

The Long, Cold March - Revisited

By Lucy Lussenden

I have long wanted to visit the villages where Don and the other men of Oflag 64 spent their nights on the march during the winter of 1945. Don described the crowded and uncomfortable sleeping arrangements in barns and various other buildings. My wish became possible when the former East Germany became part of the reunited country again.

In June 2005, my friend, Charlene, and I rented a car in Berlin and drove north towards the Polish border at the Oder River near Swinemunde. We did not want to venture into Poland. Prior to leaving home, we plotted an approximate plan of travel. We hoped that we would find locals who remembered those difficult days and the American POWs.

Garz was the first village we visited, and as far east as we drove. From there, we followed the March route and photographed barns, churches and other buildings where we thought the POWs had likely spent their nights. We missed only a couple of villages along the way between Garz and Parchim.

We observed that very little development had occurred in this area of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern during the 40 plus years of Communism. We felt that this was to our advantage, because we were able to capture the buildings in photographs much the way they probably looked when the POWs were there. The only improvements we found were where people had "cleaned up, fixed up, and painted up" their hotels, restaurants, and homes. The main roads and autobahns were in excellent condition, no doubt having been improved since being reunited with the West.

Wherever we drove, we saw very few people. Everyone seemed to be keeping a low profile and staying out of sight. Maybe this is a habit developed for survival under the old regime! The people we did see and stopped to talk with were too young to remember anything about the war--except for one man in his sixties, but who looked to be much older. We saw him standing on a corner outside of town and thought he would be our "likely candidate." We pulled alongside, rolled down our window, and asked if he spoke English. Imagine our surprise when he slapped his knee and, with a big smile on his face said, "Goddammit! Goddammit!" We don't think he ever expected to hear someone speaking English. It seems he had grown up in Chicago, after having been born in Germany. Eventually he and his parents moved back to Germany, where he was "stuck" and not able to return to the States. So, he was not there at the end of the war and was no help to us at all. We sure did get a big laugh out of that encounter!

We visited Hammelburg during the "Bonnfest," festival. Peter Domes met us and showed us an impressive special display of the route taken by Abe Baum and his Task Force, and the resulting battle in the Task Force's effort to free the American POWs at Oflag XIII-B.