT Bonomi was assigned to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment. The 16<sup>th</sup> was one of three regiments that composed the First Infantry Division, known as the Big Red One. The division was shipped to Great Britain in July of 1942 for training prior to the North African campaign. If Bob joined the regiment before the entire division was shipped to French Morocco in late October of 1942, then he fought with the division in Operation Torch, capturing the port of Oran, and in Tunisia at the battles of Ousseltia Valley, Kasserine Pass, and El Guettar.

### **Capture and Prisoner of War Experience**

2LT Bonomi survived the battle of El Guettar, March 16 to 25, 1945. The aftermath was his undoing. On March 28 the Allies resumed their attack eastward and all three regiments of the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division were sent to the front. Bob was captured on March 29, 1943.

*Mostly it was because my outfit (2<sup>nd</sup> battalion of the 16<sup>th</sup> infantry, 1<sup>st</sup> division) made an attack one night at El Guettar, Tunisia, the idea being that we were going up there and shove a lot of bayonets under the noses of some German and Italian infantry who were going to quit and come along with us. Well, some of them did but they had friends who rode around in armor, and we had to back*

*up from the hills we had taken during the attack. I just didn't run fast enough.*

*About eight fellows and myself were cut off by machinegun fire which was effectively sweeping a flat and open stretch. A couple of German tanks came out and rounded up the other fellows and then found me pretending to be dead. It just came rumbling up the slope with one track in the little ditch that I was in, so I jumped. (Bob Bonomi, page 1)*

Bob and his fellow prisoners were taken by truck to Sfax, on the east coast of Tunisia, then crammed into box cars and taken north by railroad to Tunis. From Tunis he was flown to Naples, Italy.

*There we were promised we would get the same type of quarters that the Nazi officers had. Things must have been tough for Axis officers for we were taken in an open truck to Capua, given a blanket, no chow, and directed to a building that had no beds, chairs or tables.*

*The next morning we got hot water for breakfast, boiled greens for lunch, and some spaghetti for dinner. A small bun made up the rest of the food. This was one of the roughest times for some. We all lost weight rapidly. (Bob Bonomi, page 2)*

From Capua, a train transported the prisoners into Germany, to Stalag VII-A near Moosburg. After only three days, they were loaded back on the train and taken to Oflag VII-B near Eichstatt. The camp was filled with British and British Empire officers captured from 1940 onwards. Bob and his fellow American prisoners were there for about 45 days, until they were transported to Oflag 64, Szubin, Poland.

*We were fortunate having been at the British camp for it enabled us to learn many things that would have taken us a long time to find out for ourselves. The British had learned much during their long years behind the wire.*

*Our first colonel (COL Thomas Drake) had his system for dealing with the Germans. First, he showed them that his control inside the camp was absolute. We obeyed him implicitly, thus forcing the Germans to deal with him. (Bob Bonomi, page 2)*

Bob occupied himself at Oflag 64 playing bridge and trading bridge lessons for shorthand lessons from a fellow prisoner. He helped set up the movie projector when it arrived in camp, and thus became one of the projector operators. Movies, which were largely German musical comedies, had to be shown about six times so that every man in camp could see the show. And he became part of the costume department for the theater productions.

*I got mixed up with the theater by helping a fellow decorate the seating portion of our "Little Theater". And then I foolishly said "yes" when one of the producers asked if I could make hats out of paper. He said, "Make me five—I want a derby, a homberg..." and I was stuck. I learned to make hats from paper mache that looked like hats. The first ones took about a week each to make, but later I could do one a day. I later branched into other paper mache work—made a stalk of bananas, and Christmas figurines. (Bob Bonomi, page 3)*

On January 21, 1945, Bob marched away from Oflag 64 with about 1400 other prisoners of war. He described life on the march:

*The trek settled down into deadening days of walking silently along, head down, looking only where you were going to put your foot, counting the kilometer markers and the time until the next break. As we reached the place we would stay for the night, the column broke up rapidly, some men going in search of trades, some for firewood and some for a place to sleep.*

*Campfire cliques were growing—six or eight men to a fire—two men going for wood, two for trading, four arranging a place to sleep for all, and then all gathered to see how the "loot" looked.*

*We were all thieves—we'd steal almost anything that looked like it could be eaten. Large white beets, potatoes, beans, peas, ground cattle food—which turned out to be a darn fine cereal, even uncrushed grain would be parched over a fire until it popped open. (Bob Bonomi, page 4)*

By March 1, 1945, Bob had arrived near Parchim, Germany. The prisoners had four days of rest, waiting for the next move, which was by boxcar to Oflag XIII-B, Hammelburg, Germany.

*Of course no one had any food left when they arrived at the new camp, and there we found that they had nothing also. There were about 800 officers there and 400 of us. No Red Cross parcels, no nothing! It was even worse than Italy had been for me. The men here had been mostly the captives of the battle of the Bulge and there was no one there to help them organize the camp. The colonel who came in with us (COL Paul Goode) was the ranking colonel at this camp, so he began setting things up along the lines of our original camp. Morale picked up quickly. (Bob Bonomi, page 4)*

By March 9, the remaining Oflag 64 prisoners, including Bob, were resident in Oflag XIII-B. There they stayed until March 27, when Task Force Baum

arrived and attempted a rescue. The number of officers in the camp was far greater than the rescue group expected. They could carry a small number of men in and on their vehicles but most prisoners had to walk if they wished to try and reach the Allied line, about 40 miles away.

*I have great respect for the fighting qualities of those men. They came 60 miles to get us. Spent about 12 hours in continuous combat near the camp and town, and then tried to take a lot of us back with them. I was on the hood of a half-track, but the armored column had been in the area too long, and the Germans had us cut off. We ran into a road-block and the lead tank was knocked out. There were too many prisoners hanging on the outside of the tanks and half-tracks for the column to attempt to break through by weight of armor and so another route was sought. None had been found at daylight. (Bob Bonomi, page 4)*

Bob, along with many of the escaped prisoners, returned to the Stalag in the morning. Evacuation ahead of the Allied forces was underway and he was loaded onto a boxcar, which reached Nurnberg three days later. After three days in Nurnberg all the accumulated prisoners, estimated by Bob as at least 8,000 men, began the march to Moosburg, near Munich. By the third morning of the march, Bob was too sick to walk and was left behind. The sick and injured group grew to about 100 men in four days, when they moved on, sometimes riding in a truck, sometimes walking. No one, including the German doctor in charge of the group, was in hurry to reach Moosburg. But eventually, arrive they did, approximately one week before the Stalag was liberated by units of General George S. Patton's Third Army.

### **Postwar Life**

Bob returned to the United States on a ship from Le Havre, France to New York City. He was discharged from active service but may have chosen to serve in the United States Army Reserve. At death, his rank was recorded as Major. He may have returned home to Idaho for a while. In December 1945 the *Lewiston Morning Tribune* printed a two-part article, written by Bob, about his time as a prisoner of war. That article was reprinted at a later date, and that reprint is the major source of information about Robert F. Bonomi and his wartime experience.

The 1950 census gives us a glimpse of Bob. He was living in Des Moines, Iowa, married, and working as a newspaperman/reporter. He and his wife, Ferne Gater, married on September 3, 1949. Ferne was a native Iowan with a background in newspaper work as well. She grew up in Council Bluffs, Iowa and graduated from the University of Iowa. The couple had two sons. They divorced in 1974.



Bob met and married Grace Carolyn Sykes and moved to Tennessee. He died there on October 13, 2003, and was buried in the West Tennessee State Veterans Cemetery in Memphis, Tennessee.



## Sources

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