

# Oflag 64 Schubin

## **The Camp as We Saw It:**

***A German prisoner of war camp is something you never forget, and Oflag 64 was a very special one. Here is a look at those grim, and not-so-grim, days a half century ago.***

**Who would have thought 50 years ago that the survivors of Oflag 64 would be celebrating the anniversary of the place that we wanted so desperately to get the hell out of? Nobody.**

**But it was a unique, unforgettable experience. No question.**

**It taught us a great appreciation for some things we had always taken for granted - a decent meal, a warm room, a bed with more than three slats to hold you up, the therapeutic value of a good bull session, even an occasional martini.**

**Just being there was a great shock. Americans do not take kindly to captivity. Sid Miller expressed the almost universal reaction like this: "The last thing I ever expected was to be captured; it never entered my mind until it happened." But there we were, prisoners of the enemy in a camp completely isolated from the rest of the world and dependent on the ruthless, unpredictable Germans for everything.**

**What we did have, though, was a disciplined organization within the camp, run along U.S. Army lines and headed initially by a tough, no-nonsense Army colonel, Thomas Drake, a veteran of World War I, who set the tone of our relations with the Germans right from the start.**

**As Bob Bonomi tells it - and he swears it is true - Col. Drake was called in for a conference with Oberst Schneider when the first group of Americans arrived. The action went like this:**

**The American colonel and an interpreter entered and were seated. The German Oberst rose and began speaking in a "voice of command." Col. Drake rose, beckoned his interpreter and started for the door. Oberst Schneider said, in effect, "*Was is loss?*"**

**Using his interpreter to emphasize his position of rank, Col. 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 an officer and a gentleman, I will return for the conference."**

**Schneider never again raised his voice in speaking to Drake. The senior American had**

**established a control which turned out to be a great benefit to us in the nearly two years ahead.**

**It was a small camp at that time, in June 1943, with only about 150 American officers in the 10-acre compound. By the time the Oflag was evacuated in January 1945, the roll call had reached 1,400 - still far less than the big camp at Stalag Luft 3, where more than 10,000 shot-down American flying officers were held, or the several Stalags for thousands of American enlisted men.**

**But the Oflag 64 group was full of interesting characters. Most of them were young lieutenants or captains, but there were enough field grade officers to maintain discipline. The average age was 27. Most were college-educated, many with advanced degrees. They included men who in civilian life had been doctors, lawyers, engineers, professors, journalists, artists, ranchers, musicians, and even a former commandant for a U.S. military school. There was talent everywhere, and much of it was utilized in one form or another as the camp activities were organized and carried out.**

**All the activities were designed to keep the restless young officers occupied and preserve their sanity. There was a remarkably professional theater group that put on Broadway-type plays and concerts. Bob Rankin, the camp's talented music maestro, organized a fine symphony orchestra, a jazz band and a glee club. They played at frequent concerts and were well received.**

**For the conscientious kriegy with time on his hands, though, this was a chance to learn something. And he did. An elaborate program of classes was set up by several of the prisoners with academic backgrounds. Called the Altburgund Academy, it was designed as a college curriculum under Capt. Hubert Eldridge, who had had 22 years of experience as a teacher and school superintendent.**

**At the start, many kriegies signed up for the 14 courses taught by Americans. The classes included German language course, with a view of communicating with the natives after the Americans' certain escape. And a surprisingly well-attended course was "Salesmanship," taught by Maj. Jerry Sage, the kriegy who held the record for the most escapes from various camps since his capture.**

**Then there were organized card games (played in the cold Polish winter with gloves on), a greenhouse where some gardeners actually grew a few things to eat, a well-supplied library, a tailor shop, a shoe-repair shop manned by some talented kriegies, and sports activities of many kinds.**

**All of these projects, including the theater, were arranged by the International YMCA and Salvation Army - not the Red Cross. The civilian representative of the "Y," Henry Soederberg, visited the camp every few months and managed to have long lists of things shipped in, unfortunately not including food. He was the only civilian we ever saw and he well deserved his title of "The Welcome Swede."**

**The books themselves were a Godsend. At the end there were 7,000 of them, mostly used fiction. On average, the librarian figured that each kriegy took out and read one**

**book every three days.**

**We had three ways to keep up with things on the outside. The secret radio, which was actually built by a kriegy inside the camp and was kept tuned in on BBC every day, was the most effective. With guards posted to warn of prying Germans, the "bird" was tuned in every afternoon in the White House attic, notes taken and the news read that evening in each barrack.**

**The camp newspaper, of course, was *The Oflag Item*, printed in a local Polish print shop by a German guard and his wife who had confiscated the place. It came out monthly and was full of news of camp activities, notes from home and humorous columns and cartoons.**

**But there was a daily newspaper of sorts, too. Called "The Daily Bulletin," it was hand-lettered, the size and general appearance of the front page of an American newspaper, and tacked up on the camp bulletin board each morning. This was largely news of the war as gleaned from German newspapers, magazines and radio reports, with the propaganda deleted and maps showing just where the latest glorious German victories had moved enemy troops backwards. There was also news culled from letters from home reviews of the latest camp shows, and often a "Special Features" page. Needless to say, it was widely and closely read by both the kriegies and the English-speaking German guards.**

**So as prison camps go, Oflag 64 had a lot going for it. There was no torture, no solitary confinement, no officers were forced to work, and the camp was run more or less by the senior American officers, except for the twice-a-day "*appel*" when everyone lined up to be counted and were sometimes lectured to by the German colonel.**

**But there were two overpowering problems that made life hellish for everybody. You simply could not get enough to eat, and there was no way to stay warm during the bitter cold, northern Poland winter.**

**The Kriegies became obsessed with thought of food. When the camp first opened, Red Cross food parcels were distributed every week. This was supposed to be just a food supplement, but contained enough to subsist on for a week: things like powdered milk, instant coffee, a chocolate bar, a tin of some kind of meat, and the like. Soon they began to arrive at the camp every other week, then every month, then almost not at all. The Germans explained that the supply trains from neutral Sweden and Switzerland were being bombed by those cursed Americans.**

**Then we had to live almost entirely on the German ration. This amounted typically to only hot water for breakfast, a thin barley soup for lunch and perhaps some wizened turnips and a shriveled-up carrot for dinner. With this menu went a couple of inches of German wartime black bread. The accepted technique was to slice the bread as thin as possible and toast it over our famous "smokeless heaters," made from old Red Cross powdered milk cans.**

**The camp doctors figured that all this amounted to about 700 calories a day, so they started weighing each kriegy once a week. When the Red Cross parcels virtually stopped coming, the average prisoner lost more pounds very quickly. By the end of the war, most of the old-time kriegies had dropped 30 to 50 pounds.**

**This diet sapped the prisoners' energy, of course. And it made the awful winter cold even harder to take. The only warmth provided by the Germans came from large European-style porcelain stoves placed in each barrack. The Americans were given pressed peat bricks which they ignited and placed inside each stove. The tiles on the outside then would become slightly warm, but never hot.**

**"I always thought," one of the Americans muttered later, "that it was the kriegies huddled around those stoves that kept them warm."**

**Frostbitten legs and sometimes frozen hands and feet were the result of these prolonged periods of cold, augmented by the long march ordered by Hitler in the icy winter of 1945. Fifty years later, many former prisoners are still drawing disability payments from the U.S. Government for the after-effects of such ailments back at Oflag 64.**

**The cold and hunger reinforced the urge of all the Americans to escape from the camp and somehow get out through Russia or the Baltic or somewhere. The Escape Committee redoubled its efforts while the kriegies came up with all sorts of clever, unique and sometimes desperate plans for approval.**

**A tunnel was the obvious answer and that project involved almost everyone to some degree. The engineers in the camp devised an ingenious plan for the tunnel to start inside one of the barracks and wind deep underground beneath the barbed wire fence, surfacing in an unlikely place on the outside. The project took many months and the Germans sought in vain to create a cave-in. But they never found it.**

**Diggers sent the dirt back up in old Red Cross boxes which were then stored in the low attics of the barracks until they threatened to break through the ceilings, which happened on one occasion. Then the clever tunnelers sewed sacks inside the trousers of some of the kriegies and filled them with dirt. As the kriegy walked around the 10-acre camp, he would pull a string releasing small quantities of dirt from time to time. That worked too, getting rid of tons of debris.**

**To shore up the roof of the tunnel in the sandy soil of Poland, slats of wood were required, so one slat was removed from the eight-slat bunk of every kriegy. Soon another was needed, then another. At the end, everyone was sleeping with great difficulty in a bunk with only three slats holding him up.**

**Other things were needed for an escape. Kriegies with special skills began making maps and forging documents for the potential escapees. Civilian-type clothing was manufactured. Classes were conducted in colloquial German and Russian.**

**Meanwhile, an almost identical tunnel was being dug by the American and British fly-**

**boys at Stalag Luft 3, a huge compound also located in northern Poland. This one was completed first and was the scene of the "Great Escape" of motion picture fame. It was, unfortunately, a great disaster as well. The exit came up a bit too close to the German guard barrack, so that only three men actually got away, all of the rest being recaptured within a few hours, and 50 of them shot upon Hitler's orders. These murders convinced our Escape Committee to close down the Oflag tunnel project.**

**A number of other escape attempts were made, including one in which the escapees pretended to be drunk and raised so much hell in the middle of the night that they were taken to the small jailhouse outside of camp, which is what they had in mind. They broke away, but not for long.**

**Then on January 21, 1945, the whole camp of 1,400 officers, was moved out in a blinding snowstorm and marched slowly and painfully back into Germany - all except the 100 or so men in the hospital who were deemed unable to march. They were left behind and eventually picked up by the Russians, trucked to a refugee center near Warsaw, then moved by box cars across Russia to Odessa and by British freighter to Egypt and Italy. Another 100 or more were able to escape from the marching column and hide out with Polish families until the Russian army swept along. These men all managed to join up with the hospital group at Warsaw and return with them.**

**After the war, some kriegies stayed in the Army, all of them reaching the rank of at least Lt. Colonel, and three of them making General. But most returned to civilian life as quickly as possible and began to make their mark in many fields.**

**Now, 50 years later, *Who's Who* is replete with the names of former kriegies. They have produced big Broadway shows, become editors of major American newspapers, sat on the boards of large corporations, become engineers of great renown, owned and operated radio stations, written books, been on White House staffs in Washington, D.C., and excelled in many other fields.**

**But none of us has ever forgotten those hungry, challenging, cold, educational, friendship-producing days at Oflag 64, a half century ago.**

*Page last revised 11/26/2006*

**[Print This Article](#)**