

2LT James Franklin Ralstin

1920 – 2008

James Franklin Ralstin, the son of Dr. Henry William Ralstin and Laura Ralstin, was born on 18 August 1920 in Wichita, Kansas. He graduated from North High School in Wichita in 1938.

MILITARY SERVICE

Ralstin enlisted on January 25, 1943 and qualified to become a member of one of the elite ground forces used in World War II. Known as Darby's Rangers, their specialty concerned the capability to execute successful night missions. Physical requirements were so extreme that many who applied did not make the cut. Training regiments included speed marches, stamina tests, cliff climbing, rappelling, amphibious landings, obstacle courses, live ammunition drills, and reckonings cross-points of rivers in unconventional ways, all with full packs.

As a U.S. Army Ranger of the 3rd Battalion during WWII, Lt. Ralstin was captured by German forces at the landing at Anzio and assault at Cisterna. After initial success, the Rangers were surrounded and fought bravely against four German divisions. More than 700 Rangers were wounded, killed or captured.

'At dusk, we were loaded onto trucks, packed into sardines so tightly that we could not sit or lie down. We were actually held up by each other and rode that way all night long, arriving at the outskirts of Rome early in the morning. It was at the Colosseum area where we dismounted and were marched through the streets of the city of Rome in one huge propaganda extravaganza—the Germans had cameras at every corner.' (Schunemann, pp. 27-31)

Exposing prisoners of war to ridicule was in direct violation of the Geneva Convention Agreement, but no arrests were made during this inhumane activity. In defiance, the Rangers marched proudly through the streets as a symbol of who they were and what they represented.

OFLAG 64 AND ESCAPE

The captives who were then loaded tightly and locked into boxcars without sufficient food or water finally arrived at Oflag 64 in Szubin, Poland on 21 April 1944. There, they were processed in and assigned to barracks. Fortunately, Oflag 64 was a well-run camp, with a strong Senior American Officer leadership and some amenities. Ralstin and those who arrived with him learned quickly

about the structure and daily routines of Oflag 64. Although some aspects of camp life like sports, daily perimeter walks, library facility and theatre presentations, others, such a lack of proper food nutrition and insufficient heating in the winter months combined to cause severe hardships on every man who passed through its gates. Fortunately, a secure, hidden radio enabled the Kriegies in the camp to stay up-to-date on war and general news through BBC reports twice daily.

As a POW in Oflag 64, Ralstin escaped and spent over three months eluding his captors in Poland and Russia prior to the end of the war

One other source in Meltesen's book (p. 219) mentions Ralstin in a connection with others who had left a hospital train at Lodz:

'At Lodz our group left the train. They met Lts Ralstin and Hogue, 3rd Bn, who had escaped at Wegheim hiding in a haystack. They celebrated with a dinner at the hotel/Russian officers mess in town and showed empty pockets to settle their bill. They traveled with Roy Chappell to Odessa and probably sailed on the Duchess of Bedford to Marseilles.'

CIVILIAN LIFE

James Franklin Ralstin, known as Jim, was a geologist and an avid outdoorsman. He was a member of the Wichita Lodge #99, Wichita Consistory and Scottish Rite, a Past Potentate of Midian Shrine and Royal Order of Jesters.

He was buried in Maple Grove Cemetery in Wichita, Kansas.

SOURCES

DESCENDANTS OF WWII RANGERS, INC., David Williams, President and CEO

Oflag 64 POW Database Statistics

Cochran Mortuary and Crematory Obituary Information Section

Memories of a Ranger by Ranger Gustave Schunemann

ROADS TO LAIBERATION FROM OFLAG 64 by Clarence R. Meltesen

Biography written by Kriegy Research Group writer Ann C. Rogers