

Liberator Burriss: Path to Liberation

27 April, 1945--Near the Wöbbelin Concentration Camp, Burriss and his company smelled the stench before they saw the remains of the concentration camp for Jews and other political prisoners in Wöbbelin, Germany. The victims had been transferred from Auschwitz just before Poland was over-run by the Russians. *“I had never seen human beings look so tortured and grotesque... Their bodies were no more than skin stretched over knobby bones that threatened to break through with the slightest movement... Many were too weak to walk or talk. One building was stacked three deep with unburied bodies, and other bodies were found in a 10 foot wide trench.”*

The city of Ludwigslust was a few miles away from this horror, so Burriss rounded up the townspeople, along with German POWs, and ordered them to collect all the bodies in the camp, including those in huge burial pits. Then they were instructed to bury the dead in individual graves in the town square. This humane action showed the respect that the dead demanded and made the local people fully aware of the German crimes against humanity.



During the war, a U.S. Jewish soldier was assigned to Burriss' company. He had escaped from Austria after the German occupation, made his way to the U.S. and enlisted in the Army and joined the paratroopers, with the single mission of trying to find his family and rescue them. He had information that his parents, sister and brother had been placed in a concentration camp when he escaped from Austria. Upon his arrival at the Wöbbelin camp, he searched and found a Catholic priest and learned, to his horror, that his family had been imprisoned in this camp and only one week earlier had been put to death. Burriss cried with the devastated Jewish soldier.

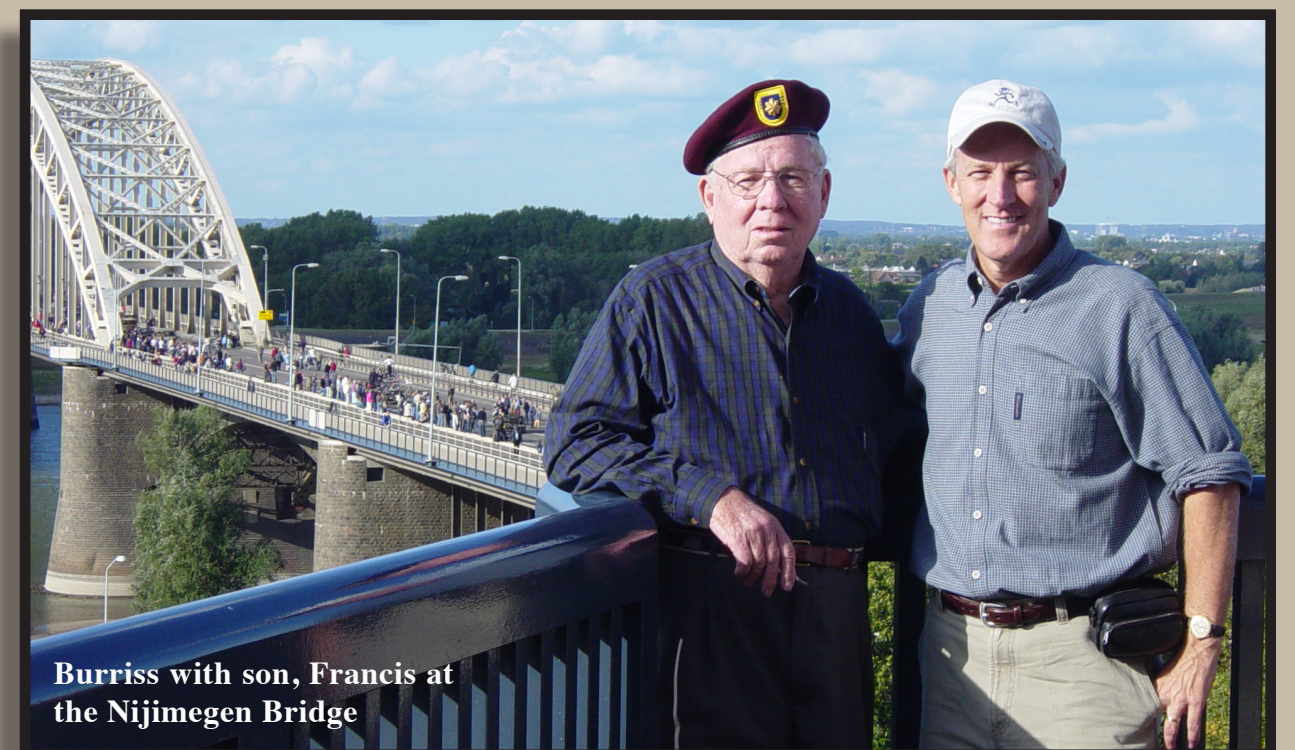


1 May, 1945--Even though U.S. troops were ordered to stop 90 miles from Berlin, Burriss and two men crossed the Elbe River while on patrol and headed toward Berlin. Unexpectedly, they met a German Armored Corps and amazingly “demanded their surrender.” Over 15,000 German soldiers surrendered! Continuing toward Berlin, they ran into a Russian Division. After a brief celebration, Burriss, with his two paratroopers and a Russian colonel, finally entered Berlin-the first American soldiers to do so.

September, 1945--Captain Burriss returned to the U.S. and was honorably discharged. He returned to civilian life.

Captain T. Moffatt Burriss had four children with his first wife, “Squee:” John Hay, Moffatt Jr., Francis, and Louisa (“Weesa”). “Squee” died from Alzheimer’s Disease in August, 1986. Burriss married his second wife, Jean Wheelwright Burriss, who died in 2009.

Burriss kept in touch with many of the paratroopers and attended reunions, but in the summer of 1993, he decided to return (with son Francis and life-friend Joe Taylor) to the area of the WWII battles in Sicily, Italy, Holland, France, Belgium and Germany. After that trip he wrote his memoirs, *Strike and Hold*.



2005--Burriss returned to Holland to celebrate his 90th birthday with a parachute jump during the 65th Anniversary of Operation Market Garden. During the celebration, Burriss was awarded the Nijmegen Medal of Honor for his role in the bridge capture.

“I only hope that after we are all gone, future generations will recall that when darkness had already descended on Europe and much of Asia, young men from cities, towns and farms all over America, willingly left their families and friends to fight and die on foreign soil in order to keep the world free.”