

Sidney Thal's Story – The Announcement

In December 2011, when I sent former Oflag 64 POW Sidney Thal my letter with more than 40 detailed questions mostly regarding his activities in The Little Theater, I did not expect to receive a handwritten, multi-page letter back containing many asides which told the story of his capture, escape attempt and various memories of his life in the prison camp. Sidney, then at the age of 93, wrote: *"This is the most I have ever written about my life as a POW. I'm going to make a copy. Thank You!"*, so I thought that his story was worth seeing the light of day somehow. When I started my blog, I contacted him again via his daughter, Cheryl, and asked for permission to use it. The permission was granted, so the next few entries will be previously unpublished memories written by Sidney Thal himself. I have only extracted it from his letter, leaving the replies related to The Little Theater for later.



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Sidney Thal, June 11th, 2013

I also think that there is nothing better than introducing it with the crowning quote of Sidney Thal's letter from 2012: *"My life as a POW, I believe, has strength of its own which has helped me every day of my life. Some say that your experiences fashion the life you lead. I believe that is true of my life. I was strengthened immeasurably by my experiences and rarely a day passes that some thought of Szubin and 64 enters my mind. How lucky, I should say that I feel to have such a valuable experience. I'm sure it has*

somehow shaped and even enhanced my viewpoint.

However, I don't recommend it for anyone. I am the sole survivor of a large family. (...)."

...and the latest (updated) sentence: "I am now 96 years old and the last of the original group, looking forward to reaching 100!"

Btw, Sidney isn't the last one of the original group.

According to my knowledge, except of Wilbur Sharpe (93 years old), Donald Waful at age of 98 still lives in Syracuse - both were in the original group.

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Sidney Thal's Story - Part 1:

"At once our attack was brought to a halt"

My father was born in Russia in Smila, near Kiev. My mother was born in Rhode Island. I was born October 3th, 1918, the 4th of five sons, no girl! My father and mother worked together in my fathers' business for many years until his death from burst appendix in 1936, due to peritonitis. My mother died in 1977 from Leukemia.

My father came to America as a young boy as an indentured worker to a slaughter house operator near Philadelphia. His family in Russia were tanners, so he was an experienced meat cutter. He quickly became expert as a judge of meat-grader of quality! After his marriage in 1906 my father opened small meat markets in South Philadelphia. After a series of moves from small stores to larger stores he finished up in Chester, PA in his last and best store, in 1927, with five sons – 4 helping when not in school.

Immediately after his death in 1936 my mother sold our house and sent me and my youngest brother to Pennsylvania Military College (PMC), a boarding school in Chester, Pa, in September 1936.

The school, PMC, had two divisions in its entire history – college and high school. I graduated in June of 1937 and went to work in a store owned by my older brother, Leonard, in Philadelphia. In 1936, where my oldest brother, Edward, went to Miami Beach, where he went into the hotel business with money borrowed from my mother so, in January 1938 I went to Florida to work with my brother until I enlisted in the army Air force in 1940, in the month of October. I enlisted (volunteered) because I was convinced that war with Germany was certain.

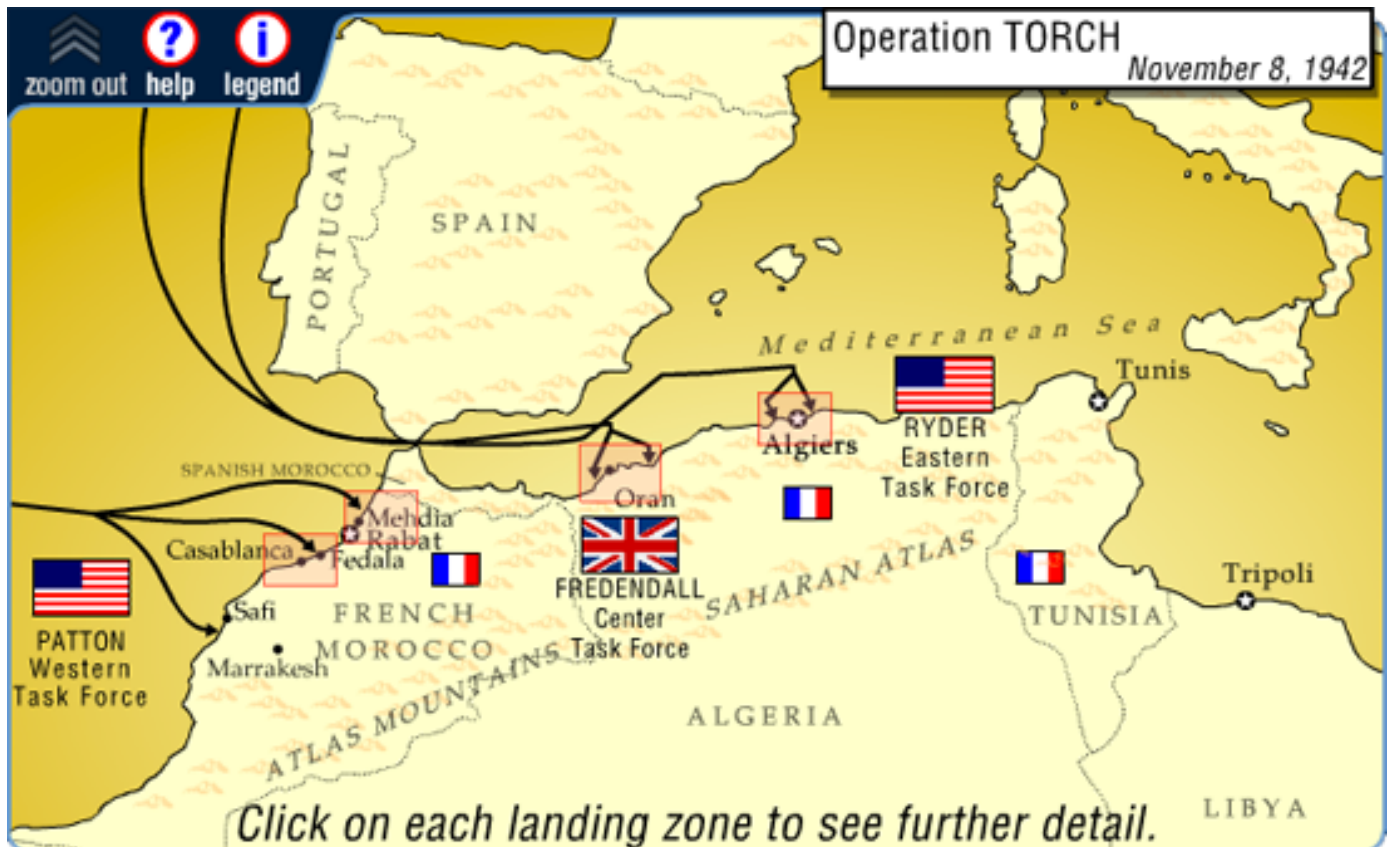
My experience at PMC was incalculably helpful, because I was a corporal by the second day responsible to teach 800 new recruits how to march, military law, and daily physical training. Two weeks later we were on our way to Puerto Rico. Within 3 months I was a radio and machine gunner on B-28-medium bombers stationed at Borinquen field.

In January 1942 I went to Fort Benning, Georgia, to become a lieutenant in The Infantry. When I graduated Officers Candidate School in May of 1942 I chose the 9th Infantry Division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

When I joined the 9th Division we were training for amphibians landing and on one of the practice landings we left for the invasion of North Africa!!! We landed November

7th, 1942 in French Morocco.

We landed on a beach south of Safi in French Morocco. Safi is about 50 miles south of Casablanca. Within 5 hours we were in the town of Safi – a quick landing, very little resistance, and welcomed by French troops. From Safi we next were sent to Kasserine Pass to relieve the few forces left. I was now 2nd Battalion Communication Officer – still a 2nd Lieutenant.



Click on the map to move to the Liberation Trilogy website and see the Interactive Map and the Slideshow to learn more about the Operation Torch, Invasion of North Africa.

The map is taken from Rick Atkinson's book "An Army at

Dawn: The War in North Africa, 1942-1943, Volume One of the Liberation Trilogy" (Publisher: Holt Paperbacks; 2007)

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After a 3 week stay at Kasserine Pass we then went to take part in a huge attack at El Guettar in Tunisia, where I was captured. The battle of El Guettar involved 3 American divisions, including ours; it was a night attack. The path was so narrow that we were forced to walk in single file (five paces apart) so our four companies formed a line 4000 yards long up to the line of departure. The first attack by the Germans occurred during a rest break! Heavy machine gunfire and hundreds of flares exploded at one time followed by mortar and artillery, heavy barrages.

At once our attack was brought to a halt. The sun was just creeping over the horizon and Colonel Gershenow* ordered me to find out why we were being held up. Within a few minutes I reached the attack company and realized that they were facing a battery of artillery fire, point-blank, pinning them down. By the time I returned to report to Colonel Gershenow he had disappeared with his staff. Due to heavy fire, I found myself alone and crawled back trying to keep safe till I ran into Lt. Craig Campbell* (ex aide de camp to General Eisenhower), we found a shell hole and set up a point of fire. After a few hours we were out of

ammunition and water. The sun was high and cries of the wounded all around us was critical. We discussed surrendering and finally we decided to do so!

I was carrying a Garand rifle, so I tied my handkerchief to the barrel and waved it overhead. All firing ceased – two Germans some distance away stood up and motioned us to come to their position. We picked up a couple of wounded on the way and wound up as POWs. The Germans then joined our survivors gathering the wounded. They were immediately tended to by the German doctors. We were, all unwounded, searched, and disarmed – tagged and under armed guards marched to trucks. Shortly after we were on our way we numbered about 150 on a 3 trucks convoy.

We were taken to a field where spent the night under a poorly live enclosure, guided by soldiers with machine guns. This first night was spent with all of us wide awake wondering what is going to happen next. The worst fears were the unknown. We had, luckily, a few German speaking American kids who translated everything. According to them we were on our way to the city of Tunis – the capital of Tunisia. In the morning we were on our way.

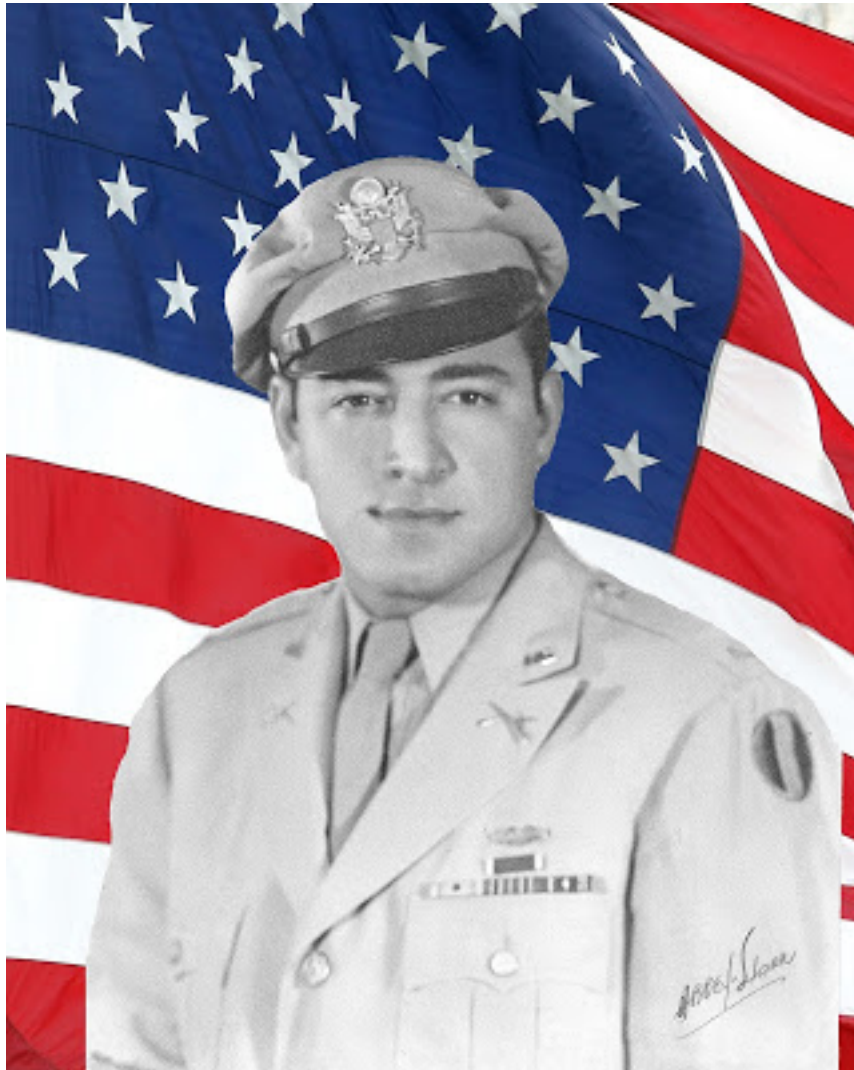
**Lt. Col. Louis Gershenow and 1st Lt Craig Campbell were also POW of Oflag 64.*

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Edited by Mariusz Winiecki

Special thanks for Cheryl Ellis, for corrections on her
father's story

Sidney Thal's Story - Part 2: "From Tunis to Oflag 7B"



Sidney Thal (1940/41)

This trip was started as soon as it was day light. Shortly after we started a flight of 3 fighters appeared in a distance. I immediately ordered everyone to pull off their undershirts to wave to indicate we were Americans so the pilots would not shoot at us. When they flew over us they rocked their wings to let us know they caught the signal. But they

dropped their bombs on a German motor pool nearby destroying everything. Then they flew down the near highway shooting up the traffic very badly. We passed many burning vehicles on our way to trains waiting to take us to Sfax. From Sfax we went to Sousse and then to Tunis. Once in Tunis they took us to a camp for interrogation. We were put in small groups in a series of officer and then question by the Gestapo. The interview lasted only a few minutes. The main question was the information about the weapon called the BAZOOKA! – an anti-tank weapon which I had tested while at Kasserine Pass. My test of the weapon was made to determine the amount, if any, about the percussion effect when fired at close range. There was none, no matter how, close to the tank! When we were in bivouac in Old Point Comfort in Virginia we had a meeting for all officers to learn that a spy ring had been discovered and exposed. They were all arrested and jailed but they had looted a lot of information before discovery and sent copies of our 201 files to Germany. Those files were in the hands of the Germans when they questioned us in Tunis. We discussed it for hours after interrogation and flown in JU52's to Naples, Italy. We arrived shortly after a bombing by the Americans air force. We were loaded into trucks and driven through the narrow streets of Naples to a prison camp, a very large camp, in the suburbs of Naples – Capua.

Shortly after we arrived we were issued a Red Cross pack of

food – our survival package that kept us from starvation for our life as a POW. It contained a can of corned beef, a can of PREM, a can of sardines. The most wonderful 5 packs of cigarettes, a one pound can of whole powdered milk, a can of condensed milk, a pound box of raisins (sometimes prunes) 4oz. can of Nescafe powder coffee, ½ pound of sugar cubes, a 6 oz. bar of chocolate square. Later we discovered the trading value of cigarettes, coffee and chocolate with Germans (and the Poles) which were used as much as possible to get other things that were “verbotin” (properly in German: ‘verboten’ = ‘forbidden’). [Later in Oflag 64] I also, with Jim McArevey, opened a store in the basement of the camp hospital and shower center to barter our stock of cigarettes for goods from home. As soon as our cigarettes were gone, so was the store. OUT OF BUSINESS!

From Capua, Italy, we were loaded in cars used to ship cattle, to Stalag 7A [in Murnau], near Munich, We had traveled 3 days. We went through the Brenner Pass into the Italian Tyrol (beautiful), stuffed 80 of us in Each car. When we finally arrived we were all suffering from dysentery. We were deloused, bathed and fed in 7A and given our first medicine for dysentery. We all recovered quickly. Here we were introduced to our first meetings with French, Russian and other POWs from other Allied nations.

From Stalag 7A we were moved, after a week, to Oflag 7B in

Eichstätt, Southern Bavaria. This was a camp of several thousand British and Canadian's captured in Dunkirk (and many other commonwealth soldiers). The Canadian were all in handcuffs as a reprisal for tying up the Germans captured in the Dieppe raid (an all Canadian raidearlier across the channel from Dover). The camp 7B was well organized and from them we learned how to run our camp at Oflag 64. They taught us how to deal and negotiate with Germans, how to pick locks, how to trade with guards and value of goods for exchange. We have learned how to operate our camp, about the escape possibilities and how to subsists in camp activity.

They provided us with a show that was an all British story and we, 22 of us, decided to put on a 4th July show for them, even though it was May. We knew we would be leaving before July, so we decided to reciprocate with a little Americana. We did our "Yankee Doodle Dandy" best-made a big hit and left behind a good impression of our friendship. Through their friendship and advice we escaped, 4 of us, from the train on the way to Oflag 64, successfully.

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Sidney Thal's Story - Part 3: "The tumultuous welcome"

We discussed escape opportunities and we were able to escape, 4 of us on the trip from 7B to 64. We jumped out of the train window at the last station before Poznan.

Unfortunately, I was last out and became separated from the others. They were recaptured the next day, but I was out for 3 more days before I was recaptured. I was able to get help from an elderly Pole who fed me, hide me and even used his sister to try a contact in Poznan the British had given to me. The contact was gone, so I was on my own. That evening I began walking to Gdynia.

After a futile attempt to steal a bicycle I walked til dawn. I passed though one small village and finally decided to hide in a barn in the hayloft. I was undiscovered in the barn and that night started walking again. I milked a cow for some delicious warm milk before I left the barn and within an hour I begin suffering from diarrhoea. It was a humiliating experience for several hours. Quite debilitating! I walked all night and someone had seen me, because I was recaptured by a man on horseback. He ran me down with his horse, injured my back and walked me back to the nearest village to the mayor's house. A policeman arrived and took me to the jail. I thanked the mayor's, gave him some cigarettes

and chocolate for his 16 yr old daughter for his kindness for me. Unfortunately I don't remember the name of the village. From there the Police captain took me to Szubin to Oflag 64.

When I walked through the town from the train station everybody was watching us. As I reached the camp everybody was lined up shouting and applauding as I was led to the guard house to a cell where other 3 were also jailed. Mixed emotions were rampant. It wasn't until later that I learned that I should have tried to contact a priest when I had the opportunity. Many escapees were helped by the church all the way back to freedom.

Once in a jail at the camp I received food, books, visits and comfort with my friends Frank Aten, John Pearson and Bill Duckworth.

We were only a small group from 7B, 22 of us. But my arrival on June 6, 1943 was a surprise to me so many more that preceded us from other camps in Germany. This, evidently, was the only officer camp for ground forces POWs. We were all released from jail together in two weeks to a tumultuous welcome by the others and introduced to Col. Drake our Camp Commander. A full colonel and haughty, splendid looking man. He turned out to be a real leader and made life at least the best possible under conditions.

It doesn't take long to accommodate oneself to camp life. Everything was so limited and orderly by the time we got out of jail that it was easy to fit in. Freedom felt so good!!!

By the way – the Germans were always searching for tunnels. I was the person who formed the tunnel plan that would have been unsuccessful under the pot in the washroom. All the dirt we removed was stored in the crawl space under the roof. We could only work at night. We had spotters watching the front gate at all times. One was in the bathroom, on the third floor of the main building. The second was in our barracks. The signal to suspend all activities was simply a lighted candle in the window.

Lou Otterbein was our main craftsman who made all of our theater props, as well as, escape tools and aids. Everything was made of out tin cans and scraps. He made the floodlight + reflectors out of tin cans, a bellows to supply air in the tunnel, and the suction to remove water from the sump in the tunnel. The tracks and the carts for the dirt removal. Old shoe tops were used to make the bellows.

Dr. John Creech was later named chief of US National Arboretum in Washington, D.C. He was in charge of all of our vegetable gardens in Oflag 64. The son-in-law of General Patton was Col. John K. Waters. Amon Carter, in charge of our parcel hut was the son of the wealthiest man in Texas at that time. Tom Jones was the nephew of Jesse Jones – the chief of the manpower program of the U.S. for the war effort. As fact of history Amon Carters' father flew to Europe to pick up his son when he was finally liberated, as well as, others from Texas who were more with Amon.

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