

Colonel Thomas Davisson Drake

1900 – 1970

The term, “War is Hell”, is particularly appropriate for those directly involved in day-to-day military operations. Military Commanders are key decision makers, often affecting the tides of battles and the lives of survivors. The military traits of one such officer have been extracted from multiple sources below reflecting how history has remembered him, thus providing a formidable, professional portrait of this American officer.

COLONEL THOMAS D. DRAKE – THE ULTIMATE COMMANDER



Colonel Thomas Davisson Drake, (the son of Eli Carrington Drake and Icy Dora Arthur Drake) was born October 24, 1900 in a small coalmining community in Tunnelton, West Virginia. During World War, he volunteered for army service and lied about his age (he was only 16), where he started as a Private, moved through the ranks to Sergeant, then finally as First Sergeant in General Pershing’s guard of honor following the war, receiving the Distinguished Service Cross for his heroic actions. He then remained in military service, reaching the rank of an Infantry Colonel and assignment as Regiment Commander. During ongoing conflicts in North Africa (starting in November of 1942), Colonel Drake took command of the 168th Infantry Regiment in January 1943, which served as part of the 34th Big Red Infantry Division.

Selected excerpts were taken from the KASSERINE PASS BATTLES READINGS, Volume, Part 1 of the U.S. CENTER OF MILITARY HISTORY (pp.160 – 165). Recorded statements submitted by Lt. Colonel Van Vliet and First Lt. Moschel respectively added some highlights of the report.

Joining his unit included 1000 men of the 3rd Battalion plus 650 miscellaneous troops, a medical detachment, the regimental band, 200 engineers, attached cannon company, several aircraft guns, a few artillery pieces and 200 replacement troops with limited training. Supporting Drake was the Reconnaissance Battalion of the 1st AD near Sidi bon Zid and a representative of the American Military Chaplain Corps named Chaplain Stephen W. Kane.

At 1430 hours on 16 February 1943, Colonel Drake received a radio message from General Ward to this effect, "We can do no more for you. The decision is yours. I will try to have supplies dropped to you." The supplies were never dropped. The message which came in clear was not understood because it presented problems which had not been in question. The orders were to hold this position. Was it intended that the decision was up to Colonel Drake, either to surrender, continue the defense or withdraw? No one was told of the contents of this message except the Communications Officer, Lt. Moschel, who received it, the radio operator the Executive Officer, Lt. Colonel Line, the Chaplain, Stehen W. Kane and the Commanding Officer, Colonel Drake. At 1500 on this date Colonel Drake received another message from General Ward, 'Look for dropped message at 1700.' Colonel Drake assumed that they were going to order him to withdraw. He made all preparations for withdrawal that night and after a careful estimate of the situation, before which Chaplain Stephen Kane, standing in full view of enemy snipers with his hands raised in Benediction, asked the Blessing of God upon the decision, Drake selected the route west along the foothills of GARET HADID, then Southwest, continued following the foothills until clear; thence northwest across country to EL HAMIR. He then sent a coded message to Lt. Colonel John H. Van Vliet, Jr., of the third Battalion to prepare to withdraw on order that night and then completed arrangements for the withdrawing of his own men from GARET HADID.

Continued confusion caused by the lack of accurate/timely communications led to the following description of Drake's Regiment's plight.

DRAKE'S SURRENDER

The Germans brought up several tanks, all with yellow tigers painted on their sides and opened fire. They also set up machine-gun positions and supplemented that with rifle fire. While they are doing this, their infantry completely encircled the small American force. After three and one-half hours of fighting, the American fire power diminished and then practically ceased as the men were out of ammunitions and had become casualties. Finally, a German armored car bearing a white flag came dashing into the American circle. Colonel Drake ordered his men to wave the car away. When the car failed to respond, he then ordered his men to fire upon the German car. Some men began to fire, but others could not as they had no ammunition and then began surrendering in small groups. German tanks came in following that vehicle without any negotiations for surrender. The

Germans had used the white flag as subterfuge to come inside the circle of defense without drawing fire. Their tanks then closed in from all directions cutting Colonel Drake's forces into smaller groups. Drake's men who did not surrender were killed by German bullets. One tank came toward Colonel Drake and a German officer pointing a rifle at him called out, "Colonel, you surrender." The Colonel replied, "You go to hell," and turned his back. Drake then walked away and two German soldiers with rifles followed him at a distance of about 50 yards. Colonel Drake was then stopped by a German Major who spoke good English and was asked to get into his car where he was taken to General Schmidt, Group Commander of the 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions at German Divisional Headquarters. There the German General immediately came forward to see him, drew up to attention, saluted and said, "I want to compliment your command for the splendid fight they put up. It was a hopeless thing from the start, but they fought like real soldiers."

"I have called my regimental commander who held you at GARET HADID this morning and asked him how the Americans were. He replied that they were alright; that he hadn't heard a sound from them and I find you back here. I am glad to have you for now I can go on to fight your comrades at SBEITLA." The German Commander promised Colonel Drake that all the American wounded would be cared for and that he would leave American medical personnel to properly look after them, but immediately upon Colonel Drake's leaving the field, the American medical personnel were carried off as prisoners and the American dead and wounded left to the ravages of the Arabs who proceeded to immediately strip the dead and wounded and to beat insensible those wounded who protested to the stripping of their clothes.

NOW AS PRISONERS OF WAR

The American prisoners were assembled in a group and under guard marched back that afternoon and night along the road to DJ LESSOUDA. Americans who were slightly wounded or who became ill because of fatigue, lack of food and water and could not keep up with the column were ruthlessly bayoneted or shot. Many were walking barefooted because the Arabs had taken their shoes under the supervision of the German soldiers.

The men had been left to the systematic robbery by German soldiers, including some junior officers, for a period of about a half hour. During this time, pockets and kits were thoroughly searched, often at the point of a rifle or bayonet presented at their unprotected belly, while

watches, rings, pocketbooks, pens and all valuables were ruthlessly seized. They were then formed in a column of fours, officers at the head, and started to the rear. Three German tanks brought up the rear of the column, which was flanked by armed guards, waiting to strike, bayonet or shoot anyone who resisted.

All day they marched through desert sand with unrelieved thirst almost unbearable. Colonel appealed to the German Commander in the name of common humanity to give the men a drink of water, but was met with the statement, "We only have enough for our troop." Near midnight they were finally halted for the remaining hours of darkness. The men were then herded into a circle in the open desert and there practically froze in the piercing cold of the African night.

At dawn, 18 February 1943, trucks came in to which the men were packed and thus transported to SFAX where THE FIRST FOOD WAS EATEN IN FIVE DAYS! Black sawdust bread was issued then along with water, as they were corralled into an open wire-in compound, roughly 100 yards square and flanked by towers with machine guns in place. The men burrowed into the ground for warmth, scooping out the sand with their hands. No means whatever was provided for ordinary sanitation. Officers and men thrown in together like pigs.

The next day trains were provided, 40 to 60 men in a livestock car built for 8 horses. The misery, squalor and suffering endured will remain fresh in their memories. Two days and one night were used to get to SOUSSE where the men were permitted to get out for latrine purposes. During all this time no provisions had been made for men to answer the calls of nature as they were kept locked in darkness. One day in the yards at SOUSSE then on to TUNIS under exactly the same conditions just described.

At TUNIS, they were turned over to the inquisitors headed by a German called "Charley" who at the "School House" amused himself by stamping an iron-shod heel into a soldier's instep or twisting his fingers while backed up by loaded and bayoneted rifles, all in an effort to obtain military information. Another method was softly saying a little trip [would be taken] out in the dark and the soldier's mother would never know what became of her darling boy. However, "Charley" although he had lived in America, was very gullible and was soon assiduously writing down fantastic stories that had no basis of fact.

From TUNIS, the men were marched to the airport eight kilometers from the city and there most of them were transported by air in JU 52's to ITALY. Others were taken by water. All ended up at Capua, a collecting camp which stood out as a new low level [of treatment]. The

men slept on the ground, which was dusty, and the nights were very chilly. No utensils were provided and the men procured rusty tin cans from a heap in the camp and with improvised spoons from boards which contributed proportionate dignity to the menu of cabbage water provided once daily. Two weeks of CAPUA and then they were ready to leave for the regular prison camps in Germany and Poland.

THOMAS D. DRAKE, 015384

Colonel

(Formerly Commanding 168th Inf)

G.S.C. [General Service Corps]

WDGS [War Department General Staff]

*Col. Drake was captured by the Nazis on the 16th of February. This battle was the first major encounter of the US Army and concurrently its first major defeat, and is a battle still studied at the Army War College. **Drake was taken to the Oflag in Eichstätt; later, when the Germans opened what became the largest US Army Oflag in Szubin, Poland (Alzburgund) which was numbered Oflag 64, they all were transferred there and Colonel Drake became SAO (Senior American Officer) of the Oflag. At the beginning, in the camps where Americans were held, no military structure was observed; however, in Szubin – as Waters recollected - Drake rapidly organized the camp according to the Code of Military Conduct.***

THE SENIOR AMERICAN OFFICER (SAO) SETS THE TONE

The Kriegies of Oflag 64 were fortunate to have as their Senior American Officer a hard-nosed, well respected, professional soldier who knew how to lead. Colonel Thomas D. Drake was a highly decorated veteran of World War I who was described by Kriegy Clarence Ferguson as “a very straight diminutive man with piercing blue eyes whose very movement denoted a person of command.” In the first days at Oflag 64 he organized the camp as an Army unit with the staff set up in a similar fashion with an XO, S-1 (Adjutant), S-2 (Intel), S-3 (Operations), etc. Everything was run by ranking American

officers and discipline at all times to include pressed trousers (dampened and put under mattress between used Red Cross boxes). As described by Kriegy "Boomer" Holder, 'Keeping clean and well pressed was considered a major morale factor at Oflag 64.'

But just as important was the relationship he established with the German Commandant, Oberst Scheider. Early on Colonel Drake made it known that he and his staff would be responsible for the internal operations in the camp and the Germans the external part. If a Kriegy was called before a German officer, an American of equal rank always accompanied him. The first meeting between Colonel Drake and Oberst Schneider probably set the tone for this relationship.

As written by Kriegy Frank Diggs in his book, Americans Behind the Barbed Wire WORLD WAR II: INSIDE A GERMAN PRISON CAMP, Colonel Drake and the interpreter were called to the commandant's quarters for an initial conference. When they were seated, the German rose up, beckoning to the interpreter in a 'loud voice of command'. The American Colonel then rose up, beckoning the interpreter, and started to the door. Oberst Schneider said, 'Was ist los?'

Using his interpreter to emphasize his position of rank, Colonel Drake said, 'I am a Colonel in the United States Army. One does not address an American Colonel in that tone of voice. When you have learned to act and speak as a gentleman, I will return for the conference.'

Never again did Schneider raise his voice to Colonel Drake. In fact, Drake would not deal with any German officer of lesser rank which drove many of the guard officers crazy. The Colonel had established control that would serve as a great benefit to the POWs during their confinement.

Drake's professional, sometimes abrupt, demeanor quickly became common knowledge throughout camp personnel within its perimeters, resulting in a healthy respect for his office and authority.

REPATRIATED

Colonel Drake's capture was first reported to the International Committee of the Red Cross on 17 February 1943, and the last report was made on 22 September 1944. Based on these two reports, he was imprisoned for at least 583 days. Ultimately, the Colonel was returned to Military Control.



Colonel Drake was sent stateside in 1944 for health reasons. Regaining his health and still on active duty, Drake was assigned by the Army as a technical advisor on a 20th Century Fox film, *A WALK IN THE SUN*. It starred Dana Andrews, Richard Conte, George Tyne, John Ireland, Lloyd Bridges, and Sterling Holloway, Norman Lloyd, Herbert Rudley, Richard Benedict with Burgess Meredith as narrator. The plot concerned the attempt of a lead platoon with 53 soldiers whose mission was to capture a designated farmhouse and destroy a bridge in preparation for the invasion of Italy.

The mission was successful but the price was high for men in the platoon who would never return home.

“It is most distinguished for the real and comradely relationship among men of varying origins and modes of life, for its vital and sparkling dialogue...and for its unaccented tribute to the resourcefulness of the American soldier, working out battle problems with the co-operation and efficiency of a smart football team.”

In 2016, the film was deemed “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant” by the United States Library of Congress, and selected for preservation in its National Film Registry.

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Walk_in_the_Sun

TAPS

For his long and valued military service to the United States of America, Thomas Davison Drake was awarded the following medals: Purple Heart (WWI), Silver Star (WWII), Two Distinguished Service Crosses (WWI and WWII) [Note: Colonel Drake’s courageous actions and extraordinary heroism during the Kasserine Pass engagements, earned him a Bronze Oak Leaf Cluster for his second DSC, personally pinned on by Eisenhower], Legion of Merit and five stars (WWII) and the POW Medal (WWII).

According to [Find a Grave.com](http://FindaGrave.com), Colonel Drake’s death is recorded as 8 April 1970 in San Diego County, California. Both he and Mrs. Quincey Drake reside there as permanent residents at Greenwood Memorial Park in San Diego.

MEMORABLE PASSAGE

Drake shared his thoughts on POWs in the Oflag 64 50th Anniversary Book.



REMEMBER

It is a fact that prisoners of war have offered their best in service of their country. The only difference between them and those who have so gallantly died in so doing is that the enemy did not choose to kill them when they were overpowered.

If you are close enough to the enemy to be captured, you are close enough to be shot or bayoneted.

Let no man believe there is a stigma attached to having been honorably captured in battle. Only the fighting man gets close enough to the enemy for that to happen. That he is not listed with the slain is due to the infinite care of Providence.

Be proud that you carried yourselves as men in battle and adversity. You will be enriched thereby.

Let us anew, pledge ourselves, that we may return to our place in the American life better fitted to carry on the duty assigned to us and none the worst for the inevitable role we have carried for so long.

THOMAS D. DRAKE, Col. U.S.A.

Senior Officer, Oflag 64

MEMORIAL SALUTES FOR THOMAS D. DRAKE, COL, USA (Ret)

An article written by Larry Allen (captured AP writer, also a POW at Oflag 64) which appeared in the First Issue (November 1943, p. 3) of the original camp produced newspaper, *The Oflag 64 Item*, states Colonel Drake's military contributions in the section *Kriegy Sketches*:

A hard fighting 'go-getter' who learned about war in the last one and topped it off by helping to lead the big Allied assault on North Africa as the 'Boss' of Camp Number 64 in Germany.

'He is able, determined, 42-year-old, clean-cut, blue eyed Colonel Thomas D. Drake, with a reputation of knowing what he wants and usually getting it.

A native of Clarksburg, West Virginia, he started on the ground floor of the United States Army and was commissioned on April 7, 1917, two days after America entered the War.

Gallantry in action brought him quick recognition along with the Distinguished Service Cross and rapid promotion. He went through the thrill of all major operations in France, with the Fourth Division, for 18 months. Later he was assigned to the Army of Occupation in Germany for nine months at Coblenz. In the ensuing years he saw long service in the Philippines and China and at Army Posts in the Southern United States.

Colonel Drake commanded the 168th infantry regiment and was attached to the divisional staff on plans and training for the eastern assault force in the invasion of North Africa. He was captured last February 17 near El Hammar in Tunisia.

The Colonel's favorite sports are football and boxing. He is married and his son is a cadet at West Point.

He says his principal job here is: 'To see that every man maintains himself in a fit mental and physical condition.'

His policy on camp administration: We must willingly carry out all orders the Germans give in the running of the camp because it is for our own benefit. In turn, we require the Germans to treat us decently and we have been getting that kind of treatment.

On the every-present burning question on 'When do you think the war will end?' The Colonel says: 'The war, I think should end next Fall. I base that primarily on the supposition that big things will happen next Spring.'

In planning this special edition, your editors felt it should contain commentaries from those gentlemen who were closely associated with Colonel Drake behind barbed wire. Accordingly, we contacted the following and here are their comments.

SOURCE: POST OFLAG ITEM, SPECIAL RECOGNITION EDITION,
SPECIAL EDITOR FRANK MAXWELL

GENERAL JOHN KNIGHT WATERS (SETUSA)

My association with Colonel Drake-and it was only while we were in the POW camp-was one of the most rewarding I have ever had in my service. His remarkable courage, leadership, and devotion to the American fighting man and the principles for which our country stood were deeply inspiring. He believed that each American soldier and officer was fighting for a noble purpose; was the best fighter in the world; and that their profession was an honorable one to be admired and respected by all.

LT GENERAL J.D. ALGER

His actions were always in the face of great odds and to have misjudged our captors or a situation would have generated reactions of serious, if not disastrous, consequences. That we Americans in that first US officer's camp were able to organize and operate the Oflag-and to survive in that far corner of Poland-was due in large measure to Colonel Drake's untiring efforts, his strength of character, his high principles and his just plain guts in standing up to the Germans in our behalf.

Most of us at Stubin knew this and time has not dimmed the memory and the image of Colonel Drake, ramrod straight, immaculately turned out and, every inch a soldier, marching out the gate to confront the Kommandant to ensure that our position and our rights were respected.

We all owe so much to Tom Drake and I join all of those who were with us in adversity in saluting a gallant soldier who is now at rest.

COL. JOHN H. VAN VLIET, JR.

Colonel Drake is remembered for the successful way he dealt with the Germans to secure the rights, the privileges, and the fair treatment to which we were entitled. His manner, his ego and cocksure attitude allowed him to project a forceful personality that had an almost physical impact. He was, in fact, a kind of Napoleon...always striving to be right; always working to be right; believing he was right even though some of his judgements were not always right. This was what the Germans knew and expected from their own officers and it contributed to Colonel Drake's success in dealing with them on our behalf.

MAJ HAROLD S. SPURGIN

As a Regimental Commander he proved to be very exacting and under no circumstances would he accept an indifferent performance or results. Frankly, I actually did not know him until POW days, though I had served under him for quite a long time. There was one thing that always impressed me with Colonel Drake and that was that I never knew anyone who was so proud to be an Officer in the United States Army and an American as he was. He typified the best in a regular Army officer and a leader in every sense of the word. It was a privilege to serve under him. I admired him greatly.

MAJ MERLE MEACHAM

I think two words describe him very well; he was a perfectionist and a 'loner'. He was very demanding in anything he wanted done and was not prone to accept excuses. Some people resented this attitude but I believe that he had the welfare of the men in his mind all the time. As much as people criticized him, I do not believe that any other officer could have run Oflag 64 and demanded and gotten the respect of German Officers. He demanded strict courtesy from the Germans [missing words] he wanted a certain thing, he kept at it this until he got it. During our stay at Schubin, he stayed in his room a good deal of the time. He would frequently have me come and have long talks with him. He would always be making plans for betterment of the camp. Another example of Colonel Drake's perseverance: When we were in Africa, we received quite a large number of replacements. These arrived at night right up to the front lines. After checking in, Colonel Drake told everyone one to dig his fox hole before they went to sleep. He was astonished and furious to hear that they had been sent without entrenching tools. He started writing letters to higher headquarters and even wrote letters to the War Department. He felt it was his duty to do this and did not care whose toes he stepped on. This, as you know, did not endear him to the Pentagon.

MR. HENRY SODERBERG

I am stricken with grief because I have lost a great friend for many years. At my first visit to Oflag 64 in the summer of 1943, Tom was sick and in the hospital. I met him for the first time in the fall, on a visit to the camp in the company of Mr. Hugh Cedergren of Sweden, and the Rev. Eric Christensen of Denmark, two great war-time YMCA leaders. I wrote, that evening, in my diary, "Today I have met Colonel Thomas Drake for the first time, the Chief Man of Confidence at Oflag 64. All three of us thoroughly enjoyed being with him and working with him. He is a very fine man, a good exponent of a correct and cultured American Officer. He is keeping up an extra-ordinary

discipline among his men, which is good for their morale. This was also something which was pointed out to us by the German Colonel, the Camp Commandant.”

On repeated visits to the camp, during the spring and 1944, Tom was my guide and advisor. I got to know him better and better. His warm voice and his friendly smile behind the little fine mustache always fascinated me. Behind the sometimes harsh and military façade I found a man, not only of strong convictions in some things, but also a man of profound human understanding for the individual officers – perhaps not always fully understood among the men.

MRS. THOMAS D. DRAKE



Tom had fought many hard fights these past few years having to do with his heart. It seems incredible that this vibrant man is no longer in this physical presence. He had very great respect, regard and a special feeling for all his “Kriegies”. While I had never been able to attend any of the reunions, it was not because I did not want to come. It was just a thing of someone needing to be near the small business that we have—just in case! But please know that I feel very close to all of you—actually like I know most of you, because we did talk about you all and your experiences—so will you still keep me on the list of any information about Oflag 64 and maybe one day I will visit one of your reunions.

A great American – a dear friend is gone. We bow our heads in gratitude for what Colonel Drake gave us. May he rest in peace.

THE DRAKE LEGACY

Military service through multiple generations has been a common trait throughout this nation’s history. One such US Army legacy has occurred in the Drake family with Thomas, the father; Tom II, the son; and Tom III, the grandson.

Colonel Drake’s practical knowledge was accumulated early in his life when he volunteered at age 16 during WWI, rising in the ranks to Regimental Commander of the 168th Infantry Regiment during WWII and as Senior American Officer at Oflag 64, an American Prisoner of War camp in Poland. As a youngster, son Tom had also been initiated for duty responsibilities as his father often included him as an observer of military maneuvers, preparing him for his graduation from West Point in 1945 and an accomplished career until his retirement in 1975 with the rank of Colonel.

The military educational venues for both father and son were diverse, yet equally important, the knowledge acquired throughout their careers, were often challenging overseas assignments. Those of the father were experienced in two World Wars and as a Senior American Officer in an American Officers' Prisoner of War camp in Poland. Tom's were realized half a world away where he served in Korea as an Infantry Company Commander and Battalion S-3, 2d Battalion, 160th Infantry Regiment, 40th Infantry Division. Conflict beacons again in Vietnam where the now Lt. Colonel Tomas Drake II served as J-3 in MACV, Saigon. The most unique assignment for Tom and his family occurred with their five-year assignment to Iran where he worked with government and military leaders before returning to the states and retiring in 1975.

Tom Drake III was also the recipient of this legacy as he, too, became an officer and served until he resigned his commission and moved with his family to San Diego. Now, the entire family including parents, children and grandchildren was complete—a legacy of honor and service to be remembered.

Biography written by Kriegy Research Group writer Ann C. Rogers in
collaboration with David Little