

Le camp de Schirmeck

Extraits de « Missing Parachutists »
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The Sicherungslager of Schirmeck Vorbruck



V. The Sicherungs Camp of Schirmeck-Vorbruck

These were the only two camps of their nature in Alsace. They were in a sense complementary, for Schirmeck was often shown to neutral journalists as a "musterlager" — an example of a "humane and well organized camp", while the more inaccessible Struthof/Natzweiler housed the apparatus for the destruction of prisoners sent there for that purpose as well as serving in the normal way as a concentration camp.

As far as all S.A.S. prisoners and American Air Force personnel who arrived after 10. 9. 44 are concerned, the camp at Schirmeck possesses no more importance than a transit camp, for none were killed there, and there is no evidence of beating by members of the camp staff. The possibility of beating remains, but is confined to the interrogation room of the Gestapo established in the camp. In any case the Gestapo members who might be involved are already accused of murder.

At the end of July and during August 1944 however, a small number of baled out airmen were brought to Schirmeck and were transferred on the orders of the Commandant Karl Buck to Struthof/Natzweiler for execution.

The only S.A.S. soldier to reach Struthof/Natzweiler was Pct. Hall, captured on 17th August. After interrogation at Schirmeck he was taken by truck to Struthof, shot on the way and his body handed in at the latter camp.

In one other case at least, it appears that an airman or airmen were murdered by personnel of Schirmeck camp in the same manner, and the dead bodies handed in for cremation. (See Cases 3 and 13.)

On the evacuation of Schirmeck camp to Baden in November 1944, the ten British and American prisoners held there at that time were killed at Gaggenau by members of the staff of Rotenfels camp, to which part of the guards and prisoners from Schirmeck had been transferred.

Sicherungs-lager Schirmeck-Vorbruck

1. General description

This camp is situated outside the town of Schirmeck in the valley leading to the Donon. It was constructed in the summer and autumn of 1940.

Karl Buck the commandant of the camp, himself a constructional engineer supervised the building. The capacity for prisoners was up to 1500, who were accommodated in 14 barracks. Of these, barack 2 was the kitchen and barrack 8 the camp hospital. Barracks 12, 13 and 14 were built of stone and were used to accommodate the women.

In 1943 a large hall was built at the western end of the camp. This was principally used for the women to work in. Underneath were 25 cells; 23 small and 2 slightly larger; each cell had a window. These cells were used for male prisoners, female prisoners were confined in 6 cells at the opposite end of the building which housed the washroom.

There were two barriers, one at the main entrance to the camp, and the other at the division between the administrative enclosure and the prisoners compound.

The four watch towers were manned until August 1944 by prisoners. From this date onwards these were taken over by the camp police in conjunction with the general measures to safeguard the camp against the rumoured impending attack by the Maquis. (For details of the camp see plan page 38.)

2. Staff

The commandant of the camp, throughout its existence, was Hstuf. Karl Buck. He had joined the German army in 1913 as a volunteer and by the end of the war had become Lieutenant and Adjutant to a battalion.

Thereafter he resumed his training as a civil engineer. He first supervised the construction of a cement works in Portugal, and then left for Chile where he directed the building of a nitrate plant, with which concern he remained as chief engineer.

In 1930, as the result of a sympathetic reflex caused by a war wound in the neck, he had to have a leg amputated, and returned to Germany. According to Buck, the pension authorities claimed this was no direct result of a war injury, and he was forced to spend 18,000 marks on further treatment. This left him with 200 marks to his credit in the bank.

Buck's brother, an officer in the Wehrmacht, who later rose to the rank of General, was said to have obtained work for him with the Nazi Party, and after the Machtübernahme, he became in 1934, second in command, then commander at the concentration camp at the Heuberg. When this was dissolved to make way for an army training area, he joined the Stuttgart Gestapo in a junior capacity, until in the summer of 1940 he took up his appointment at Schirmeck.

The pain which he suffered from his stump, and the onset of gangrene in the other leg led him to take morphia, and his moods were accordingly variable. His temper was feared throughout the camp, and surprisingly, more by the staff than the prisoners.

Schirmeck camp was run under Buck's orders with Prussian precision. The camp staff, for example, were not allowed to smoke whilst in the camp, and Buck took to chewing tobacco in his office rather than set a bad example.

Isselhorst states he had a very high opinion of Buck's ability, and wished to make him Police President of Strassburg. He said that he visited Buck at least once a month, as he felt sorry for a man of Buck's intelligence and education with no one in the camp to whom he could talk.

The police who were responsible for guarding the camp were under command of Oberleutnant Karl Nussberger. The so-called Lagerführer under Buck was Ustuf. Robert Wunsch, who was transferred to the branch camp of Rotenfels in July 1944. Thereafter the position of Lagerführer Schirmeck remained vacant, but Oberwachtmeister Neuschwanger carried out its duties.

There was up to a total of five Lagerwachtmeister. These were: —

	Oberwachtmeister	MUTH Josef
	Oberwachtmeister	NEUSCHWANGER Heinrich
	Oberwachtmeister	NEUER Herman
	Wachtmeister	THURMANN Walter
	Wachtmeister	SCHWARTZ

Neuer and Schwartz came from the Genesungs-Kompanie, Stuttgart. One of these in turn was responsible for the Innendienst of the camp, and during his turn of duty slept there.

Thürmann, who was in charge of the cells, left the camp for Italy at the end of August 1944; he was succeeded by Hermann Neuer.

The Effekten Abteilung where prisoners' private property was stored, was conducted by Burckhardt of the S.D., and Ustuf. Xaver Miller. The Bekleidungskammer (clothing store) where the prisoners' handed in their former clothes and received camp uniform, was in the charge of Hans Georgi (S.D.).

The office staff consisted partly of paid personnel and partly of prisoners.

	Offner	
Paid	Leon Hecht	
	Mlle. Hertenberger	
Prisoners	Frau Kaethe Schlesinger (who operated the teleprinter)	} (Typists who worked in the main office)
	Schmidt (who worked in the same office as Schlesinger)	
	Mme. Spielmont	
	Mlle. Diebolt	

Buck's drivers were Hscha. Kurt Giegling and Uscha. Klock of Colmar. The camp canteen was managed by M. Riegert and his wife.

Giegling is a sinister character concerned in the murder of prisoners of war on the way to Natzweiler. (See Cases 3 and 13.)

3. Police Detachment

Certain of the names given of the staff of Schirmeck camp in the Interim Report issued in July 1945, are those of men now known to have left the camp for active military service before the autumn of 1944. The following however, are known to have been there during that period: —

Zeugw.	BECK
Oberw.	NEUSCHWANGER Heinrich
Oberw.	MUTH Josef

Wachtm. THURMANN
DINKEL
BACHER Pius
MOELLEN
Wachtm. SCHWARTZ
Hscha. GIEGLING Kurt
Meister OSTERTAG Erwin
Wachtm. ULLRICH Benno
ZIMMERMANN
WEBER

4. Prisoners

The prisoners who were confined in the camp of Schirmeck Vorbruck normally fell into two categories: —

Political prisoners, of whom a large proportion during the autumn of 1944 came from the valleys to the West of the Vosges, and prisoners convicted of or awaiting trial for theft, absenteeism, blackmarketeering, sexual crimes and so on. This latter group formed about 35—40 % of the total.

The normal procedure for a prisoner entering the camp was first to be registered in the camp office in the card index, then his personal property was handed in at the Effekten Abteilung, and finally at the Bekleidungskammer he exchanged his clothes for the Sträflingskleider, normally worn by the prisoners in the camp.

It was only exceptionally that this procedure was followed in the case of allied prisoners of war who came to the camp. as their arrival and confinement there was kept as secret as possible particularly in August 1944.

5. Witnesses

It has been a matter of some difficulty to trace and select reliable witnesses to account accurately for the presence at Schirmeck of the British and American prisoners confined there.

After the beginning of September a register was kept of such P.O.W. (see page 56), but before that date no records, were kept which have been found.

The most reliable witnesses for the presence of allied prisoners of war, are Denu and Helfen, who as prisoners were given the task of taking food to those confined in the cells.

The statements of many of the other prisoners in the camp are of extremely doubtful value for the following reasons: —

- (a) Prisoners confined in such a camp for a long period, have in general no memory for dates.
- (b) They are often confused and can not differentiate between airmen, parachutists, and the two groups of Indian prisoners who had escaped from the camp at Epinal, and were brought to Schirmeck after recapture.

- (c) Many of these statements are based on hearsay camp gossip, and therefore it is easy enough to understand that the prisoners in the camp below the hill on which stood Struthof/Natzweiler, should assume that every truck leaving the former should be bound for the "execution" camp.
- (d) Certain prisoners wish to increase their own importance and status as political martyrs by making definite statements concerning cases of which they have no personal experience or knowledge.

Sub Camps of Schirmeck Vorbruck

In the summer of 1944, certain branch camps were constructed in the province of Baden, to the East of the Rhine. They were Rotenfels, Haslach I and II and Sulzbach. Bastion XII at Rastatt was taken into use as a transit and re-allocation centre for prisoners moving eastwards from Schirmeck to the new camps, and the Arbeitserziehungs camp of Niederbühl was brought into the group. Only the camps Rotenfels, Haslach and Niederbühl are concerned in this report.

(a) Rotenfels Camp

This camp had been used as a store for the Wehrmacht at the beginning of the war. On being taken over, it was enlarged by Italian labour, and was ready for occupation by the middle of July 1944. The siting of the camp was dictated by the desire to ensure a constant supply of cheap labour to the Mercedes Benz factory at Gaggenau, which was producing lorries for the Wehrmacht.

Ustuf. Wünsch was transferred from Schirmeck and assumed command of the new camp in July 1944. As the number of prisoners increased, so the camp staff was augmented by transfers from Schirmeck, until full establishment was reached on the final evacuation of the latter. (For further details see Case 11).

(b) Haslach I und II

The Mercedes concern was also the cause of the establishment of these two camps, as it was proposed to move the factory at Gaggenau to bomb-proof caves at Haslach. The American daylight bombing attacks on Gaggenau on the 25th September and 3rd October 1944 effectively scotched this project. The two camps however, continued to exist, one commanded by Oberwachtmeister Muth, and the other by Ustuf. Krauss.

(c) Niederbühl

This camp had been put to many uses. First a disbandment centre for the French foreign legion after 1940, then an Arbeitserziehungs-Lager or

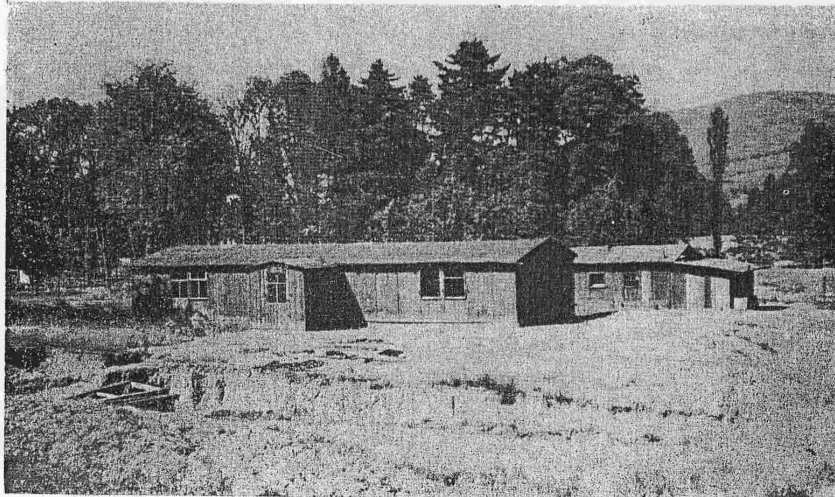
"correction camp for absentee workers", in November 1944 it was joined to the chain of camps under command of Karl Buck, and received consignments of evacuated prisoners from Schirmeck and the Strassburg prisons.

The commandant was Albert Pfeifer. The Lagerwachtmeister was Obrecht. Further details of this camp will be found in Case 12.

(d) **H.Q.**

On the final evacuation of Schirmeck camp in November 1944 Karl Buck first set up his H.Q. at Oberweiler, but moved at the beginning of December to Villingendorf. This remained the administration centre and only a small number of prisoners for domestic and office employment were kept there.

Sub Camp Rotenfels



Some personnel of the Sicherungslager of Schirmeck Vorbruck



OSTERTAG



BUCK



NUSSBERGER



NEUSCHWANGER



THORMANN



FREITAG



WEBER



LEHMAN



SCHLESINGER