

1LT Francis C. Callahan

December 21, 1918 - May 5, 2006

Early Years

Francis “Frank” Charles Callahan was born in Boston MA on December 21, 1918. He was the third of four sons born to John Thomas Callahan and the former Mary Jane Milligan. Growing up in East Boston, Frank was an excellent student and became an avid Red Sox fan. After the Selective Service act was passed in 1939, he was called to appear before the “draft board” for a physical. During this time, he was accepted to Tufts College in Medford MA and graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in 1941. After graduation, he was immediately accepted to begin Tufts Medical School, but did not have tuition, so he attended public health courses at MIT to earn enough money to pay for medical school.

Military



After the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Frank was ordered to report to the Boston induction center and was then taken to Fort Devens in Ayer MA for a physical to be sworn into the Army in February 1942. After his induction, he was transported by train to Alabama for basic training. He subsequently joined the 8th infantry division and was accepted to Officers Candidate School in Fort Benning, GA. He received his commission as a 2nd Lieutenant on New Year’s Day, 1943.

Frank got a 2-week leave after Officers School and returned to East Boston to find his brother Bob had also been inducted into the Army, as well as many of his friends. Frank also learned his college senior prom date, Rita, who would become his wife, had joined the WAVES.

While on leave, he received orders to report back to Fort McClellan GA to train troops. After that tour was over, he was sent to Camp Blanding in Jacksonville FL to help form the 63rd division. Because he worked as a short order cook at Howard Johnson restaurant before the Army, he was sent to the Army cook and baker school. Frank received a diploma from there but never got to use it. The Army decided Florida was too flat for infantry training, so the unit was sent to Camp Van Dorn in Mississippi, about 50 miles away from Baton Rouge LA. Frank received a lot of training in intelligence and reconnaissance there and spent a brief period running an officer’s mess. In the Fall of 1943, Frank shipped out to join the 88th infantry in Italy.

Prisoner of War “In his own words” (recorded in 1995)

In the fall of 1943, I was transferred overseas from the 63rd division and sent to Italy where I joined the 88th infantry division. I went into combat with them sometime after the “Battle of Monte Cassino”. We were making the push up the "boot" of Italy which was very mountainous. This eventually resulted in the defeat of the Italian army, then later the fall of Rome and finally, the evacuation of the German army from Italy. The American 5th army under General Mark Clark,

was on the west side of Italy along the Tyrrhenian Sea, and the British 8th army was on the east side along the Aegean Sea.

Someplace south of Rome in the mountains, I think it was in Fondi, I was captured by the Germans who were part of the Hermann Goring Division. We were on a reconnaissance patrol but our right flank was exposed. The British units hadn't kept up to our movement. The Germans were firing machine guns, rifles and mortars and we took cover, but we were surrounded and outnumbered. All we had were small carbines. We were given the order to surrender by our unit leader.

Rome was liberated a short while later, a couple of days before D-Day on June 6. While the Germans were moving us north, we could hear combat fire to the west. This I found out later was the battle of Anzio. We eventually got to Rome but unfortunately, I never got to see any of it.

We were transported by truck to northern Italy through the Po River Valley and up to the Brenner Pass. We went on trains through the Alps to a camp in Innsbruck, Austria, a temporary camp for us named "Stalag 7A". This was a camp which had civil prisoners. We stayed there for a couple of weeks and then were taken by train through Munich and up to Leipzig. On this trip, we were put on a siding for about 3 hours. A guard told us they were waiting for a train to pass on which Adolph Hitler was riding.

After we got to Leipzig, we went into Poland and I was incarcerated in a permanent camp, "Oflag 64", a camp for army officer prisoners. The Germans separated their prisoners with camps for officers, a separate camp for enlisted personnel and since the Air Force was considered elite by them, they had special camps for them. I was at "Oflag 64" between 5 and 6 months, with nothing to do, not much food to eat and practically no heat. There used to be a few sports activities at the camp but that ended before my arrival, mostly because of the overcrowding and lack of energy of prisoners.

The Germans were supposed to feed us rations under the rules of the Geneva Convention, but they didn't even have food for themselves. We were also supposed to be getting monthly food parcels from the Red Cross, but I only got a couple of them during my entire incarceration. Our daily food rationing consisted of the following: in the morning we received a small cup "ersatz" or phony coffee and a small slice of black bread; in the afternoon we got a cup of thin watery cabbage soup; and in the evening we received a small amount of potatoes and turnip.

We had a small library with a few old books which we were allowed to read to pass the time. Since most of the prisoners were officers, we were not allowed to do any physical labor. Our barracks were a one-room building for 50-100 men with double and triple decker bunks with wooden slats. The mattress was a burlap sack stuffed with straw as was the pillow. There were no sheets, except a flimsy one to cover us at night.

The Germans liked having us stand outside the barracks for headcounts in all kinds of weather day and night, rain, snow or freezing cold. We had no communication with any of the Allied Forces, but we did have a secret radio. Every few days word would pass through the camp that "the bird would sing tonight," that meant that there would be some news about the war which would spread around. We did have some idea about what was happening.

Every once in a while, we would see large puffs of smoke off in the distance and did not know what they were. We eventually found out that Auschwitz was nearby and then knew that the smoke came from opening the crematorium ovens. When the Battle of the Bulge took place, we received a tremendous number of new prisoners at our camp. More prisoners made things even more uncomfortable for us and it also reduced the food rations that we were getting.

A few years ago, I received a notice from the ex-prisoners of war from Oflag 64 prepared by the military intelligence of the War Department in 1944. The food that we were supposed to receive per day was: meat = 35 grams or 1.2 oz, barley = 9 grams or 1/4 oz, cabbage = 200 grams or 7 oz, dried vegetables = 6 grams or .2 oz, margarine = 21 grams or .7 oz, cheese = 4 grams or .2 oz, potatoes = 353 grams or 12 oz, carrots = 100 grams or 3.8 oz, bread = 353 grams or 12 oz. This may explain why from the time of my capture in Italy to the time I escaped in Poland, I had lost between 40 and 50 pounds.

We heard that the Russians were building up forces on the east side of the Vistula River, which was not far from where we were. When the Russians were getting ready to cross the river, the Germans decided to evacuate our camp and move us out by foot toward Berlin, Germany. We started our march on January 21, 1945 and I stayed with the march on the first day. After walking 20 miles or 25 kilometers to a tiny town called Exin or Wertheim, I decided that I was going to escape because I did not think that I would make it through the next day's march.

We were put into big hay barns on a baronial estate. I found out later it was the estate of Baron Von Rosen. I tried to dig a hole in the hay that night, but it kept caving in so I looked for another place. I found a small area behind a pigpen where I could hide. It did not smell very good or feel very good, but it served its purpose because here I am to talk about it. I stayed there that night, the next day and night and on the following morning, I did not hear anyone moving around or talking, especially in German. I looked around and saw about 20 other guys who had similar ideas like I did. A few days later, there were about 50 of us, some had hid in drainage ditches on the farm and other places. Remember, this was January in Poland and it was extremely cold, so that we were all lucky to get away alive.

We hung around the estate for 10 days and watched part of the Russian army go past us. This was General Zukov's army. They were on foot, on wagons, riding on the top of tanks and they even had U.S. equipment (jeeps). I made the acquaintance of a Polish family who fed me a meal of sorts. Through sign language, some words in German, Italian, and French, I heard there was going to be a catholic Mass in Polish, the first one in 10 years. They asked me if I would like to go with them, and I did. They were all very excited to have a Catholic Mass.

The Russians did not pay any attention to us. They did not give us any food, so we decided to try to move out on our own. We headed back to the camp we had been in because we had seen a railroad line on our march, this was a narrow gage line as are most of the railroads in Europe. A freight train came along, and we jumped a ride on it and we crossed another railroad line that had a wide gage track. We remembered from our training that this could be a Russian train. The freight train stopped at a station and stayed there overnight.

I met another Polish family along with one of my officer friends and we had another meal. We were billeted that night on the thickest down mattress that I ever saw in my life. I thought I was going to smother in it. The next day we went back to the railroad line and got on another train that eventually got us to Warsaw, Poland.

Warsaw was a devastated city it was bombed by the Germans, the Russians, the United States, and the Germans again as they were retreating from it, blew up what was left. In Warsaw, the Russians took us under their control and transported us through the Ukraine to Odessa on the Black Sea. Incidentally, when I mention trains, these were all freight cars of 40 and 8 cattle trains. There were no plush seats, and we were not traveling first class.

In Odessa, we were put up in old embassy buildings until a British ship arrived with some freed Russian prisoners. The Russians got off the ship and we got on. We then went by way of the Black Sea through the Dardanelles near Istanbul, around the Island of Crete across the Mediterranean Sea, to Port Said Egypt where we were finally under the control of the United States. While on the British ship there was plenty of food to eat for the first time in more than a year. I couldn't eat any of it because I blew up with an infected, impacted wisdom tooth and I could not open my mouth.

I was taken to a United States' Army hospital near Cairo, Egypt and was treated with sulfur drugs because there were no other antibiotics available. Penicillin was not in great supply at that time. The group that I had come out of Odessa with were eventually taken by ship to Naples Italy. My brother Bob found out somehow that I was supposed to be on that ship and was waiting for me on the dock. However, I was not on the ship, I was still in Cairo having my wisdom tooth removed.

After the tooth was removed, I remained in the hospital and was the only army officer patient. One evening, the nurses were having a dinner, and they invited me to attend. At the dinner, I met the colonel who was the hospital commander. When he heard what I had been through, he offered me a seat on a hospital plane that was coming through Cairo from the China, Burma, India theater and was flying wounded personnel to a hospital in Florida.

I jumped at the opportunity to join the flight and we flew into Casablanca. We changed planes and got on a four-engine prop plane to fly across the Atlantic. We eventually landed in Bermuda for refueling on Easter Sunday, 1945 and then on to Miami. The hospital the government took over was the original Miami Biltmore Hotel and I spent a couple of weeks there. Later I was then transferred to the Lovell General Hospital at Fort Devens in Ayer Mass where I was originally inducted into the army in 1942. After several leaves which the hospital gave me to go home and eat some of my mother's cooking, I eventually put on enough weight to go back to duty.

In May 1945, during a Prisoner of War Recuperation Leave, I married the love of my life, Rita M. Ehler. We were married in Cleveland Ohio with a "Sea of WAVES" present. After the wedding, I was returned to duty and sent to Camp Joseph T. Robinson outside Little Rock AR. I was put in charge of the basic training unit to get troops ready to go to the Pacific theater to fight the Japanese. Around this time, the Americans dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Japanese surrendered and the war was over.

Later Life



Frank was separated from the service in Arkansas and then came back to Massachusetts. He was re-accepted to Tufts Medical School and while in attendance, Frank and Rita's first child Joan was born. She was followed in 1950 by their first son John. Frank graduated with an MD degree in June 1950. Present that day at his graduation were his parents, his wife Rita, Joan and John, his brother Joe's wife Helen and her daughter Debbie and his brother Bob and Bob's wife Jean. Frank described the day as one of the happiest of his life. As Dr. Callahan embarked on his medical career, he and Rita were blessed with 4 more children between 1951 and 1958: Jane, Joyce, Frank and Julie. Dr. Callahan served as a physician for more than 30 years at Cambridge City Hospital, Cambridge MA and New England Memorial Hospital, Stoneham MA. Frank and Rita loved bowling and playing golf. In 1961, they joined the Nashawtuc Country Club, Sudbury MA, so his children could learn both golf and swimming.

In 1978, Dr. Callahan's beloved wife and golf partner, Rita, passed away. Frank was a devoted family man, a respected physician, a proud military veteran, an avid golfer, an accomplished cook, and a long-suffering Red Sox fan. He lived to spend time with his 10 grandchildren and see the Red Sox win the world series in 2004. Frank passed away peacefully in May 2006 with his family by his side.



Contributed by Joan Callahan and Joyce Condon, daughters, 2024