

Charles G. Eberle 1919 to 2010

Early Years

Charles Gustav Eberle was born February 15, 1919, in Roselle Park, Union County, New Jersey. His father, Gustav, had immigrated from Germany as a small child. His mother, Rose, was born in New York to recent German immigrants. By the time of Charles' birth, the family was living in Roselle Park, which would be his home for the rest of his life.



Charles characterized himself as an indifferent student. In high school he recalled wrestling. But he was also good at business subjects and learned stenography and typing. After graduation, he went to work. He also attended college, most likely the Newark campus of Rutgers University, the State University of New Jersey. And he got involved in boxing, training in local gyms. He fought about 27 bouts and in 1941 he won the New Jersey State boxing championship. When interviewed by Aaron Elson, he told the following story about his boxing experiences:

There's a lot of wise guys go down to the gym, a lot of pros, and some of these pros, they'll get ahold of the amateurs and they really maul them. Jim (Koerner) and I were both pretty good boxers, and the manager would say, let's say this guy was mauling one of the young kids just trying to come in. "All right Charlie, come in the next round, you're next." And we could handle them. We could hit too, just like they could. And Jim would do the same thing. We never took advantage of the young kids coming up. We were young, too. We were only 19 at the time, but you had kids 17, 18 just coming up.

Military Service

In October 1940, the United States began its first peacetime conscription of men for military service. Charles registered as required by law and was one of the first men inducted in 1941. He was sent first to Fort Dix, New Jersey, and then Camp Croft in South Carolina. After basic training his first job in the Army was stenographer. Those business skills had been noticed! At Camp Croft he also began boxing competitively again.

Charles was home on leave when his father wanted to know why he was not becoming an officer, like the son of a family friend. This caused Charles to apply for Officer Candidate School. He was accepted and sent to Fort Benning, Georgia, for training. He was commissioned as a second lieutenant in August 1942 and assigned to the 34th Infantry Division, the “Red Bulls”.

By May 1942 the entire 34th Division had arrived in Northern Ireland to train for the invasion of North Africa. 2LT Eberle was sent to join them within days of receiving his commission. On November 8, 1942, 2LT Eberle landed in Algiers as part of Operation TORCH. After additional training in Algiers, the Red Bulls moved eastward to engage Rommel’s Afrika Corps in the mountains and narrow passes of Tunisia. The 34th Division fought at Faid Pass and Fondouk in February 1943. On March 10, 1943, 2LT Eberle’s platoon was lead platoon for his company, which in turn was leading the battalion. By his own account, his platoon got too far ahead of the company, was surrounded by German soldiers and he was captured.

Charles told the story of his capture in more detail in his interview with Aaron Elson.

Charles Eberle: *Anyway, we had a series of counterattacks and in this one my platoon is the point for my company, which is the point for the battalion, and the battalion the point for the regiment. In fact the battalion commander was court martialed, or he was reduced a grade anyway, back to major from colonel. He was 600 yards behind us, and what good are you there? You’re in open territory. And because of him, my company, most of the company, we got captured.*

The night before we had to take this hill, which wasn’t much at all. The Germans had evacuated it. In front of us, maybe 200 yards, was a real high ridge, maybe 200 feet high. I had guys up there to patrol to see what was what. And they’re coming back down, “The Germans are coming!” Christ, I saw them before they even got me that message. The Germans are coming through the pass – not the Kasserine Pass but Kef el Ahmar – and they’ve got tanks and weapons carriers.

We don’t even have bazookas. We had no antitank weapon, no radio, and I remember – I hope I can get through it – Bob Fry was my, in barracks he was my orderly, because when you’re training, you’re soaking wet, he takes care of everything for you. He makes your bed and all; you’re too busy doing things and arranging things. But in combat he’s your runner. When I saw how the situation was turning out, we had lost the machine gun section already, and some other guys were either wounded or killed, I told Bob Fry, Bob, go back and tell Hinton, who was our C.O., what the situation is. He didn’t get ten, fifteen feet and he got a mortar right

between the legs. When I got to him, he was already out of it. And they've got the mortars coming down. We're in the desert. There's cactus, and you've got some rocks there, but you've really got no protection. If a mortar went off twenty feet in front of you it would get you because it spread out.

I think the scariest moment of my life, I said, we don't stand a chance here. Am I gonna get us all killed or what? And these men were my responsibility. I didn't want to die either. But I felt for my men. So I put my bayonet on top of the rifle, I got my handkerchief out, and I stood up. I was praying and I just stood up.

Aaron Elson: *You stood up?*

Charles Eberle: *I had to. What are you gonna do? And the Germans came in right away. They didn't start shooting. I have to give them credit. They were very good. They rounded us all up quickly. They were very efficient. What's the name of the guy now, general, Rommel. Oh, they were efficient.*

Prisoner of War Experience

2LT Eberle was first transported to Palermo, Sicily, and then to Prigione di Guerra (PG) 21 in Chieti, Italy. In September, 1943, after Italy surrendered to the Allies, Charles was among those moved by the Germans to PG 78 in Sulmona, Italy. In the confusion of the move, he and five fellow prisoners seized the chance to escape. They split up and headed into the Abruzzi mountains, working their way south toward the Allied lines near Cassino. They had found two local youths who were guiding them over the mountains. Unfortunately, the youths guided the group straight into the hands of the Germans in Campobasso. Charles remembered the commander of the German unit spoke impeccable English and had studied at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. The commander told him that his group had been betrayed for an 8,000-lira bounty per officer. The Germans knew there were Allied soldiers wandering around the mountains and were depending on the local residents to round them up in exchange for the bounty. Charles had been free for 27 days by his account. He and his fellow prisoners were transported to the prison in Sulmona and then to Oflag 64 in Szubin, German occupied Poland, arriving on November 11, 1943.

Charles settled into life at Oflag 64, which he praised as a very well-organized camp. He was aware of the existence of "the bird", the clandestine radio. In fact, on one occasion, he was responsible for "holding" the bird, hiding from the Germans between uses, usually in the beams of the barracks. Thanks to the bird, the Kriegies knew about the June 1944 D-Day landings before their prison guards.

The food situation was not too bad at first. Charles would save his Red Cross cheese and chocolate and trade it to a particular prison guard for flour and sugar. He used these items to make bread and cake for himself and his fellow prisoners. He took German language classes from Kriegie Carl V. Hansen, a college professor in civilian life, and became fluent in the language. Professor Hansen, he recalled, made his students learn to speak the language like native Germans. By the end of 1944 food was scarce and the Red Cross parcels were not arriving as they used to.

On January 21, 1945, 2LT Eberle walked out of Oflag 64, evacuating before the arrival of the Russian Army. Charles, however, decided to take his chances with the Russians. On the first night of the march, he hid beneath a board and some straw in a large cattle barn. Once the main body had walked on the next morning, he returned to the Oflag. He made his way to Warsaw where he sheltered with a Polish family for about three weeks until the Russians seized him and put him in a displaced persons camp. He was sent by boxcar to Odessa, a very cold nine-day trip with no blankets or straw in the drafty cars. He believes this is when his feet were frostbitten. In Odessa he was transported to Port Said, Egypt, on a British ship complete with tablecloths and plenty of food. After processing and interrogation, he was sent to Naples, Italy, where he received a pay draw of \$200, which he promptly gambled away.

Home



Upon returning to the United States, Charles would have been given 60 days of leave. He returned to Roselle Park. Before the war, he had been part of a gang of young people who went dancing together. Emma Devoto was also a member of this group. Before the war, Emma and Charles were friends. But then Emma wrote to him during the war and every week while he was a Prisoner of War. They became engaged in early July 1945. Charles then went to Lexington, Virginia, for an Army training program. Emma flew down to Lexington with Charles' father and two sisters and they were married in a civil ceremony in Lexington. After training, he was assigned as

Regimental Athletic Officer at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. He and Emma returned to New Jersey for a big church wedding in early September 1945.

As Regimental Athletic Officer Charles was in charge of providing activities for the soldiers and also in charge of explaining the many benefits available to them once they were discharged. This job was considered an essential service and Charles complained that he served four months longer than other soldiers

thanks to that job. By the end of 1945 he had joined the ranks of the discharged and returned home to Roselle Park, New Jersey. However, before his discharge, he had chosen to join the inactive reserve.

Life After the War

Charles became a salesman and eventually a sales manager. He was the envy of his fellow salesmen because his wife handled all his paperwork for him, leaving him more time to sell and to become a top seller. He used his veterans benefits to go back to Rutgers University and estimated he spent seven years in night school over about fifteen years but never completed a degree.

In 1950, Charles was recalled to service under the Army Reserve system for two years. He was stationed in Germany, which he found to be pleasant duty, using the fluent German that he had mastered in Oflag 64. And he had a great story about how he got that assignment, from the Aaron Elson interview.

Okay, yeah. Now when I got recalled, an officer reports to the post. I was called to Fort Dix. I reported to the VOQ (Visiting Officers Quarters) there and showed them my orders and I got assigned a room there.

The next morning I'm going to go to the headquarters. So it's a rainy morning. I had my car with me. So I'm driving up and I see this captain walking by there. I stop and ask him if he wants a lift. Yeah. "What's the Army all about now, I've been out of it four years." He's telling me about the changes and all, a nice conversation. Then I drop him off there and I start my processing. An officer gets processed. And then you have to go in for your assignment. You have to see the adjutant's office. Well, he was not the adjutant, he was the assistant adjutant, and he was in charge this day. So I said, "Hey, what have you got that's good?" And they ask you, "What's your MOS?" I forget what the regimental athletic officer is, I says, that was my latest MOS. Incidentally, I said I'm not particularly crazy about going into combat again. I said if I get a nice job here, at Benning, I'd like that. "Yeah, we can do that for you." Oh, fine. He says, "If you stay here, every three months they clean you out, and over to Korea you go." I said, That doesn't sound so good either. He says, "I've got just exactly what you want. They're forming the 4th Division, that's already scheduled for Germany, and the officer cadre for it." And they're scheduled to go to Germany, he mentioned several months ahead, and if you accept that now, that would probably be the best thing. So I said, let me call my wife. I called my wife and I told her. I said it's the best thing for us. And I could probably get you down there too.

Charles and Emma had two sons. He also kept in touch with fellow Kriegies and organized three reunions during the 1960's. In 1971 he organized a trip to Szubin to revisit Oflag 64. Emma died in August 1998 and Charles died May 28, 2010.

Sources

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