

William “Wright” Bryan—WWII War Correspondent

1905 – 1991

The 20th Century displayed its events through many historical avenues; the D-Day Invasion of Normandy as part of Operation Overlord remains one of the most memorable. Themes based on many written and oral accounts, as well as documented military actions and battles, have propelled 6 June 1944 and those which followed through the seven plus decades since it occurred. For their parts, many reporters, often risking serious injury and/or death, were present to record and report this do-or-die challenge.

“More than two years had been put into the build-up for the Allied assault on Hitler’s Fortress Europe, and when it came, everything went much according to plan. Within five days, sixteen divisions had landed in Normandy. By the end of the month, more than a million men were ashore; the beachhead was secure.”
(Sulzberger, p. 486)

Airborne above the armada of ships were assault troop planes and gliders bound for inland targets. One passenger was a 39-year-old associate editor of the *Atlanta Journal* and American War Correspondent on special assignment named Wright Bryan. His name would forever be linked to this day as the first American correspondent to report the Invasion. This he accomplished by returning to England after the drop, reporting to BBC Headquarters in London and announcing the invasion via NBC broadcast following recorded messages by the Allied Commander, General Eisenhower; King George VI; and American President Franklin Roosevelt. It was heard repeatedly over the airways by many including Wright’s wife, Ellen, and their three children. His written chronicle followed. (Bennett)

Great Britain, a war weary but determined nation, was the launching site for the Invasion, and as such, also a major participant and recorder for the event. Many British Broadcasting (BBC) reporters were extensively involved in D-Day as reported below.

“When Operation Overlord – to reclaim mainland Europe from the Nazis - began with the Normandy Landings on 6 June 1944, BBC news reporters were in at the start, reporting from the frontline. The news broke at home with the 8:00 AM bulletin, when Freddy Allen reported that paratroops had landed in France. Any doubt that D-Day had come vanished with the newsflash just after 9.30, when John Snagge introduced General Eisenhower’s announcement. The BBC set up a War Reporting Unit to cover the allied invasion. Seventeen reporters were embedded with the initial British and US invading forces. For Guy Byam this meant jumping with the 6th Airborne Division.” (BBC100)

William Bryan, called Wright throughout his life, was born in Atlanta, Georgia and raised in Clemson, South Carolina. The art of reporting became second nature to Wright and would remain an integral part of his professional life. His academic preparation included a degree from Clemson in 1926 and a year spent at the Missouri School of Journalism; next he joined the *Atlanta Journal* staff, advancing through the newspaper hierarchy to become managing editor in 1943—the same year he became a war correspondent, sent on special assignment to England. While other reporters were in London or aboard ships converging on Normandy, Bryan boarded a C-47 Dakota transport aircraft and used his intrepid skills to make notes while observing the brave troop carrier plane crews and paratroopers preparing to jump from 700 feet over enemy territory. (Clemson University Libraries Special Collections)

Accounts state that nine-hundred-and-twenty-five C-47 aircraft transported 13,000 paratroopers with their gear on D-Day. Lew Johnson, a troop carrier pilot, later posted the following summary on the Air Mobility Command Museum's History website:

“To visualize the enormity of this operation, besides being nine planes wide, it was strung out for something like five hours. The groups had to be coordinated from dozens of bases in England so that they could mesh into a solid train. The naval armada was even more awesome. Following the launching of the second front, Joseph Stalin was quoted as saying that never in military history had the world witnessed anything as grandiose or spectacular.”

Returning to the continent to cover the liberation of Paris (August 19-25, 1944) and the continuing war from France, Bryan and other correspondents left the press camp at Chaumont on 12 September 1944, and proceeded on a debris-covered road when Germans opened fire on their jeep.

Wright exited to take cover nearby, but his 6' 5" height made him a large target resulting in a leg injury; he spent the following six months recuperating in hospitals and prison camps in Germany and Poland as a captive. The American medical staff did their best when caring for the POWs throughout their captivity, but their medical services were often limited. As a result, Bryan spent additional time in an American hospital in Paris following the war. (Bennett)

Transported to Oflag 64 in Szubin, Poland, Wright entered the front gate on 25 November 1944 and was held as a prisoner of war (Kriegy) until 21 January 1945 when he was freed by the Russians and departed through Odessa, thus ending his 57 day captivity at Oflag 64.

According to the PRISONER OF WAR BULLETIN, April 1945, “Several hundred American officers formerly at Oflag 64 were liberated by the advancing Russian armies and have returned to the United States.”

At Oflag 64, Bryan experienced the in processing all POWs received their first day: check-in and ID evaluation followed by barracks assignment. He soon discovered the scarcity of heat and food which resulted in his 25 pound weight loss when liberated.

To occupy his writer's mind and maintain his editing skills, Bryan was eager to share information with other journalists and writers. He is listed below in the January 1945 edition of the *OFLAG 64 ITEM*:

Bulletin staff included Lt. Diggs, editor; Lt. Seymour Bolten, chief translator; Lt. Ken Goddard, art editor; Lt. David Englander, feature editor; Lt. Tom Magee, printer; Lt. Charles Posz, cartographer; **Wright Bryan, Sunday editor**; and Lt. Martin Smith, Carl Hansen, and Ed Spicher, translators.

The OFLAG 64 ITEM staff includes Lt. Diggs, editor, and Lt. Larry Phelan, Lt. David Englander, Lt. Frank Hancock, Lt. Howard Holder, Lt. Teddy Roggen, Capt. Charles Wilkinson, Lt. Robert Cheatham, Lt. James, Lt. Alexander Ross and **War Correspondent Wright Bryan.**

Wright also became friends with Larry Allen, a well-known journalist and Pulitzer Prize winner who became a thorn in the Germans' side by using the bulletin board on which he displayed camp news and negative comments about his captors for which they were unappreciative.

“Allen’s status as a non-combatant civilian would result in his being sent home to the United States via the Geneva Convention’s repatriation provisions. It was great news for Allen, but Diggs missed his contributions. As compensation the following September, Wright Bryan—or ‘Write Bryan’ as some kriegies describe him—a former Atlanta Journal associate editor and subsequent war correspondent for that paper and the National Broadcasting Company (NBC). [He was] wounded and captured three months later while covering a firefight near Chaumont. Because he was armed when captured, the Germans would not accord Bryan noncombatant status so repatriation was out of the question for him.” (Dando-Collins, pp. 52, 53)

FEBRUARY 20, 1945: WRIGHT BRYAN'S STORY, WHICH FOLLOWS, WAS TAKEN FROM SZUBIN, POLAND, TO MOSCOW BY A SOVIET OFFICER WHO DELIVERED IT TO ASSOCIATED PRESS CORRESPONDENT EDDY GILMORE. THE DISPATCH WAS MADE AVAILABLE TO ASSOCIATED PRESS MEMBERS BY COURTESY OF THE ATLANTA JOURNAL, DISTRIBUTED BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS; COPYRIGHT 1945 BY THE ATLANTA JOURNAL.

SZUBIN, POLAND: LIBERATION FOR AT LEAST ONE GROUP OF AMERICAN WAR PRISONERS WHO HAD BEEN HELD HERE BY THE GERMANS CAME WITHIN EIGHT DAYS AFTER THE RED ARMY HAD LAUNCHED ITS SWIFT, POWERFUL OFFENSIVE.

ALTHOUGH THE NUMBER OF PRISONERS RELEASED HERE WAS RELATIVELY FEW, THERE IS HOPE THAT MANY OTHERS OF ALL OTHER ALLIED FORCES MAY BE CLOSE TO FREEDOM IF THEY HAVE NOT ALREADY ACHIEVED IT. SEVERAL OF THE LARGEST WAR PRISON CAMPS WERE LOCATED IN THIS REGION AND GERMAN EFFORTS TO REMOVE THEM AT THE LAST MINUTE MAY HAVE BEEN THWARTED BY THE SPEED OF THE RUSSIAN ADVANCE.

IN THIS LITTLE POLISH CORRIDOR TOWN, A HALF HOUR'S TRAIN RIDE SOUTHWEST OF BROMBERG, WAS A CAMP WHERE MOST OF THE AMERICAN GROUND FORCE OFFICERS CAPTURED IN AFRICA, SICILY, ITALY AND WESTERN EUROPE WERE LIVING BEHIND BARBED WIRE, WAITING IMPATIENTLY FOR THE END OF THE WAR OR FOR AN OPPORTUNITY TO ESCAPE.

A LITTLE MORE THAN A WEEK AGO THEY LEARNED FROM A GERMAN COMMUNIQUE OF THE RUSSIAN ATTACK, BEGINNING MORE THAN 100 MILES EASTWARD.

ON SATURDAY, JANUARY 20 [1945], THE GERMAN GARRISON WARNED THE AMERICAN PRISONERS TO PREPARE FOR EVACUATION OF THE CAMP ON FOOT AT ANYTIME WITHOUT FURTHER NOTICE. PRISONERS CERTIFIED BY GERMAN DOCTORS AS UNFIT TO MARCH WERE TOLD TO READY THEMSELVES TO LEAVE IMMEDIATELY WHEN TRANSPORTATION BECAME AVAILABLE.

ALL THAT DAY A CONTINUOUS STREAM OF CIVILIAN REFUGEES MOVED IN WAGON CARTS, BICYCLES AND AFOOT ALONG THE HIGHWAY PASSING THE CAMP. SUNDAY MORNING THE AMERICAN WAR PRISONERS HELD THEIR LAST FORMATION UNDER GERMAN SUPERVISION ON THE CAMP ASSEMBLY AREA AND THE MEN MARCHED OUT THE GATE IN A COLUMN OF THREES, ESCORTED BY GERMAN GUARDS.

TRANSPORTATION BEING UNAVAILABLE FOR HOSPITAL PATIENTS AND OTHERS UNABLE TO WALK, THEY REMAINED BEHIND. THIS GROUP, INCLUDING A FEW DOCTORS AND ORDERLIES TO CARE FOR THEM, NUMBERED NINETY-ONE. I WAS ONE OF THE GROUP BECAUSE OF A SLIGHT BULLET WOUND IN THE LEFT LEG WHICH STILL WAS NOT ENTIRELY HEALED.

UNTIL THE LAST MINUTE WE DID NOT KNOW WHETHER THE GUARDS WOULD BE LEFT WITH US OR WHETHER TRANSPORT MIGHT YET BE OBTAINED TO TAKE US BACK INTO THE GERMAN INTERIOR. BUT WHEN OUR MARCHING FRIENDS MOVED OUT OF SIGHT DOWN THE HIGHWAY, THEY WERE FOLLOWED IN A LITTLE AUTOMOBILE BY THE LAST GERMAN OFFICERS AND SOLDIERS IN SZUBIN.

AS THEY LEFT, THE GERMAN OFFICERS HANDED THE KEYS OF THE CAMP TO CHAPLAIN STANLEY BRACH OF NEWARK, N.J. AND WE WERE ONCE AGAIN UNDER FULL COMMAND OF THE AMERICAN OFFICERS.

QUICKLY WE PAINTED LARGE RED CROSS FLAGS TO HANG ON ALL SIDES AND ROOF OF THE HOSPITAL, NOT KNOWING WHETHER ANY GERMANS WERE LEFT IN THE VICINITY OR WHERE THE APPROACHING RUSSIANS MIGHT BE. RUMOR PLACED THE RUSSIANS ABOUT 50 MILES AWAY, BUT WE HAD NO WAY OF CONFIRMING THIS.

FATHER BRACH, CAPTURED IN AFRICA, HAD BEEN A PRISONER SINCE NOVEMBER 1942 AND HAD BEEN THROUGH THIS BEFORE. IN ITALY HE HAD BEEN IN A CAMP ABANDONED BY ITALIAN GUARDS ON THE SURRENDER OF THEIR GOVERNMENT BUT HAD BEEN RETAKEN BY THE GERMANS BEFORE ALLIED PRISONERS COULD BE EVACUATED. HE SAID MASS ON SUNDAY IN THE HOSPITAL WARD AND TOLD US TO BE CONFIDENT, THIS TIME WE WOULD BE FREE, AND TO PRAY FOR OUR FRIENDS AND COMRADES MARCHING THROUGH SNOW AND SUBFREEZING TEMPERATURES.

THE SENIOR AMERICAN OFFICER REMAINING IN CAMP ASSURED US WE HAD ADEQUATE FOOD AND FUEL SUPPLIES FOR SEVERAL WEEKS AND “THE RUSSIANS WILL BE HERE EITHER TOMORROW OR THE NEXT DAY OR NEXT WEEK OR NEXT MONTH—WE DON’T KNOW WHEN—BUT THEY WILL BE HERE.”

ALL THAT DAY WE WATCHED THROUGH BARBED WIRE FESTOONED WITH SNOW ICICLES – BARBED WIRE NO LONGER COVERED ON ALL SIDES BY VIGILANT GERMAN MACHINE GUNNERS—BARBED WIRE WHICH NO LONGER HELD US IN BUT KEPT UNFRIENDLY INTRUDERS OUTSIDE THE CAMP. ALL DAY WAGONS, SOME OPEN, SOME COVERED, PLODDED ALONG THE HIGHWAY OUTSIDE THE CAMP. AND THROUGH THE NIGHT WE COULD HEAR A FEW MUFFLED EXPLOSIONS IN THE DISTANCE.

MONDAY MORNING, WE LOOKED OUT TO THE DESERTED HIGHWAY AND WONDERED. THEN SOMEONE SAW TWO AMERICAN BUILT SIX-BY-SIX MILITARY TRUCKS AND A LIGHT TANK GO BY. THEY DID NOT PAUSE BUT SPIRITS IN OUR CAMP LIFTED.

JUST AFTER 10 O’CLOCK A VEHICLE STOPPED BETWEEN TWO PRINCIPAL GERMAN BARRACKS ACROSS THE STREET FROM THE HOSPITAL AND HEAVILY ARMED MEN SCATTERED TO SEARCH THE PREMISES. FROM HOSPITAL WINDOWS WE COULD NOT TELL BY THEIR SNOW-COVERED WINTER UNIFORMS WHETHER THEY WERE GERMAN REARGUARDS OR RUSSIAN ADVANCE UNITS. WHEN THE VEHICLE TURNED, WE RECOGNIZED IT AS AN AMERICAN-BUILT THREE-QUARTER TON RECONNAISSANCE CAR AND WHEN OFFICERS CAME TO OUR GATE, WE SAW THAT THEY WERE RUSSIANS.

AN ARTILLERY CAPTAIN WAS THE FIRST RUSSIAN OFFICER INTO OUR CAMP. HE WAS THE FIRST OF THREE GROUPS OF RUSSIAN OFFICERS WHO VISITED US DURING THE DAY AND EVENING. LIKE EVERY RUSSIAN WHO HAS BEEN HERE, THEY WERE ALERT AND SOLDIERLY, DEMANDING

PROPER PROOF OF OUR STATUS BUT ONCE IT WAS ESTABLISHED, EXTENDING ALL POSSIBLE COURTESY AND HELP.

THEY TOLD US THAT RUSSIAN SPEARHEADS WERE PUSHING EASTWARD ON EITHER SIDE OF SZUBIN, THAT BERLIN WAS THEIR GOAL AND THAT THINGS WERE MOVING SO SWIFTLY OUR FRIENDS IN THE MARCHING COLUMN MIGHT BE OVERTAKEN AND LIBERATED. AT THIS WRITING WE STILL HAVE NO DEFINITE NEWS ABOUT THAT COLUMN BUT WE ARE CONSTANTLY HOPING.

RUSSIAN UNITS THAT PUSHED THROUGH MONDAY WERE ARMORED SPEARHEADS AND RECONNAISSANCE FORCES. THEY MOVED WITH SWIFT PRECISION AND HAD NO TIME TO TARRY.

TUESDAY, RUSSIAN SOLDIERS CAME THROUGH IN LARGE NUMBERS, RIDING TANKS, TRUCKS, JEEPS AND MOTORCYCLES AND IN THE AFTERNOON THE INFANTRYMEN CAME, MARCHING THROUGH THE SNOW. ALL DAY WE HEARD THE REASSURING "BEEP, BEEP" OF AMERICAN HORNS ON THE HIGHWAY AND ALL DAY WE RECEIVED VISITS FROM RUSSIAN OFFICERS AND SOLDIERS AND FROM POLISH TOWNSPEOPLE WHO BROUGHT US FRESH BREAD AND HELPED REPAIR THE WATER AND ELECTRIC SERVICES OF THE CAMP.

THE RUSSIANS HAVE MUCH LEND-LEASE EQUIPMENT FROM AMERICA AND THEY LIKE IT.

EQUIPMENT OF THEIR OWN MANUFACTURE IS ABUNDANT AND FIRST RATE. THEY ARE EAGER TO MEET AMERICANS. THEY SALUTE AND SHAKE HANDS AND SPEAK OF ROOSEVELT, STALIN AND CHURCHILL AND EVERYONE HAS HIS EYES ON THE ROAD TO BERLIN.

WE TOLD ONE OF THEM WE WANTED TO GO TO MOSCOW. HE MISUNDERSTOOD, THINKING WE HAD ASKED HIM IF HE WAS GOING TO MOSCOW. QUICKLY HE INSISTED "NOT MOSCOW, NO. I AM GOING TO BERLIN."

IT IS ALL MOVING WITH THE SAME SPEED THAT THE ALLIES PUSHED ACROSS FRANCE AFTER BREAKING OUT OF THE NORMANDY BEACHHEAD—THE SAME HASTY RETREAT OF THE GERMANS WITH SOME ARMORED SPEARHEADS FORKING OUT OVER THE COUNTRY, BY-PASSING GERMAN STRONGPOINTS—THE SAME TRUCKLOADS OF SOLDIERS AND SUPPLIES FOLLOWING—THE SAME MOPPING UP BY INFANTRY AND ARTILLERY OF HARD FIGHTING GERMAN REARGUARDS.

MEANTIME, WE SIT HERE FLYING THE AMERICAN FLAG BESIDE THOSE OF RUSSIA AND BRITAIN.

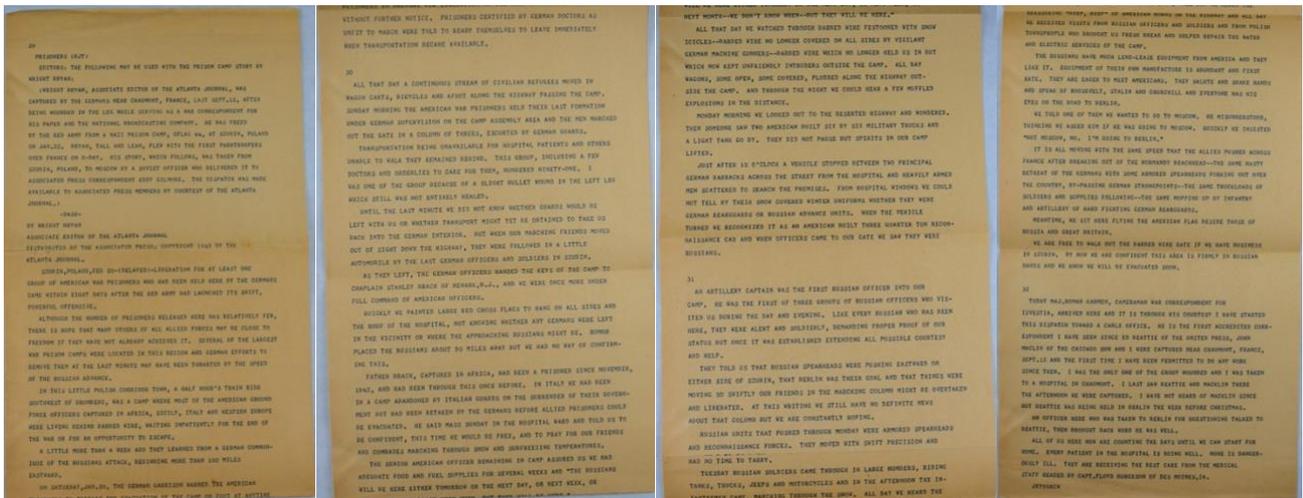
WE ARE FREE TO WALK OUT THE BARBED WIRE GATE IF WE HAVE BUSINESS IN SZUBIN. BY NOW WE ARE CONFIDENT THIS AREA IS FIRMLY IN RUSSIAN HANDS AND WE KNOW WE WILL BE EVACUATED SOON.

TODAY MAJ. ROMAN KARMEN, CAMERAMAN WAR CORRESPONDENT FOR IZVESTIA, ARRIVED HERE AND IT IS THROUGH HIS COURTESY I HAVE STARTED THIS DISPATCH TOWARD A CABLE OFFICE. HE IS THE FIRST ACCREDITED CORRESPONDENT I HAVE SEEN SINCE ED BEATTIE OF THE UNITED PRESS AND JOHN MACLIN [MACKLIN] OF THE CHICAGO SUN AND I WERE CAPTURED NEAR CHAUMONT, FRANCE ON SEPT. 12 AND THE FIRST TIME I HAVE BEEN PERMITTED TO DO ANY WORK SINCE THEN. I WAS THE ONLY ONE OF THE GROUP WOUNDED AND I WAS TAKEN TO A HOSPITAL IN CHAUMONT. I LAST SAW BEATTIE AND MACKLIN THERE THE AFTERNOON WE WERE CAPTURED. I HAVE NOT HEARD OF MACKLIN SINCE BUT BEATTIE WAS BEING HELD IN BERLIN THE WEEK BEFORE CHRISTMAS.

AN OFFICER HERE WHO WAS TAKEN TO BERLIN FOR QUESTIONING TALKED TO BEATTIE, THEN BROUGHT BACK WORD HE WAS WELL.

ALL OF US HERE ARE COUNTING THE DAYS UNTIL WE CAN START FOR HOME. EVERY PATIENT IN THE HOSPITAL IS DOING WELL. NONE IS DANGEROUSLY ILL. THEY ARE RECEIVING THE BEST CARE FROM THE MEDICAL STAFF HEADED BY CAPT. FLOYD BURGESSON OF DES MOINES, IOWA.

Returning to Atlanta in 1945, Bryan served as editor of the *Atlanta Journal*.



He was active in civic organizations such as the Red Cross. He received the Medal of Freedom in 1947 from NATO Supreme Commander General Dwight D. Eisenhower. Active in a variety of professional organizations, he held leadership positions in the American Society of Newspaper Editors and served as its President in 1952-1953.

In early 1954, Bryan accepted the editorship of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and continued in this position for a decade. Bryan weathered labor disputes at the newspaper and continued editorial support for Republicans at the national level. During that time, he was active in civic affairs in Cleveland as well as serving as an Overseer of Sweet Briar College, 1957-1970.

Bryan continued to have a keen interest in his alma mater serving as the President of the Alumni Association in 1958 as well as being on the Board of the Clemson Foundation. He had the distinction of delivering the commencement address at Clemson College in both 1946 and 1956. At the later date he was awarded an LLD. In 1963, after leaving the *Plain Dealer*, Bryan accepted the position as Vice President for Development at Clemson, a position he held through 1970. Upon retirement, he continued living in Clemson and devoted himself to researching and writing, *Clemson An Informal History of the University 1889-1979*. In 1987 Clemson University awarded William Wright Bryan the Clemson Medallion, its highest honor. (Clemson University Libraries Special Collections)

Committed to historical recollections during his lifetime, Bryan returned to Normandy in 1949, 1953 and to the Oflag 64 camp in 1970.

He died at the age of 85 and is buried in Oakland Cemetery in Atlanta, Georgia.

SOURCES

This writing contains information and materials from varied sources, including common knowledge.

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