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1 April 1995
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Joe Lipsius
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Dear Joe,

Karl-Heinz Lange has asked me to send you a copy of our English translation of his work about Torgau in April 1945. I didn't know who you were until I came across your name in his text. I believe you were the staff officer of the 272nd he refers to on page 28. I trust you are a member of the 69th Div Assoc. Are you planning on going to the Elbe this month?

I first met Karl-Heinz about 10 years ago, and I've stayed with his family on a trip to Torgau several years ago. He is a retired school teacher (of English) from Torgau, and speaks English adequately, but not as well as Heinz Richter. But it is almost impossible to translate German directly into vernacular English, for the sentence structure is so different. So I volunteered to attempt this for them, hence the enclosed. This is the 2nd generation of revision, but it still had a lot of deficiencies and typos, so I made another one, which I've sent off to Germany. I hope the pencil scratches here and there are not too distracting.

In several places, between [.....] signs, I've introduced information that I happen to know, or comments that I think are needed, but whether or not they will be in the final draft, I do not know.

And by the way, I hope you know that there will be Ceremony at Arlington Nat. Cemetery next Saturday, the 8th, at 10:30 AM. It's held to commemorate the Elbe link up as well as other "cooperative" aspects of our relationship with Russia, such as the Murmansk Convoy run, the Persian Gulf Command. The Chairman of the JCS, the Sec. Defense, Postmaster General, Russian Ambassador, etc. will be there, with members of the 69th, the Naval/Merchant Marine Murmansk run, the Air Force, the Persian Gulf Command. I believe we're supposed to meet at the Visitors Center parking lot.

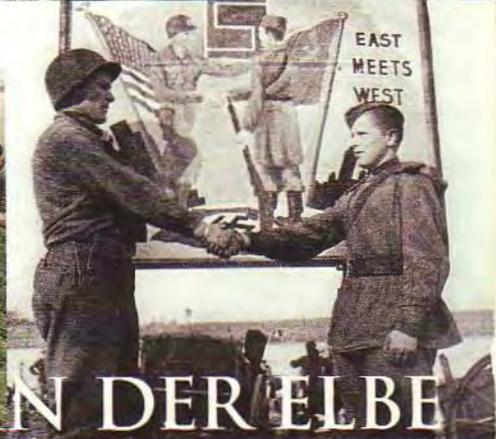
I trust this finds you in good health. Please write to me when you have the chance.

Sincerely,





APRIL 1945 IN TORGAU



BEGEGNUNG AN DER ELBE



A P R I L 1 9 4 5 I N T O R G A U
LINK-UP AND MEETINGS AT THE ELBE RIVER

A general description of the events at the Elbe River in Torgau between
April 10 and May 6, 1945.

by **Karl-Heinz Lange**

Photo Documents by Manfred Braunlich

(Commissioned by the Historical Association of Torgau)

Dedicated to William Robertson, M.D., and Alexander Silvasenko, Lieutenants, respectively, of the US Army and the Red Army, who made the first official direct contact between the US-Army and the Red Army at their link-up on the East Bank of the Elbe River at Torgau, April 25, 1945. They made the town of Torgau famous throughout the world..

Translation by Heinz Richter and William Robertson MD, 1995.

1:30 pm, 6 km southwest of Muehlberg in the section of the 58th Guards Rifle Division,
 175th Guards Rifle Regiment, Guards Lt. Col Gordejev,
 2nd Rifle Battalion, Guards Major Glotov,
 6th Company, Guards 1st Lt. Goloborodko,
 3rd Platoon, Guards Lt. Smirnov

We will not report here the story of Lt Kotzebue's link up with the Red Army near Strehla, or the Major Craig patrol which followed Lt Kotzebue's patrol. This book will report exclusively about the events in Torgau, and will discuss why Torgau made world history and not Strehla, though the very first link up took place near Strehla three and a half hours earlier.

Another patrol, from the 104th U S Division, the "Bill Shank" patrol, made it's way from Delitzsch via the Dueben Heath Forest to Torgau. This patrol did not come into contact with the Red Army. Indeed, they were captured, and spent the night of the 23rd April in Torgau. They left Torgau the 24th, but were able to secure their own release in the confusion of the day, and returned to their own lines.(13)

Reconnaissance patrols of the Red Army were sent to reconnoiter the territory west of the Elbe. One started from Kreinitz, surveyed the area around Strehla and advanced to a little hill northeast of Leckwitz (they saw the Kotzebue patrol), and another patrol under Lt. Tshishikov reconnoitered Torgau and advanced to the western outskirts of the town. Both patrols left observers to keep watch on any remarkable events and to report by radio. So the approach of the Robertson patrol to Torgau from the west was reported as well as it's disappearance into the town.

6) Tshishikov's Reconnaissance Patrol in Torgau on April 25, 1945

Early in the morning of April 25, 1945, both of the Elbe bridges and some bridges over the Schwarze Graben in Torgau were blown up by the Engineers of the German Army. The 8th Rifle Company under Guards 1st Lt Babitshev, of the 173rd Guards Rifle Regiment, moved into position at the Bridgehead on the east bank of the Elbe. Guards Lt. Silvashko reports that he was with his platoon just opposite of Torgau.(14)

After the detonation of the Elbe Bridge, a reconnaissance patrol of the 2nd Battalion, under Lt Tshishikov, approached the road bridge (air photo of the Royal Air Force). They recognized that parts of the bridge were demolished, but it was still possible to crawl across the broken and bent girders of the bridge to reach the other bank. Tshishikov reports (15) he left some of his men with the radio on the east bank, and crossed the bridge with Ivan Shisharin, Nicolai Babitsh, and Victor Gawronski. While on the bridge they came under machine gun fire from the west bank. Counter-firing, they moved forward and the enemy withdrew. It is not known who these defenders were; possibly Werewolves or some of the demolition squad. Tshishikov's men found some boats, and they used them to ferry the rest of the patrol and radio to the west bank. There was no immediate German attack, and the patrol entered Torgau. Later, after having repulsed another attack by about 10 to 15 men, they finally reached the western outskirts of the town. They left observation posts in the town, and returned to the east bank, with their mission accomplished.

Silvashko also reports a gun battle when he and another soldier crawled across the girders of the destroyed bridge to meet a group of Germans showing their peaceful intent by wearing white armbands, and who then fired upon the Russians. It is unknown if this might be the same action Tshishikov was reporting. (16) Tshishikov still lives in Moscow, but is no longer able to give evidence, according to A. Silvashko when he visited Torgau in 1994. This was at a time when the historic Elbe bridge was already closed and prepared for dismantling.

Because of some supposed contradictions, some Torgau citizens doubt the truth of Tshishikov's report. In my opinion there is no reason for doubt because the tale seems logical for activities of a reconnaissance patrol, and was never doubted by the editors of "Yanks Meet Reds". But the retired General Olshanski, a Soviet Elbe Veteran (then a sergeant) does not think Tshishikov's report to be true. Dr (then Lt) Robertson also doubts the report because he never saw Tshishikov's patrol or any other Russians before 4pm in Torgau, on the 25th. Also, Robertson had only 1 jeep and 4 men, while Tshishikov reports meeting a "line of American jeeps, with a Lt. in charge and a radio. Robertson had no radio. Nor did the 2 self-released American POW's from Ft Zinna, George Peck and Victor Berruti see any Russians in the west side of Torgau.

7) The Robertson Patrol on April 25, 1945 (17)

7.1) Reconnaissance East of Wurzen

Crowds of people moved on the roads coming from the east toward Wurzen. At first, Robertson's order was to observe the roads east of the Mulde to obtain information regarding numbers of people arriving, so that necessary preparations could be made for feeding and sheltering the arrivals, including civilians, refugees, and forced laborers, as well as establishing POW enclosures and guards to hold surrendering German soldiers. It was not the task of his patrol to contact the Russians. The regimental commander, Col Adams, did not have knowledge of this patrol, but clearly the area forward of Wurzen had to be reconnoitered, and the Battalion Commander ordered the patrol. Lt Robertson was the S-2, reconnaissance officer, of the 1st Battalion, 273rd Regt. The patrol's jeep was equipped with a machine-gun, not even a radio, and had no flares. It did not set out to meet the Russians. He selected for his patrol:

Corp James McDonnel from Peabody, Mass.,
Pfc Frank Huff, from Flint Hill, VA.,
Pfc Paul Staub from the Bronx, N.Y., who spoke German.

7.2) The Patrol's Route to Torgau

Their patrol started at Wurzen on April 25th, about 10:00 am and surveyed the road directly east, but found few refugees. They returned and then took the road to the northeast, and here they encountered many refugees and surrendering German troops. They were filled with the same feelings of Kotzebue and Craig; encouraged by a wave of sympathy for the freed forced laborers, the refugees, and spurred on by the withdrawing German Army units laying down their arms, by the white flags displayed from windows in the villages, and by freed former POW's, and they, also, exceeded the 5 mile limit on patrols. They encountered little resistance, expecting to encounter German rear echelon depots, and took the side roads. They were fired on by two SS men, captured and disarmed them, and, since there were 4 in the jeep already, placed them on the hood of the jeep. They simply went from village to village: via Falkenhain, Frauwalds, Ochsenaal, Sitzenroda, and Beckwitz to Torgau. At Sitzenroda he met a group of former British POW's from Torgau, who told them that there were wounded Americans in Torgau.

It was then that Robertson decided to proceed, particularly to help their injured comrades, but also driven by a desire to meet the Russians.

Paul Staub had his camera with him. He took a photo of the entrance sign of Torgau in the Dahleener Str. (see photo) The fortifications (pill boxes and anti-tank obstacles) beginning at the Dahleener str. alongside the Schwarze Graben, urged caution. So it is assumed it was here that he left the main road and reconnoitered the southern, then the western outskirts of Torgau.(18)

7.3) Encountering Peck and Berruti

In Torgau they found two Americans, standing by a road junction, watching the patrol. The two Americans were prisoners at Ft Zinna, and had been captured in Italy. Their names are George Peck, a Naval Ensign, and Victor Berruti, a Sergeant. The Ft Zinna guards had left, the prisoners now freed. George Peck writes:(19) "We sat down on the side of the road. The road was long, straight, and flat... At 3:15 pm (corrected by Peck to 1:30 pm), we spotted a tiny vehicle at the point where the road centered its lines of perspective on the horizon. As the spot grew larger, we saw that it was a jeep. The back seat was full of small arms. On the pile perched a GI Corporal. 'Higa, fellas!' he called out. Never have the accents of my native New York sounded sweeter. Like Victor he was from the East Bronx." The corporal was Paul Staub. Lt Robertson enquired about enemy units in Torgau. Peck reported the situation: The Germans had withdrawn about 7 am, but there might be some Volkssturm men around. The Russians had come to a stop on the opposite bank of the river. Robertson asked Peck and Berruti to join the patrol and armed them (the patrol was now six). The two captured SS men were left in the care of the POW's at the Prison.

The present residential area of Torgau-west did not exist at that time. But Peck's writing coincides with the present junction of Eilenburger Str. and Dr. Kuelz Ufer/Friedrich Naumann Str. The Robertson patrol may have skirted the town's western edge after approaching from the south. There were some POW Camps in the area of Eilenburg Rd and Naundorf Rd. in close vicinity to some factories. Some Allied pilots of shot-down planes were POW's here (e.g. on Witsun, 1944, a US bomber was shot down over Torgau, exploded in the air, the wreckage spread over the Domnitzscher Str. area. Three airmen parachuted out successfully, two others burned to death in the crash, and were buried at the hedge of the New Cemetery in Torgau).

On April 23, Ft. Zinna was evacuated, the field hospital cleared. The Allied wounded were left there. Peck himself took care (21) that "the 40 or so Russians and a handful of Americans, were carefully brought up from the cellars and placed in clean beds in an airy barracks". They were cared for by a Yugoslavian physician.

When I viewed Ft. Zinna together with Bill Robertson in 1992, all the places there seemed unfamiliar to him, although some of the buildings of the surrounding area look much like 1945. Only George Peck can answer the question if the patrol was in Ft. Zinna. If Robertson followed the description of the British POW's he met in Sitzenroda, he might have come to a little POW camp in Naundorfer Str. George Peck reports Robertson drove to Ft. Zinna but only after the link up at the Elbe.

Shortly after noon, Peck and Berruti left Ft. Zinna to watch for any advancing Americans. Peck and Berruti had been charged with espionage and detained in the Military Prison of the Supreme Court Marial of the German Reich. They had been in the American OSS. They could not be sentenced because the judges and prison officers had evacuated before April 23rd. Thereafter the prisoners put the Prison under their own control, under the command of the French Captain Levacher.(21) Peck and Berruti had left the camp to watch for the approaching Americans.

7.4) Patrol Preparations for the Imminent Link-Up (the U S Flag)

The Robertson patrol, now enlarged by Peck and Berruti, drove toward the town center. Only two of the Schwarze Graben bridges were not destroyed: the bridge of Eilenburg Rd. towards Spital Rd. and the Ziethen-bridge toward Bahnhof Rd. Some buildings were still burning, from the artillery fire of the Red Army on April 24. In the town center, the patrol encountered some sniper fire. They left the jeep, spread out, and detoured around the snipers.

In the area of Baecker Str., the restaurant "Preufischer Hof" was still burning, the patrol discussed how to contact the Russians without having the required green flares, the pre-agreed signs for mutual identification. They had to devise a way to identify themselves as Americans.

Already they had confiscated a white bed-sheet, but now they had doubts about the expediency of a white flag, since it was prominently displayed from a great many German windows during these last days of the war. So they decided to color the white sheet to make it similar to the Stars and Stripes. According to Peck's report they forced entry into a hardware store; according to Robertson, they broke into the first drugstore (apotheker) they found.(22) Peck wrote me that the hardware store was "at a great square." On his visit to Torgau in 1992, Robertson identified the place at Rosa Luxembourg Platz, now the "Electronic Store". But he stated they entered the store via the entrance door at the corner of Rosa Luxembourg Platz/Ritter Str. He entered by shooting out the lock and breaking the glass. After his departure, I contacted the present owner of the store, Frau Georgi. I was informed that at that time the owner of the building was her father, Herr Grube. As his heir, she is now the owner of both buildings, which were connected during the war by an opening in the cellar. At that time, she and her family had been evacuated to Mockritz. After their return, her father told his family that he had found the lock of the door smashed, and the evidence of the painting spread about in the store, when he returned from a Volkssturm operation about 8:00 pm at night. Frau Braeunlich took a photo of this historic place together with Frau Georgi.(see photo) Some weeks after the "liberation", Mr Grube was deported by the Soviet occupying power and did not return.

Robertson reported to the author that it was he, himself, who painted the "home made flag" in the drugstore with 5 red stripes and a blue field in the corner), but the blue did not stick well so it looked like stars (Peck tells us (23).

On April 26th, Paul Staub took a photo of the flag in memory of this historic event, and the photo was published in "Yanks Meet Reds", but in the American and Russian editions only, not in the German edition. The photo shows Frank Huff holding the pole of the flag, with Bill Robertson kneeling in front. Not until 1994 was Manfred Braeunlich able to identify this house after Bill Robertson described the rough whereabouts of the place. Peck reports (24): "I had taken the precaution of tearing a corner from it to show doubting persons as proof that this entire experience was not a dream." It was this flag that the Robertson Patrol later presented to General Eisenhower in France.

In Baecker Str. they asked two Torgau inhabitants for the way to the Elbe, and the position of the Russians. Ewald Scheibe and Willi Keil, both house owners there, guided the patrol to the Elbe.(25) The antitank obstacle at the exit of the Market Square towards Schlosstrasse will tell us that they could not have passed this way.

7.5) Inside and Outside the Bottle-Tower of Hartenfels Castle

Robertson: "Then we saw Hartenfels Castle. It had a magnificent tower close to the west bank of the Elbe. The castle had one entrance through a walled courtyard."(26) The tower was the so-called "Bottle Tower", and was the right place for waving the home-made flag. Obviously they entered the castle through the "Hunters' Gate" (see photos). Huff and Berruti stayed with the jeep. Robertson went up the tower with Peck, McDonnell, and Staub. They went up a spiral staircase. Bill's comrades in arms remained at the topmost landing. Peck: "Briefly surveying the situation, Bill clambered up a rickety ladder in the belfry through a trap door to the open space under the dome. He climbed up over the platform onto the dome, more than 100 feet above the Elbe, and began precariously waving the flag at the Russians,"(27) So General Russakov phoned General Baklanov about 3:00 pm after the report from his front-line troops came to him. Their red flares were not answered, against the agreement. This made them feel uncertain, and they opened fire at the tower.(28) The attempt to get visual recognition had failed.

During his imprisonment, George Peck had learned some Russian words, so he told Robertson what to shout. The Soviets on the east bank heard him cry in German and English, later with a strong foreign accent: "Tovarisch! Tovarisch! Amerikanski! Sniper fire was to be heard in the town. Peck: "This was enough for the Russians. They opened fire. It was very impressive. From where we were, it looked like striking flints. The sparks mushroomed out: I could look down the middle to see the bullet coming. We all ducked. But not Bill. He kept waving the flag."(29) The Bottle Tower was hit by a shell. Robertson: "The Russians resumed firing. This time, though, an anti-tank gun coughed from the left side of the woods, I could see the smoke, and the round hit the tower about five to six feet from me."(30) (see the photo of the shell-holes)

In 1992 we re-enacted this scene. Erdmute Braeunlich took the photos. Because of the present bad state of repair, it was too dangerous to get to the dormer window. So, the flag-waving was done out of the window of the former Banquet Hall of the Saxon Electors, the present rooms of the local museum (see photo). At his visits to Torgau in 1992 and 1993, Bill Robertson confirmed that he had waved the flag out of the dormer window.

Now a clear voice in native Russian shouted from the tower: "Comrades! Stop firing! There are Allies here! Here are Americans!.....!" Firing ceased - and Soviet soldiers began to climb over of their earthworks and come to the river bank.

What had happened to change the situation? Peck knew of a Soviet pilot in the POW Camp. Berruti was told to get him in the jeep, and bring him to the tower. It was he who shouted across the river to his countrymen with the powerful voice of a husky fellow, for in civilian life he had been a Siberian Taiga hunter. He was Lt. Titov, a Russian pilot who had been shot down and captured at Stalingrad. It was his voice that convinced the Soviets that there really were Americans here, and not SS men wearing American uniforms. Robertson: "The Russian leaned out of the window and shouted a few sentences...."(31) Peck expressed it more poetically: "...he sprang into the belfry and began yelling at the top of his large lungs in Russian, drawing out his syllables in long, mournful cries..."(32) Pilot Titov's eventual fate is unknown.

7.6) Meeting on the Blown-up Elbe Road Bridge and Link-up on the East Bank of the Elbe River.

The green-light for the Americans was when the Russians ^{toward} left their earth-works and started toward the bridge. The patrol ran down the stairs, crossed the courtyard, jumped into the jeep, and went racing to the blown-up Elbe bridge. The girders of the bridge had been buckled and twisted, but the upper girders were all above the water. Titov was the first to reach the girder, then Robertson, Peck, and Huff. The others stayed with the jeep. Paul Staub took that historic photo with the four clambering over the girders and Silvasenko's soldiers on the opposite bank. (See Photo) Robertson gave me his written confirmation that he crossed the bridge getting his feet wet.

There are different versions about the meeting on the bridge. Silvasenko: "We began crawling across the bridge toward each other. We met in the middle. We shook hands..."(33) Robertson: "A Russian soldier on the east bank began crawling on the girder toward us".(34) Peck, following close behind Robertson: "A Russian sergeant had already got a good start toward us from the other bank. He met Bill, and then I edged by. The girder was not wide; it was not easy to manage without falling into the rushing river below. But we made our way to the east bank, where we were greeted by a group of Russians. All of us were jabbering, shaking hands, and slapping each other on the back."(35) The Russian sergeant was Andreyev. He passed Robertson and continued crawling to the west bank. The link-up was about 4:00 pm. More and more soldiers of the Red Army came running along to participate in this friendly meeting which developed more and more into a real festival with food and drink, toasts, an exchange of souvenirs. In spite of all the language barriers, there was a pretty good understanding among the victors over fascism. The overwhelming desire of all of them was: never again may there be war. But the Americans also registered that there was something quite different in the Red Army than in their Army.

Amidst all the cheering and gestures of friendship, Robertson kept a cool head and concentrated on the essential tasks: making arrangements with the highest ranking Russian officer for the meeting of the higher command levels the next day and to prepare his return to his own HQ with Russian liaison, persuasive proof of the reality of the link-up. He negotiated with an English speaking, "smartly uniformed major. A tall blond, he looked like Alexander Nevsky....."(36) Peck offered to serve as interpreter, but the Russian rejected him. The Russians considered any POW a treacherous deserter until proved otherwise. General Russakov was ordered "to select the most experienced scouts for reconnoitering the west bank, together with someone speaking English" (in Yanks treffen Roté, S.192)."

7.7) Return of the Robertson Patrol

At about 5:00 pm, after being on the east bank for only an hour, Robertson gave the signal to return to HQ. The Elbe was crossed by boat. Four Red Army soldiers accompanied the Robertson patrol back to Wurzen and Trebsen to demonstrate that the link-up had really taken place and that meetings of higher level officers had been scheduled for April 26th at Torgau. Robertson's four voluntary guests were: Major Anfim Larionov, Captain Wassili Neda (battalion commander), Guards Lt Silvasenko (commander of a machine gun platoon), and Sergeant Nicolai Andreyev, who was the first Russian to meet the Americans on the blown-up bridge. Larionov and Neda were severely punished for leaving their units and going to the American lines. Sergeant Andreyev later lost his life in the fighting at Prague.