

Susanna Connaughton's Oflag 64 Living History Report

When my father, ex-Kriegy 2nd Lieutenant Seymour Bolten, left Oflag 64 on January 28, 1945, he packed-up the hundreds of letters and documents he had saved over the past two years. He hauled these papers with him on his three-thousand mile, two-and-a-half-month journey: trucked to Rembertów refugee camp, sent by box car to Odessa, and then aboard ship to Egypt. Though I didn't discover this treasure chest until long after he had passed away--and POWs were great hoarders--I believe that part of the reason he saved this time capsule for the rest of his life was so that the history of this experience would never be forgotten.

He would have been delighted with Oflag 64's first Living History event, "A Day at Oflag 64." The event brought the camp to life with vivid and keen attention to historical detail.

I was fortunate enough to be able to attend, and to be one of the recipients of the extraordinary warmth and hospitality of the organizers.

I was just as fortunate to be there with fellow "Kriegy Kids" Glenn and Cindy Sharpe Burgess and Dave Stewart, as well as the Burgess's daughter, Lauren, and David Weinstein, Leonard Feldman's nephew, who was there to film a documentary about his uncle's experience. It truly felt like the "Oflag 64 Family" that Elodie Caldwell has referenced in the informative Oflag 64 Association website.

The day before the reenactment, we were touring Barrack #9, the future home of the Hall of Remembrance. On the field in front of us, about a dozen of the [Green Lights Historical Group](#) reenactors, wearing the khaki and the drab green wool I'd only seen in photographs, were erecting a barbed wire fence for the next day's vignettes. As they worked and chatted, they shared slices of the infamous heavy-as-a-brick German black bread--made from the original

recipe, sawdust included. I hope my hosts will not be offended if I say that, at best, it was tasteless.

They also took time to show us the coats and boots that our POWs wore in the photos I showed them that came from my father's trunk. Pulling from their boxes of original and reproduction World War II gear, they described the evolution of each article, and its pros and cons of utility and durability.

The reenactors' own youthful and indefatigable energy reminded me that the Germans like *Oberst* Schneider and *Hauptman* Zimmerman did not stand a chance with our Kriegies. I also thought how my father would have liked each of them—for their hospitality, their energy, and their respect for the details of history.

The next day, a few hundred people arrived for “A Day at Oflag 64.” Thirty-Five Polish reenactors—British flyers, Russian orderlies, and American Army officers—portrayed the six-year span of the camp. During the opening moments, an original recording of the Oflag 64 Glee Club (my father sang tenor) floated over the camp loudspeakers.

[The recording](#) had been made by Henry Söderberg, the beloved International YMCA Representative, during his June 1944 visit. With the steady electronic hum of Söderberg's portable recording equipment in the background, the men's harmony sailed across the field.

After the opening ceremonies, adults and children of all ages, watched the vignettes unfold behind the barbed wire. In the first one, the “Arrival of American POWs,” we watched the exhausted prisoners shuffle through the wooden gates, cheered in by the fellow Kriegies who had arrived earlier. The German guards--well-armed, and attired in the intimidating tall boots—searched them. The new arrivals shifted from foot-to-foot as one of the welcoming POWs,

wearing a long wool military coat, read them the (original) rules of the camp from a single sheet of paper.

Between vignettes, participants could view a replica of the White House's Bulletin Board that all Kriegies (and German guards, according to my father) checked at least twice a day to read the "Daily Bulletin," or take in the historical display of camp photographs that were taken by representatives of the International Red Cross during their visits to Szubin between 1940-1944.

The participants transported us to the world of Oflag 64. The event's success is a result of months of detailed planning by the multitude of collaborators, and the leadership of the always patient, always diplomatic, always historically attentive Mariusz Winiecki. At the end of the event, attending members of the Oflag 64 Association Family presented Mariusz with a plaque thanking him for his "tireless efforts and unwavering commitment in researching the history" of the camp.

My father, ex-Kriegy #1477, and fellow archivist, would have agreed. This history should not be forgotten. And, events like this one, and the future Hall of Remembrance, ensure that it will not be forgotten. I am looking forward to enjoying the next Reenactment event at Oflag 64, even if it includes the black bread.