

SOLINGEN - OHLIGS

The 94th Division was now embarked on a new set of duties, for which we had no prior preparation. We were to assume control of more than 2600 square miles of the Ruhr industrial area, which was one of the most densely populated regions on earth prior to the war. Among the problems to be dealt with were overseeing the civilian governments, controls of cities and towns, attending to the problem of displaced persons, clearing all buildings and habitations of munitions, guarding essential supplies and services, patrolling the entire area, enforcing curfew regulations, apprehending prisoners of war, and guarding bridges, tunnels, quartermaster depots, displaced persons camps, food warehouses, ammunition dumps, telephone and telegraph facilities, radio stations, and military headquarters. The transition from combat operations to military government was a long leap, but as events proved the division was able to meet the challenge.

The third battalion and some other troops were assigned to two adjacent towns - Ohligs and Solingen. Among early tasks was the search of every structure to locate any weapons, contraband, or sabotage materials. In this process, the civilian population was cooperative, since they were almost as relieved as we were to find the war nearly at an end. When the assignment of security posts and guard responsibilities began, Lt. Key returned from the Company meeting with three installations to be guarded by our platoon. We three squad leaders met with him, to get our assignments. He said, "Scott, your squad will guard the flour mill there in Ohligs. Reiser, you take your men over to the brewery, and set up your system for keeping every drop on the premises." At this, I was really disappointed, because I knew how welcome the job of guarding a brewery would have

been to my men and to me, if I am to be truthful. Key went on, " Parks, no squad in the army will appreciate this job more than your men. There is a distillery at the top of the hill in Ohligs, and you are to guard that. Arrangements have been made for your men to live across the street, on the second floor of a private home. The housewife will cook for you, and clean your quarters. The rules are that any GI can consume any amount inside the walls of the enclosure, but not one drop goes out the gate in a container. You will have a jeep to get back and forth from company headquarters." I could not believe our good fortune.

We spent the remainder of our time in Germany guarding that distillery with all our might, and meanwhile thoroughly availed ourselves of and copiously enjoyed an endless supply of liquors. Some of the products I remember are Edelkorn, Cacao Mit Nuss, Cognac, Vodka, and an assortment of cordials. Each morning and evening, Madam Bruckhaus (who owned the distillery) would ask me what we wanted from the cellar, and I would furnish a list requested by my men, and she would go down with her basket and reappear with the bottles on my list. I must admit that most of the next weeks were spent in various stages of inebriation, but it is worth noting that we never had any problems and that we did our duty in satisfactory fashion.

Shortly after the division arrived in the Ruhr area, members of the 300th Field Artillery heard rumors of a mass grave near Ohligs, where the retreating Germans had executed a number of political prisoners before fleeing to the east. Investigation proved that the grave did exist, and that it was in a sand pit off a lonely road. The bodies were located, under less than a foot of loose sand.



Bodies of 71 German Civilians Murdered by the SS near Ohligs

Division graves registration officer Edwin Rosenzweig was charged with removal and proper disposal of the bodies. A group of forty known Nazi Party members was ordered to report to the town square one morning, with purpose not announced. Some, including a banker who was one of the wealthiest men in the Ruhr, came in their best dress clothing. Some thought they were to be executed. They were marched to the grave location, and ordered to exhume the now decayed bodies, still tied together as their killers had left them, each with a bullet hole in the back of the head. The work party was told that if they damaged any body with a shovel, they would finish the job with their hands.

Meanwhile, the Burgermeister of Ohligs was ordered to have at least one thousand citizens in front of the town hall the next day. Individual graves had been dug in the town square, floored with boards and lined with pine boughs and lilacs. Three thousand people assembled, and watched as the work party removed the bodies from the trucks and lowered each into its new grave. Because the executions had occurred on April 13 and it was now the 30th, the odors emanating from seventy one decaying bodies were terrible. The citizens watched as the bodies were placed in the graves, and then filed by to observe them before they were covered with soil. Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish chaplains conducted a service, and were joined by a German priest and Lutheran minister. The population was charged with permanent care of this new tragic cemetery in the center of their town.

The Burgermeister spoke, saying in part:

“May the dead men rest in peace in front of the City House and may the vault represent a monument of admonition to all the citizens, with a view to do all in their power to prevent for all time such inhuman crimes. . . We are not able to dry the ocean of tears

caused by the Hitler regime and all those who ran along with it; but, we can now vow, no more again the German name will be associated with a system from another world."

This was just a tiny scrap of the horror left by the Nazi's in all of Europe, and especially in their own country. The atrocities of the extermination camps further on into Germany and in Poland had not yet been exposed fully, although some of the troops from the US armies that were moving eastward had overrun Buchenwald and some of the other sites that will live on in infamy forever.

Our lives at Solingen - Ohligs now settled into a rather comfortable routine. I set up a duty roster for guarding the distillery, and the men were only too happy to have their lives governed by schedule instead of the vagaries of battle. Madam Bruchhaus was most happy to have our presence, because hers would have been one of the most vulnerable and likely targets for looters had we not been there. The Petersen family, in whose house across the street we were housed, were congenial, and made our lives comfortable. They had a daughter, Ruth, who was a rather plain teenager. She was at first quite apprehensive at the prospect of a unit of "enemy" soldiers living in their house, but soon realized that she had nothing to fear. My men treated her with respect, and she responded in kind.

One day soon after our arrival, a young German boy came to me at the distillery office. He said, "Sergeant, my mother and I are starving. My father was in the army and is now a prisoner of war. I will do any kind of work you ask, if you will just give us enough food to keep alive." He made this request in perfect English, tinged with a British accent. He spoke better English than most of the men in my squad. I said I would do what I could to

find food for him and his mother, even though we were ourselves on short rations. From that day on, Gerd Justen became our interpreter, errand boy, cleaner upper, and general factotum. He proved to be extremely versatile and efficient, far beyond his fourteen years. He was absolutely honest, as evidenced by the fact that none of my men ever missed any cigarettes or soap or other valuables left on their bunks unattended.

We were fortunate to have his help. He and I became good friends. One day he asked if I would come to his mother's apartment for an evening meal. I agreed, and despite the army rules against fraternizing with the populace, I went to the apartment which was only a short distance from the distillery. His mother had prepared as good a meal as possible with the meager rations available, and we ate by candlelight. After dining, Gerd went to the piano and began playing a classical piano selection with admirable skill.

Gerd served us well during our stay in Ohligs, and when we were replaced by British units later gave the officer who moved into our situation a letter of recommendation for Gerd. He worked with the British occupation forces for several years, and made several lifelong friends among them. Gerd and I remained friends, and after I returned to the U. S. Pat and I sent numerous CARE packages to the Justen family, for which they were most grateful.

Gerd grew into a successful college career, and worked as a scholar in Switzerland and elsewhere. Later in his career he became supervisor of language instruction for the West German armed forces, and in that capacity made a number of trips to the U. S., to visit

and observe language training for the German military personnel on duty in this country. On these official visits he sometimes found an opportunity to visit our home for a day or two. He and I have remained friends now for sixty-two years. He is now retired and lives in a small city near Bonn, Germany.

One morning Gerd came to me and said there was an emergency not far away, where a demented German ex-soldier was threatening to kill his wife and children. I took three men, and we went in the jeep to that house. My men went in and caught the man by surprise, and came rushing out the door with him between them. As they passed me, he hit me on top of my helmet with a very strong blow, nearly knocking me down. He didn't want to get into the jeep, so we wound up hog-tying him, which required all the strength of the four of us to accomplish. Gerd guided us to a mental hospital which was not far away, and we carried him inside. The attendant who met us was a huge female guard. When we untied our prisoner, he leaped at her and with one jerk tore her dress from neck to hem. Without a word, she hit him and knocked him clear across the room, where he lay huddled against the wall, thoroughly subdued. It was all over, except that my neck was sore for a few days from the effects of that blow on top of my helmet.

Across the main road from the distillery was a sort of warehouse, in which were a large number of Russian slave laborers who had been rounded up by the German army when they were attacking Russia, and brought to Germany to augment the work force on farms or in factories. As part of our assignment we charged with furnishing them with food and any necessary other supplies, and with ensuring that they could not attack neighboring farms to steal food or other supplies, no matter how justifiable such raids might have

been. We were not protecting the German populace from revenge acts, but were trying to restore the area to some sort of self-sufficiency so the burden on our resources would be diminished.

A short way down a side road, there was a German farm, with several dairy cows. Prior to our arrival, the Russians had raided that farm a couple of times, once taking just milk and butter and then stealing a cow. To prevent any recurrences, I posted a guard at the farm each evening. At this time there was a dusk to dawn curfew, during which nobody was allowed out of their houses for any reason. One evening I sent Bob Morris (the swimmer) to spend the night at the farm. After midnight, I heard a rifle shot in that direction. I grabbed my flashlight and rifle, and with two of my men ran down toward the farm, blowing my whistle for identification as I went. On the road, I stumbled across a body, obviously one of the Russians. He was dead.

When we got to the farm, Bob again demonstrated his code of honesty. I asked him what happened. He said he was not asleep, and heard someone coming down the road toward the farm. He raised up from the sofa under a window where he was trying to rest, and fired one shot to warn off any intruder. In the pitch dark, firing at random, he hit the Russian, killing him instantly. I said, "Bob, you shouted 'Halt' before you fired, didn't you?" He replied, "No, Sarge. I just shot." I said, "Bob, there was no one else around, I'm pretty sure you yelled 'Halt' first, didn't you. There will be an inquiry, and you may be court-martialed. You did holler 'Halt,' didn't you?" He said, "No, Sarge, I didn't. I just fired. I heard the noise on the road, and just shot."

We went down to the town, and stole Lt. Key's jeep, and loaded the dead Russian in it,

for the Lieutenant to find the next morning, outside his quarters. There was an inquiry, and Bob's story never wavered, and he was severely reprimanded and given punitive work to do, which he could have avoided if he had just fibbed that once, but he wouldn't. Bob was really a rarity, a completely honest man.

Before we left Solingen - Ohligs, we witnessed a really tragic episode in the turmoil raging after the end of the war. One morning a convoy of trucks came up the main road, and stopped at the warehouse. Out of them came a contingent of Russian soldiers, led by an officer. Because I had responsibility for control of the slave laborers, I went to inquire about their purpose. Using poor English, the Russian officer said he had come to return the Russian expatriates to their homeland. An American officer who arrived then confirmed the mission. When the former slaves laborers were told of the matter, they immediately began objecting. They did not want to go back to Russia. They would, I am sure, have rioted except for the presence of Russian troops to control them. The men cursed and shouted, and the women and children cried and screamed, but in the end the entire colony of slave laborers was crammed into the trucks and driven away. Later, we heard authenticated tales of summary execution of thousands of such Russian people, who were considered by Stalin to be a danger to his nightmarish government, and were simply eliminated before they could create any possible problems for him.

Since, I have asked myself on occasion whether I should have or could have done anything to alter the course of events. As a humanitarian, I must feel some guilt at my complicity or inaction, even though there was really nothing effective I could have done. In the end we could only say, "War is hell, and its aftermath isn't all that great!"

As I look back at those months spent in combat, I sometimes think it almost unbelievable that these perfectly ordinary young men, from all parts of the nation, were there, armed to the teeth, engaged in the same sort of game, now turned monstrous, that we had played as kids. In a weird fashion, we were back in the neighborhood, playing cowboys and indians, except that now when we aimed and pulled the trigger the target really did die or fall down wounded. We had become so familiar with the deadly weapons we carried that at times their dire capability to inflict grievous injury or death was almost forgotten. They were just part of our equipment, just as were the belts and shoes and jackets we wore. I wrote the above because of a couple of incidents, one terribly tragic, that involved misuse or mishandling of weapons.

At one point, after prolonged time in transit with no opportunity to clean up or even to change our socks, we found ourselves near one of the mines which were the basis for the Ruhr iron and steel industries. At this complex, there was a big shower room, which was tile lined and very well equipped. It was there for use by coal miners coming off shift, who of necessity were terribly dirty after hours in the depths of the earth digging coal for the steel mills nearby. Some of our special troops, with knowledge of such things, had fired up the boilers and opened the facility for any allied troops interested in using them. We were, of course, delighted to have this chance to scrub off days of sweat and dirt, with a plentiful supply of hot water.

When we entered the locker room, we all leaned our rifles against the wall. At this time the standing order was that all weapons would be unloaded, to prevent any accidents. We did have ammunition, of course, in case need arose. After we had finished showering, my

men were all happy, and with our particular war ended, feeling playful. There was much kidding, and horseplay. As we were picking up our weapons, one man playfully poked his rifle into the belly of his best friend, joking that he had better take back a kidding remark just made. That poke, despite its innocence, infuriated me. I hated dangerous play, and this was indeed dangerous, although all weapons were supposed to be empty of ammunition. I jumped between the two, and knocked the muzzle of the rifle toward the ceiling, yelling some curses as I did. The man holding the rifle inadvertently pulled the trigger, and put a bullet from the "empty" rifle through the ceiling.

All the happiness evaporated from the room. A much subdued squad moved quietly and soberly to the trucks waiting to take us back to the company. From that time on, I can honestly say that no man in my squad ever treated his weapon as anything but a deadly responsibility. It was not the end of comradeship or horseplay, but such antics never again involved a weapon.

A genuine tragedy resulted somewhat later, after we had been in Solingen - Ohligs for some time. Two men in the platoon but not in my squad, Duncan and Casale, were inseparable buddies. They were both good guys, well liked by everyone and willing to help anyone when asked. They were always together except when separated by duty assignments. One day Duncan was assigned to guard duty at the motor pool, where our idle vehicles were parked. Not wanting to carry his rifle, he borrowed a 45 caliber automatic pistol from one of the truck drivers. As I said above, all weapons were supposed to be unloaded, to prevent accidental firings. I suppose Duncan assumed that his borrowed pistol was empty, as required.

Duncan stood his guard tour, and after it was finished met Casale at the company café, where we could get coffee or soft drinks when off duty. They were sitting at a table, telling jokes and making the usual man talk, involving bragging and a lot of playful challenges about one thing or another. At one point, Duncan drew the supposedly empty pistol from its holster, and pointed it at Casale, saying he was going to shoot if Casale didn't take back some remark just made. It was just the usual horseplay, but when Duncan pulled the trigger he shot his best friend in the forehead, killing him instantly. I wasn't there, but talked to others who were. It is difficult to describe the horror everyone felt. Nothing could be changed. There was no going back, no do-overs. Casale was dead, still in his chair, with his face on the table and blood dripping off the edge. Duncan dropped the pistol, and began screaming.

Military efficiency took over, and people began to act. They called the medics, although that was useless. Casale was taken away, and Duncan was arrested by the MP officers who arrived to investigate. I believe Casale's was the last firearms death suffered by the 94th Division. Duncan was brought before a general court martial, and was sentenced for murder, to spend the rest of his life in confinement at Fort Leavenworth, in prison. Those of us who had fought during the bitter winter months, and witnessed deaths and wounds and had carried on without flinching, were devastated by this useless death, and I have never forgotten the sorrow it brought. One life was destroyed and another ruined, just because someone didn't obey a simple order to unload a weapon.

After the end of the war in Europe was in sight, the allied forces began to concentrate all effort, supplies, and manpower toward fighting the Pacific war, which promised to be a

long and bloody affair. As a result, we found ourselves with shortages of everything. We were reduced to two meals most days. New replacements were not trainees fresh from basic and advanced training, but were instead men transferred from units such as quartermaster and weapon repair and other so-called "rear echelon" troops whose support functions had been essential to the conduct of the war but who were now no longer needed. These transfers were made without regard for previous rank. In due course I found myself with two men in my squad who out-ranked me, since both were Tech. sergeants, and I was a mere Staff sergeant. This situation might have been somewhat uncomfortable for all concerned, but as it turned out was all right. I never hesitated to give orders or suggestions to these men, and they never exhibited resentment at their new reduced status. Of course, the fact that they continued to wear their stripes and draw their Tech. Sgt. pay made the situation more acceptable to them. They had both worked in ordinance units in Paris prior to their transfers. Now, they were relegated to serving as privates in the infantry.

As I end this account of our weeks in Solingen - Ohligs, I have one other little anecdote to relate. Because of the intense bombings that had been directed against the Ruhr industrial complex by allied planes operating out of Britain, the German civil defense forces had located throughout the area large surface reservoirs of water to be used in fighting the numerous fires resulting from bombs. Some of these were simply excavated out of the surface dirt and then flooded, but many in the area around the distillery were lined with concrete and had been well maintained during hostilities.

As the war ended and many German soldiers decided to surrender, they often threw their

weapons into these convenient ponds, so they could approach U. S. or British forces unarmed, and therefore be accepted as non-combatants. I don't know who among my squad learned of this, but shortly after we arrived in the area, my men began spending off-duty time investigating these watery hiding places. The reservoirs held between three and four feet of water, but were quite large in area.

Some of my men devised grapples and ropes, which they would use by standing on the edge of a pond and throwing their grapples as far as possible. They would then slowly pull the rig to shore, hoping to bring up a rifle or panzerfaust, or best of all a Luger or Walther or P-38 pistol discarded days earlier by their conquered foes. As the searches went on, they extended from our base at the distillery to cover a considerable area, miles in extent. Because the discards had taken place only a short time before, the recovered weapons were usually in good shape, and required only routine cleaning.

One of my most persistent hunters was Armand Pelletier, about whom I will have more in the section on Czechoslovakia. Here in Solingen, he entered wholeheartedly into our two main diversions. He consumed a generous amount of liquor, and spent idle time at the reservoirs. His mode of operations was to use his grapple for hours, standing on various locations on the edges of the ponds, to give best coverage of the bottoms. I was not surprised, therefore, when he disappeared in the morning and returned in the afternoon. He usually carried with him, in his canteen, a full portion of Edelkorn, the clear grain whiskey produced by Madam Bruchhaus, and his rifle, and his grapple.

Shortly before our departure from Solingen Pelletier didn't appear at his usual time, and

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after he was late by a couple of hours I began to worry. There was always the chance that a solitary GI might be attacked by a civilian or by a die-hard German soldier. However, I needn't have been concerned. He finally came walking along the road, clad in only his helmet and shorts, rifle slung over his shoulder, ammo belt around his waist, and shoes on his feet, untied. He had two German pistols in his hands, and was happily singing some sort of silly song. He was definitely more than inebriated. He was thoroughly drunk.

We put him to bed without comment, and waited until the next day to learn that he had thrown his grapple into a pond but had neglected to hold onto the rope, so the whole rig vanished into the depths. Spurred on by the Edelkorn, he decided to wade in and recover his equipment. Without taking off his clothes he walked into the water, and as he did so he felt a pistol with his feet. He stooped down and retrieved it and proceeded on his recovery mission, and felt another pistol, which he also picked up from the bottom. Then he tried to find the rope and grapple, but was unsuccessful. He was by now quite uncomfortable in his soaked clothes, so decided to take them off. By this time he was not entirely coordinated, and decided to return to the distillery. The fact that he was almost naked didn't occur to him, but his soldierly training at least dictated that he not leave his rifle and ammo belt and helmet behind.

He slept off his spree, and the next day went with a buddy to retrieve his clothes which by some miracle were still where he left them. I decided that two pistols were enough for him, and didn't let him go prospecting any more. He was quite agreeable, and we remained good friends.

Three Hard Years

Fort
CUSTER
Camp
PHILLIPS
Tennessee
MANEUVERS
Camp
FORREST
Camp
MCCAIN
Camp
SHANKS



★ *Northern*
FRANCE
★ *Ardenne*
ARDENNES
★ *Rhineland*
RHINELAND
★ *Central*
EUROPE



... WITH THE
94TH INFANTRY DIVISION



Don Parks Age 85