

AMERICAN PRISONERS OF WAR IN GERMANY

Prepared by MILITARY INTELLIGENCE SERVICE WAR DEPARTMENT 1 Nov. 1945

OFLAG 13 B (Transit Camp for Evacuees)

LOCATION

Oflag 13B was situated in a rural district just outside of Hammelburg, Germany (50 degrees 45' N. - 9 degrees 54' E.), and formed a part of a complex consisting of other prisoner of war camps within a German military training center.

STRENGTH

Approximately 300 American officers opened the camp on 11 January 1945, and by the time the Protecting Power visited the camp on 23 January 1945, the strength had increased to 453 officers, 12 noncommissioned officers and 18 privates. All of these men were captured on the Western Front between the 15th and 22nd of December 1944. By 25 March 1945, the strength had increased to 1291 officers and 127 enlisted men which included the 423 officers and 67 enlisted men who arrived from Oflag 64 at Schubin, Poland

DESCRIPTION

The American compound was formerly occupied by Serbian officers and consisted of 7 stone barracks of antiquated types. Soon after the opening of the camp as an American Oflag, the buildings received some badly needed repairs which made them livable. Approximately 200 men were crowded into each five-room barrack, and although ventilation and daylight were adequate, each room contained only 2 drop lights of 15 watt bulbs. During the extremely cold weather, the men tried to keep from freezing by putting on all available clothing and huddling around the one stove furnished to each room. For each stove, the Germans issued 48 coal briquettes for 3 days. These briquettes measured about 5" x 3" x 3". As a result of this small ration, the barrack temperature average about 30 degrees. At the insistence of the SAO, small details were permitted to "scrounge" for pieces of wood to supplement the fuel supply

Wash rooms did not exist and officers had to carry water from the kitchen faucet to a few wash basins supplied to each room. No hot water was available for washing because of the fuel shortage, and the delousing plant was not in operation for 3 full months. Toilet facilities were completely inadequate in type and number. Complaints about this were handled by the Protecting Power and some improvement was achieved.

U.S. PERSONNEL

Upon the opening of the camp, Cot. Charles C Cavender became the SAO, and he appointed Maj. Albert L. Berndt as the SMO. There were no other officers appointed to hold definite offices. However, when the evacuated officers of Oflag 64 arrived at the compound, Col. Paul R Goode became the SAO and organized the camp on the same basis as the compound at Schubin, Poland. He used the Oflag 64 staff, but retained Maj Berndt as the SMO.

GERMAN PERSONNEL

The German camp commander was Generalmajor von Goeckel, who had as his executive officer Oberst Giese. However the block commander for the American officers' section was Hauptmann Fuchs. General von Goeckel was the commander of the entire military installation and delegated most of the prisoner of war

administration to Oberst Giese.

TREATMENT

Treatment was only fair. It must be pointed out that the camp was opened at the time of German's last offensive, the Belgian Bulge". Soon after the opening of the camp it was apparent that this thrust was destined to fail and strong feelings of tension between the American and German personnel existed. There were many Allied air raids in the vicinity, and the air alert system at the camp was rigid. When an air alert was sounded, all POW were required to hurry to their barracks and were given only 3 minutes in which to clear the open areas between buildings. One evening a warning signal was given and about an hour later the second alarm was sounded. At this moment, 4 American officers were standing at the fence talking to some Serbian officers and were slow in leaving the fence. Just as they reached the steps of their barrack, and before the termination of the 3 minute period, a guard saw them and fired at them. He was about 75 yards away, but he hit one of the officers in the back, piercing his lung and chest. The officer died the following day of the wounds.

When more and more air raids occurred and the rigidity of the air alert rules remained the same, it became necessary for the men to be confined to their barracks for 6 and 7 hours at a time. The SAO complained to the German commandant that the lack of indoor toilet facilities and the long periods of confinement were detrimental to the health of the men. The commandant later rescinded the order, and gave permission for the men to go to the latrine. A guard yelled something at him in German which the PW did not understand, and the guard immediately shot him in the back of the head. This incident was witnessed by the camp commandant, General von Goeckel, Col. Goode and Maj. Berndt as they were approaching the area. When they reached the officer he was dead and the guard merely stated he did not know about the new rule.

There was one particular rule which caused a great deal of dissension between the Germans and Americans. The commandant issued orders that ALL Americans were required to salute ALL German officers first, regardless of their rank. Naturally, this rule was violated on many occasions and was always a subject of discussion between the SAO and the German officials. After the arrival of the officers from Oflag 64, the commandant was persuaded to revoke the order.

FOOD

When the camp ElrsI opened the rations had a "paper value" content of 1700 calories per day. This was below the normal requirement for men getting plenty of sleep and performing no work. The ration was cut several times until it contained only 1070 calories a day. Officers were allowed to purchase supplementary rations from the canteen when supplies were available. These usually consisted of cabbage, carrots and beets. There were no Red Cross packages delivered during the entire period, but the Serbian officers insisted on sharing with the American officers on a per capita basis all of the Red Cross food parcels received by Serbs. In all, approximately 1500 parcels were given to the Americans during the 3 months of the camp's operation.

The kitchen used by the Americans was suitably equipped, and the German rations were used to the best advantage. The extreme shortage of fuel hampered the preparation of the food, but after the wood-forage details were formed, this situation was improved.

The normal daily menu consisted of one-tenth of a loaf of bread, one cup of ersatz coffee, one bowl of barley soup, and one serving of a vegetable a day. About 3 times a week a small piece of margarine was issued, and occasionally a tablespoon of sugar. Toward the end of March, many officers were in a dangerous condition due to malnutrition and the SMO credited the generosity of the Serbian Officers with the saving of many lives.

HEALTH

The health of the officers was not good. Many of the men arrived at the camp with wounds from the battlefield. Nearly all of them had been marched many miles in bitterly cold weather with insufficient food and rest. Few PW arrived at the camp in vehicles. The lack of a proper diet prevented quick recoveries from such ailments as colds, dysentery, trench feet and influenza. Therefore, men with serious wounds and illnesses had

little chance of recovery without the assistance of the Serbian compound

When the 27 medical officers of the compound were captured, their equipment and supplies were confiscated. However, some drugs and instruments had been concealed and were smuggled into the camp. The 20-bed dispensary was on the second floor of a good brick building which also housed the medical personnel and the first-aid room. All of the rooms were well-lighted and clean. Every effort was made by the medical personnel to make the patients as comfortable as possible. The men who were seriously ill were treated in the adjoining lazaret which was a part of the Serbian of lag. The Serbian lazaret contained 450 beds, and although there too the equipment was not good, the Serbian doctors had been in prison for about 4 years and were experienced in successfully treating a variety of "kriegy" ailments with makeshift medicines and equipment. Fortunately, surgical equipment was quite good; the head of the staff was famous surgeon of outstanding ability.

Soon after the Americans arrived, the SMO of the Serbian compound assigned 60 beds for the exclusive use of Americans, and since "invalid" rations were issued there in addition to the other advantages offered, the men who were admitted to the lazaret had a better chance for recovery.

CLOTHING

There was no German stock of clothing and no Red Cross clothing was received while the camp was in operation. In the beginning, most of the men had complete uniforms, but lacked extra socks, sweaters and jackets. Shoes were in need of repair at all times and no repair equipment was furnished. Because of extreme cold and lack of fuel, the clothing shortage became a bitter hardship for everyone, and life at Oflag 13B was reduced to getting enough food to keep well and finding ways and means to keep warm.

WORK

PAY

The officers performed no work except camp details assigned by the SAO. At the time the men were captured, their money was confiscated and a receipt given to each individual. Since there was no pay scale worked out, the men purchased supplies from the canteen on a debit and credit system, using their receipts as collateral. Prices in the canteen were exceptionally high, but by clever manipulation, the officers were able to purchase adequate amounts when items were put on sale.

MAIL

The outgoing mail was satisfactorily handled, and the usual 3 letters forms and 3 post cards per month were issued. However, no incoming mail was received during the camp's operation.

MORALE

Morale at this camp was not high. When compared with long-established camps, there was little resemblance of organization. The extremely bad conditions seemed to create a feeling of futility and carelessness. Several officers reported that this situation was improved after the arrival of the evacuees from of lag 64. The example of military discipline, courtesy and personal cleanliness displayed by men who had been forced to march 345 miles through sub-zero and zero weather did a great deal toward raising the morale of the other officers. However, the complete lack of mail and the almost certain knowledge that their families had been notified of their safety due to the large number of captives, contributed a great deal to the low morale of the POW.

WELFARE

The first visit of the Protecting Power was made by accident. The detaining Power had not notified the Protecting Power of the existence of the camp but on 22 January 1945, representatives of the Swiss legation arrived to inspect Stalag 13C, and the adjoining Serbian compound in accordance with previous arrangements.

When informed by the commandant of the of lag's opening, the representatives' request to visit the camp was approved. At that time there were many shortages. Many requisitions were made on the International Red Cross, but supplies were not received prior to the liberation of the camp. Another visit of the Protection Power was made on 25 March 15>45 when acute shortages were reported to the Red Cross again. No YMCA or Red Cross equipment was received by the camp, and the only benefits were received through the courtesy of the Serbian compound.

RELIGION

There were 7 Protestant chaplains and 2 roman Catholic priests in the camp, but since the room provided by the Germans for religouse services was not heated attendance was small. Religious articles necessary for Catholic services were not available until the last of March.

RECREATION

There was one room set aside as a "day-room but again the lack of heating facilities prevented its becoming popular. The Serbians donated 2 ping-pong tables, cards, and checker-boards, while a small group of Australians located nearby donated a piano and some musical instruments. The "jam-sessions" became the only form of amusement which stimulated moral. For outdoor activity there was room for only one sport, horseshoe pitching, and these had few devotees. The lack of books, theatrical equipment, sports kits and art equipment made the dullness of captivity a constant source of discomfort.

EVACUATION

On 27 March 1945, the SAO was notified that the camp would be evacuated that afternoon at 1600. At 1300, American tanks appeared and after a short consultation with the German officials the SAO decided to surrender the camp to the task force. This force was 50 miles ahead of the main body of American troops and there were no facilities to transport the PW from the camp except on the tanks. The SAO divided the men into 3 groups; those who were not physically able to make the trip; those who would be able to walk beside the tanks; and those who would have to ride. out of about 500 who tried to march, only 30 got through to the American lines Those who rode on the tanks ran into strong enemy opposition, and all were either killed or recaptured The following day some 500 were moved out by train to Nurnberg. All of the remaining able-bodied men were marched the 90 miles to Stalag 7A, Moosburg. The Inen who were sick in the lazaret and the infirmary along with the medical staff, remained behind.

LIBERATION

After the main evacuation from Hammelburg, the Germans left only a token guard around the camp to pick up the American stragglers from the first "liberation", and to guard the Serbians who were not evacuated. The guard company that had made the march from Schubinx Poland, with the members of Oflag 64 was used for the movement of the troops to Nurnberg. The remaining guards were all Volksturm, and were responsible for gathering the American stragglers together in a compound adjoining the main American compound. As soon as they collected a group of 50 to 75, evacuation marches would begin.

On 3 April 1945, a German hauptman arrived at the camp, and asked the SMO for 4 of the most seriously wounded prisoners lo be designated for transfer to the town of Bad Kissengen where the Germans had supposedly converted 23 resort hotels into 500 fibbed hospitals. The German officer reported that Bad Kissingen was to be made an open city because Frau Goebbles was living in the town. The SMO requested to be permitted to go to the American lines and inform the commanders that the city was "open". This permission was refused, and at midnight 4 wounded men were taken in a truck to the resort town. The following day, 2 more evacuations took place involving about 20 sick and wounded officers. After the second trip that day, the driver evidently became nervous over the proximity of the American troops and failed to return to the camp although he had been ordered to evacuate at least 20 more PW during the day.

On 6 April 1945, the 14th Armored Division entered the town of Hammelburg in great force and fired on all

remailing buildings, carefully avoiding the camp. However, 2 large shells believed fired by the Germans did explode in the camp area. There were no casualties during the entire liberation, and the evacuation of the PW was arranged for in an orderly way. By this time only a handful of German guards remained, and they were turned over to CIC units which had accompanied the spearhead.

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