

**From
Schokken to Wugarten**

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by Lt. Col. Clarence R. Meltesen, USA Ret.

INTRODUCTION

In January 1945, the Soviet Armed Forces initiated their winter offensive by crossing the Vistula River above Warsaw and racing for the Oder River to seize early crossing sites. The German forces regrouped on the flanks of the Russian penetration. The story of Wugarten is the story of American prisoners of war caught in the cauldron of military actions as the Germans counterattacked south from Stargard and as Zhukov's armies broadened their front on the Oder River.

A cadre of ground forces officers from Oflag 64, Schubin, Poland, was sent to Oflag 64Z, Schokken, Poland, in January 1945, to operate a small, mixed nationality camp. The group was headed by Lt. Colonel Doyle A. Yardley with a Chaplain, 1st Lt. Craig Campbell, one or two other officers, T/5 Robert E. Levin, and one other enlisted man. Three American officers were present when they arrived, along with an estimated 30 Italians (generals, admirals and their orderlies), prisoners from the Badoglio government period. Colonel Hurley Fuller assumed the duties of Senior American Officer (SAO) when he arrived two days after the cadre with a packet of some 90 ground forces officers who had been captured in the Bulge and shipped directly to Oflag 64Z.

Operate is a fiction in terms of a German POW camp. Within the terms of the 1929 Geneva Conventions, the SAO dealt with the German Commandant and staff as to treatment. Food, clothing, shelter, discipline under the German code, relations with the Protecting Power (Switzerland) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) were daily considerations. All such relationships were established and maintained in the context of the political situation in Germany. Of greatest concern was the relationship of the Wehrmacht to the National Socialist government and, from June 1944 on, the ascending power of the Gestapo and the Waffen SS units in all military matters.

The forced march from Schokken to Wugarten illustrates the method of the Germans in their evacuation of stalags and kommando groups. Marching generally was off the main roads, thus avoiding both German deployment and Soviet pursuit. Officers in charge of trekking groups signed for a specific number of prisoners. They received advice from local area commanders on where to draw march rations, where to quarter the group, and the next route to march. They have to be considered fully responsible for observance of the Geneva Conventions and the Rules for Land Warfare.

As for soldiers and oncommissioned officers of the German Army, in wartime Germany there were real problems in terms of food supplies, even for front line soldiers and their families by 1945. They were hostage to Hitler, by sworn oath,

and thus to the Gestapo for performance of duty and what is more, after November 1944, their families were also hostage. Whether they deserve pity for their failures under the Geneva Convention may be debated. The record is consistent that many took their joy in denying our men food while others went through "the motions" with the same effect. The few who expressed real concern were practically powerless in situations where the Geneva Convention stood as the sole marker against German Army practice and Nazi doctrine expressed as direct orders by commanding officers and NCOs in charge of duty details.

Both Oflag 64Z and Oflag 64 were evacuated on January 21 by forced march methods that evaded the reconnaissance screens of the Soviet Forces. Events and circumstances shaped the daily history of such marches.

THE FORCED MARCH

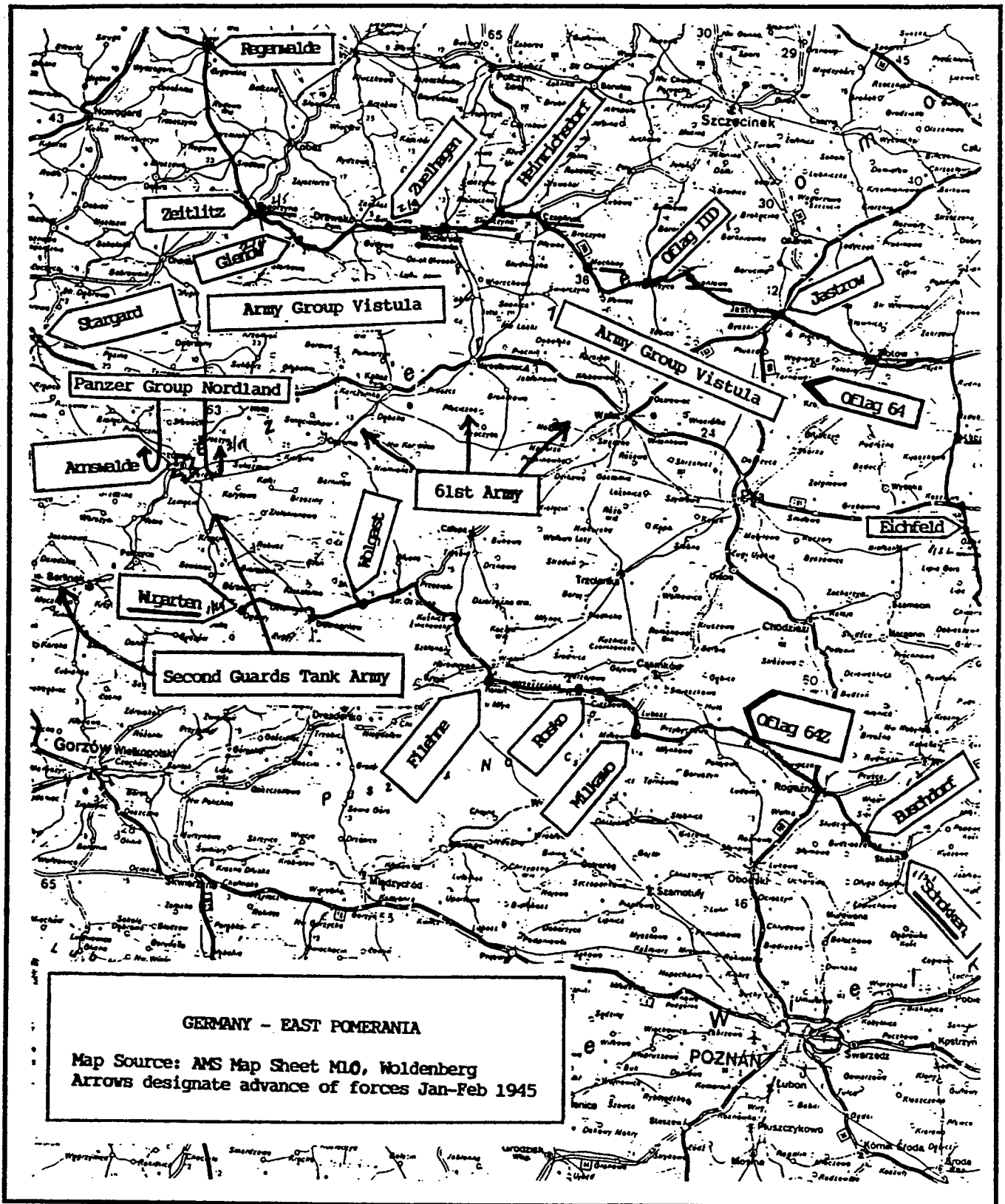
The men of Oflag 64A marched from Schokken to Wugarten and were then liberated by the Soviet Forces. Their story concludes in Odessa where they were repatriated dockside to members of the US Military Mission to Moscow. The map is marked with the general routes taken by the march columns of Oflags 64 and 64Z. The marking in the vicinity of Arnswalde (Chosozno) indicates the general flow of the main battle of February 15-23. The finale was the seizure of the entire right bank of the Oder River by the Russian offensive of February 24 to March 30.

The route of march is based on original diary notes of T/5 Robert E. Levin with Polish and German place names from the current Hallwag road map of Poland and the 1944 AMS1:100000 Map Sheets for Schneidemuhl and Woldenberg.

Levin notes that the recently captured US officers were in good shape and endured the march without casualty. The cadre had arrived at 64Z with an ample supply of US cigarettes and pipe tobacco, which was shared with the new prisoners, as were the limited number of US #10 Red Cross parcels.

....21 January 1945, Sunday. Left Oflag 64Z, Schokken (Skoki) at 0430 hours. To Buschdorf (Budzieszewko), 8 kilometers. Issue of loaf of bread, hot milk, soup, cheese and butter. Warm quarters.

22 January. [Levin notes that in the daily marches every effort was made to slow the German rate of march. Obviously the Germans were not only in good shape but had an incentive to move rapidly.]



Map showing the general routes taken by prisoners of war marched from Oflags 64 and 64Z.

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Noon meal at school house in Rogasch (Rogozno). March to a Hitler Jugend Camp. Total distance 18 kilometers. Very warm quarters. Lt. Col. Yardley, Lt. Fred Lamdin and Lt. Robert T. Huber left at this time.

23 January. To Milkawo (Milkovo), billeted in a hay barn. Very cold quarters. Pfc William E. Lindaman left at this time.

24 January. Marched 14 kilometers, billeted in a warm theater (possibly Rosko). Issued bread, butter, cheese, and soup.

25 January. Marched 30 kilometers to Filehne (Wielen). Crossed old German border, stopped north of town. Issued soup, coffee and bread. Slept in a cold barn.

26 January. Marched 14 kilometers via Sefchow (Zelichowska) to Selchow (Kuznica). Issued soup and cheese. Quartered in Nazi town hall.

27 January. March 20 kilometers via Wiesental (Przesieki) and Hochzeit (Str Osteczno) to Wolgast. Issued bread, butter, milk and soup. Quartered in a cow barn.

28 January 1945, Sunday. Marched 19 kilometers via Woldenberg (Dobiegnew), Wutzig, and Brandsheide to Wugarten (Ogardy). Quartered in a school house.

Total march, 122 kilometers, eight days. [Levin notes that in the evening, Col. Fuller and a few officers talked to Lieutenant Hegel, German interpreter, to get him to convince Hauptmann Matz, Chief Guard, to leave us and so proceed at a faster rate. Hegel was told that we would try to get him into American control if he stayed with us.]

....29 January. German commandant left at 0630 hours. Russian forces arrived at about 1030 hours. One Russian captain and one lieutenant were with the unit.

When the German commandant came to the quarters to announce his departure, he gave the SAO, Col. Fuller, a paper for protection against other German troops that might come through Wugarten. The Italians were included in the arrangements.....

WAITING IN WUGARTEN

The group stayed in Wugarten for the next five weeks. There was a daily ration delivery of food that had been requisitioned locally. There was also a daily ration of vodka which combined the utility of a drink with a means to dry clean uniforms and fill Zippo cigarette lighters. Artillery fire with small arms fire was heard for the first week and then the diminishing sounds of combat moved off to the west.

The array of Soviet and German forces in western Pomerania precluded early evacuation of the allied POW from Wugarten. Christopher Duffy writes that Poznan was 28

invested by the Soviets starting January 21, but the citadel was not captured until February 21.

Meanwhile, the Second Guards Tank Army, followed by the 5th Shock Army, barreled west, bypassing Poznan on the north. Unopposed crossings of the Netze (Notec) at Kryz and Wielen probably accounted for the arrival of Soviet reconnaissance elements in Wugarten on the 29th of January.

Earl F. Ziemke writes that Hitler had given Himmler several missions for the Army of the Vistula. One of these, in the first week of February, was "to stop the Russians south and west of Stargard and hold a staging area there for an attack into the flank of Second Guards Tank Army."

The main column of American prisoners of war on forced march from Oflag 64 reached Gienow (Ginawa) on February 4, 1945. The rumor was that the column was headed for Stargard. Instead, on February 5, the direction changed to the north and the Baltic coast.

THE GERMAN REACTION

As the Germans moved new forces into the Stargard area in late January, winter snows culminated in the blizzard of 27/28. Then a February thaw created new difficulties, not the least of which was melting the ice on the upper reaches of the Oder River.

Operation Sonnenwende (Solstice) started February 15 from the vicinity of Stargard on a front extending about 30 miles east and was directed towards Arnswalde (Choszozno), a fortress town, under strong attack by the Soviet forces. Arnswalde is about 25 kilometers (16 miles) north of Wugarten. With tactical surprise, the town was relieved and some general advances achieved by February 17.

Then the commanding general (Wenck) fell asleep at the wheel returning from a Fuhrer conference in Berlin and was seriously injured in the crash against a bridge abutment. Himmler now directed a stop to regroup which ended the German offensive.

The net effect of Sonnenwende was to demonstrate a weak flank. The Soviet Stavka reinforced and then directed a coordinated attack against Army Group Vistula (Himmler), which drove to the outskirts of Stettin (Szeczin) and cleared the right bank of the Oder to the Baltic. This operation was essential but time consuming, starting on February 24 and ending on March 30.

There would be no easy victory. Hitler would continue to pursue his fantasies. The German forces on the ground were fighting for their homeland and showed no signs of collapse. The Soviet Forces kept thrusting towards Berlin and a final victory with no intention of losing the end game on this massive chessboard.

TO ODESSA AND REPATRIATION

Once the Soviet clearing operation proceeded north and northwest from the Arnswalde area, it became possible to arrange an evacuation of the Americans in the Wugarten area. This began on March 5.

....5 March 1945. Moved by truck from Wugarten to Wrzeszin (Wrzesnia). Rode in Russian Army, US supplied, Studebaker

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(lend lease) trucks. [Levin notes that the Russian drivers floorboarded all the way, not slowing down for approaching traffic. No accidents reported. Amazing!]

6 March. Left Wrezeszin by rail at 1230 hours in boxcars.

.....9 March. Passed through Warsaw. The town was leveled to the ground. [Levin notes that rations became skimpy on entering the Soviet territory, no more living off the country.]

.....15 March. A 10-day ride to Odessa, Ukraine. Issued cigarettes, candy bars, and GI coffee. [Had no contact with other POW groups in town.] Saw American sailors and soldiers who brought them some additional supplies from their ship.

.....25 March 1945. Left schoolhouse in Odessa and boarded HMT Circassia, an Anchor Line boat. Had two meals, they were wonderful.....

HMT Circassia sailed at 1100 hours March 27, 1945, from Odessa. The American Army passengers were 149 officers, 747 other ranks, 1 merchant seaman, 1 civilian. There were 10 stretcher cases. The ship's master, Commodore Bone, had had printed and given to every passenger a notice, "It is our pleasant duty to take you home, and we welcome you back to British territory....."

Time spent in repatriation camp included making up bilingual manifests for passenger loading, delousing and inspecting, and just waiting. Morale was good, but there were few recreation facilities and very tight port area security. The command averaged three AWOLs a day out of 12,000 allied troops.

The Repatriation Camp for recovered allied prisoners of war in Odessa was organized jointly by the Red Army and the US Military Mission to Moscow (MG Deane). There were four American camps staffed largely by incoming ex-POWs. The Soviet Forces had assumed responsibility for the mission with no guide lines on which to operate. To illustrate, the Red Army hospital had set aside several hundred beds for allied personnel, if needed.

A sufficient number of American doctors were available to staff two dispensaries and handle short term treatment and outpatient services. The airbase at Poltava and Liberty Ships in the harbor were supply points for the duration of the operation. The medical cooperation was excellent. Oflag 64 medical evacuees and frost bite march casualties received good attention in the Red Army hospital.

Rations were largely Russian (fish, cabbage, kasha, pickles, tea) supplemented with Liberty Ship ration items (coffee, creamed chicken, peaches, bacon and eggs). The Russian clothing stock was limited. The Mission recommended immediate and complete re-supply of American uniforms. This was accomplished at either Suez or Naples.

Officers Camp #1 carried 190 officers and 22 enlisted men. Lt. Col. Yardley was detailed as commanding officer of

the Officer Battalion. Captain William R. Bond was staff and company commander. The largest enlisted men's camp carried 43 officers and 566 enlisted men. Total throughout was 2776 POWs and included repatriated, downed aircrews from Yugoslavia plus 24 American and 8 foreign civilians.

The story of interpreter Hegel illustrates a problem faced by Colonel Fuller. There were very real survival problems for German soldiers in these last months of the war. Hegel was uniformed, "insigniaed", and then given a background file in the name of Hoffman with a fictitious serial number. These credentials carried him through Odessa to Naples.

The plan had been to drop him off in Poznan, where he would find his family. However, Poznan was awash with Russian soldiers when the convoy went through town to the railpoint at Wrzesnia. A lone German soldier would have been shot on sight, with or without valid papers. So, it was on to Odessa. There arrangements were completed and passage organized. It was in Naples that Hegel was surfaced into custody of the British authorities.

All's well that ends well.

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