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## “BEING DETAINED BY THE SOVIETS COULD BE FUN”

### A BRIXMIS Detention near Wittenberg, 27-28 August 1981

by Peter Williams

#### Circumstances of the Detention<sup>1</sup>

1. On 27<sup>th</sup> August 1981 a British Commanders'-in-Chief to the Soviet Forces in Germany (BRIXMIS) Army Tour crew was detained in East Germany (at UT 467438) by Soviet Army Engineers near the south bank of the river Elbe to the east of Wittenberg, while observing training activity at the Elster-Gallin Crossing Site (UT 466449). The Tour crew consisted of a normal, 3-man team: a Tour Officer (Capt PG Williams COLDM GDS), a Tour NCO (Sgt MH Woods RA) and a Tour Driver (Cpl SP Evans RCT). The Tour vehicle was an Opel Senator (No 2), modified in the standard BRIXMIS manner with, among other things, Ferguson 4-wheel drive, reinforced suspension, long range (180 litres) fuel tanks and additional underside strengthening.

2. The Soviet amphibious training camp lay to the north of the Elbe and there was little cover on or near the north bank from which a Tour could hope to occupy an OP for any worthwhile length of time. For that reason, having discovered that training was underway at Elster-Gallin, the Tour decided to move into an OP in a heavily wooded area to the south of the Elbe, just over one kilometre from the actual river crossing site.

3. The OP was occupied by mid-afternoon and the Tour crew hoped to be able to remain unobserved until such time as major activity occurred, as there were all the signs that something big was due to happen<sup>2</sup>. Most of the time one or two members of the team were about 10 metres from the Tour car, watching the

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<sup>1</sup> This account is based on the notes made immediately after the event; it formed the basis of the Incident Report written on return to West Berlin.

<sup>2</sup> Tour cars were never actively camouflaged, but made use of natural cover where it was available; not being fully visible could be construed as an ‘act of omission’, rather than a ‘crime of commission’ which is how the Soviets would have viewed the deliberate employment of camouflage netting or the cutting of foliage to create artificial cover.

training activity from the forward edge of the wood by means of binoculars and cameras<sup>3</sup>. As per SOPs, one crew member was always in the vehicle with the doors locked.

4. At about 1600 hours four Soviet soldiers, including an officer, appeared about 150 metres away on the north bank of the ox-bow lake which lay in front of the OP. They were carrying fishing rods and did not appear to see the Tour. They fished the lake until about 1830 hours and then wandered off back towards the river crossing site.

5. At about 1925 hours the Tour Officer got back into the car for a break and got on with consuming a can of Coca-Cola and a pint of tea. Both the other crew members were still outside the vehicle in a foot OP, equipped with little more than a pair of binoculars.

## **The Detention**

6. At 1930 hours the Tour Officer suddenly caught sight in the rearview mirror of a man in camouflage coveralls<sup>4</sup> moving swiftly across the access track to the OP, some 50 metres behind the car. Having checked that the vehicle doors were locked, the Tour Officer attempted first to sound the horn (but it had been switched off<sup>5</sup>) and then to shout a warning to the NCOs to return to the car.

7. They had scarcely begun to do so when six Soviet officers or praporshchiks (akin to warrant officers) and four other ranks burst out of the woods from all sides and rushed towards the OP, cocking their weapons as they did so and shouting for the NCOs to put their hands above their heads. Meanwhile the Tour Officer again checked the door locks and ensured that all the touring equipment was stowed away out of sight. No attempt was made to force the doors and no violence was used against the NCOs, who surrendered as ordered. It was really and truly “a fair cop”, a well planned and executed ambush that nearly achieved complete surprise. When, within a couple of minutes, the Soviets realised that their success was total, the atmosphere relaxed somewhat and, much to the relief of the Tour crew, weapons were made safe.

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<sup>3</sup> Nikon F3 cameras with motor-drive and a 500mm or 1000mm lens would typically be used.

<sup>4</sup> This camouflage one-piece uniform, known as a ‘kombinezon’, was only worn by reconnaissance troops and special forces (‘spetsnaz’) in the early 1980s; all other Soviet soldiers still wore brown woollen field uniforms.

<sup>5</sup> The Tour vehicles were modified to allow the lights, horn and other functions to be disabled in order to suit the tactical situation.

8. One officer, a Senior Lieutenant, wore field uniform (brown jacket, breeches, jackboots and a peaked cap) and was carrying a fishing rod. He was unarmed and was probably one of the Soviets who had been fishing the ox-box lake earlier on. The other Soviets almost all wore summer camouflage coverall suits and were armed with AK-74 assault rifles. Officers and praporshchiks were wearing peaked caps and carried pistols, as well as AK-74s. All wore black shoulder or lapel tabs with Engineers or Tanks arm of service insignia; one Tanks officer also wore a Guards unit badge. One of the officers spoke passable English, while another spoke fair German. The Tour NCOs rapidly realised that they must speak to one another with due care.

9. Soon after 2000 hours a party of officers arrived, travelling on a T-62 tank, which was then backed off and deployed to block off the access track. The group was led by an Engineers Major, who appeared to be the Commanding Officer and was wearing field uniform and tall black rubber waders. A praporshchik with a camera was directed to take numerous photographs of the captors and their prize, quite probably in an unofficial capacity.

10. The Major spoke to the Tour Officer, who responded by requesting (as per SOPs) that the Soviet Komendant<sup>6</sup> be called for from the nearest garrison town. Having given an assurance that the Komendant was already en route, the major walked around, congratulating each member of the ambush party individually. After a short while the Major left, along with his travelling companions.

11. As night fell the Soviets lit two bonfires: one on the access track behind the Tour car for the sentries and the second just in front of the vehicle around which the officers sat. The evening soon started to become rather chilly, but the Soviets would not allow the Tour Officer to hand the Tour NCOs warm clothing from inside the car. Nor indeed would they allow the Tour Driver back into the car, so that the Tour Officer could speak to them eye-to eye – and so that he could have the pee that by this time he increasingly desperately needed!

12. After about two hours, at around 2200 hours, a Motor Transport Captain arrived with another officer and his driver. He approached the Tour car and informed the Tour Officer that he was the VAI (Military

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<sup>6</sup> The Komendant, based in the Komendatura, had numerous responsibilities: he acted as the military police headquarters for the garrison; he controlled the VAI which checked vehicles for roadworthiness and their papers and loads to try to stop the theft and misuse of official goods; and he managed and deployed the regulators ('reggies') who directed Soviet columns at critical road junctions. The Komendant was also responsible for liaison with the local East German authorities and for 'on the spot' investigation of Allied MLM activities, including detentions of Tours.

Vehicle Inspectorate) officer from the Wittenberg Komendatura (garrison military police headquarters). He stated that he had been ordered to take charge of the situation until such time as the Komendant himself could arrive at the scene. The Tour Officer struck up a conversation in Russian with him on a variety of general and uncontroversial topics. The atmosphere became much more pleasant and the members of the ambush party deferred to the VAI Captain. However, the Tour Officer was still not permitted to swap places with another member of the Tour crew – and his desperation mounted still further.

13. At one stage a soldier attempted to remove one of the bolted-on distinctive BRIXMIS vehicle registration plates from the Tour car. The VAI Captain immediately ordered him to desist. Later a praporshchik tried to open the vehicle's bonnet and was promptly told not to do so. When he pleaded that out of sheer curiosity he wanted to see what lay underneath the bonnet, the Captain informed him that the Tour car enjoyed the status of sovereign British territory; the Tour Officer eagerly confirmed the Captain's assertion.

14. Meanwhile one of the praporshchiks was engaging Sergeant Woods in a stilted conversation in German of sorts. He claimed that he had seen the Tour car during the previous day in the Golssen area (VT 05) and that an attempt to detain the vehicle on that occasion had failed miserably. This story, although entirely plausible, did not ring any bells with the Tour crew, but it had indeed followed a PMP pontoon bridging unit in the area of Hartmannsdorf (VT 25) at about the time in question.

### **Arrival of the Komendant and Recovery of the Tour car to Elster**

15. Finally, at about 0300 hours on 28<sup>th</sup> August, the Wittenberg Komendant, a Major wearing Motor Rifle insignia on red tabs, arrived at the scene. He identified himself by means of his distinctive Komendant's pass and (as per SOPs) the Tour Officer handed over the vehicle and individual crew members' Soviet passes<sup>7</sup>. The Komendant was accompanied by his Interpreter, who was a Russian civilian, and a Lieutenant Colonel, wearing Tanks on black tabs, who was later to identify himself as the Chief of Staff (COS) of the Wittenberg Garrison.

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<sup>7</sup> The accepted protocol was that the Tour vehicle and crew were fully under Soviet control while the Komendant was in possession of the Tour passes; the Tour was considered to be released from detention at the moment that its passes were returned by the Komendant.

16. The Komendant's party had left their own vehicle on the north bank of the Elbe, next to the Elster-Gallin river crossing site. They had crossed the river in a PTS tracked amphibian (akin to a WW2 DUKW in size and purpose) and the Komendant declared that the Tour would now return by the same means to the north bank, Tour car and all.

17. At this stage the Tour NCOs were at last allowed to get into the Tour car and the Tour officer got out of it. This was a tremendous relief, quite literally, after well over seven hours stuck in the car and full of Coca-Cola and tea. Through the efforts of the PTS' winch and the Tour car's own power the Opel Senator somehow made it up the steep ramps and onto the amphibian's load carrying deck.

18. With about eight Soviet officers and praporshchiks and the Tour Officer standing behind the PTS cab and the NCOs inside the Tour car, the unlikely duo of vehicles shot off at alarmingly high speed through the forest, out onto the flood meadows and towards the river crossing site. Brushing aside the Tour Officer's protestations of innocence and ignorance, the senior Engineers officer shouted above the roar of the engine: 'So, you want to see my crossing site? Well, here we go!' At which moment the PTS plunged into the river, apparently without even needing to change gear, and within only seconds it reached the exit point on the shingle covered north bank.

19. Having halted short of the embankment bund, which runs parallel with the river, the Soviets ordered the Senator to be driven off the back of the PTS. This it did with some difficulty – and then promptly sank up to its axles in the shingle. This caused great hilarity on all sides. The Tour Officer added to this by insisting on conducting an impromptu mock ceremony, in which he grasped the genial, but surprised, Engineers commander by the hand and declared: 'Sir, I want to thank you most sincerely for granting us the privilege of taking part in the first joint Allied crossing of the Elbe since 1945!' The gesture was greeted with much laughter from all the Soviets and did much to set the scene for the later discussions in the Wittenberg Komendatura.

20. Once a tow rope had been found in one of the huddle of vehicles on the foreshore, the Soviet Engineers rapidly hauled the Tour car up onto the bund and onto firm ground. At this stage the Tour crew amid much backslapping bade a fond farewell to the detaining unit and set off in convoy for Wittenberg, sandwiched between a UAZ-469 jeep and a UAZ-452 minibus, as instructed by the Komendant (who still had the Tour's passes).

21. At 0325 hours the Tour reached the Wittenberg Komendatura and the Tour Officer went inside, leaving the Tour NCO and Driver manning the vehicle in the road outside. (SOPs required the Tour Driver to stay in the car outside the Komendatura; the Tour NCO would normally accompany the Tour Officer into the headquarters, but chose not to do so on this occasion).

22. A long interview then ensued in the second floor visitor's lounge, throughout which the Komendant, his Interpreter and the Garrison COS were present. The Interpreter spoke only German and Russian and so was completely superfluous; this did not stop him from trying to score party political points whenever he could. The COS was obviously a chum of the Komendant's and seemed to revel in the novelty of being able to meet a British officer, who was even willing and able to speak with him in Russian.

23. The Komendant began by filling out the Akt proforma (a formal statement on the circumstances of an incident). He asked the Tour Officer to explain what he had been doing at the scene of the detention and accused the Tour of 'observing military columns and equipment, using binoculars and cameras'.

24. The Tour Officer's reply followed a well worn line of dissimulating charm:

- He emphasised that the Tour was not in PRA or TRA (Permanently or Temporarily Restricted Areas as notified under the terms of the Robertson-Malinin (RMA) Agreement of 16 September 1946<sup>8</sup>). The location was pointed out to the Soviets on the photocopy of the Soviet-supplied PRA map

- The Tour was en route from Torgau to Wittenberg and had simply pulled into the woods for a coffee break. Indeed at the time of the detention the Tour Officer was enjoying a quiet beverage in the car.

- In answer to a demand for an explanation for the NCOs' presence outside the Tour car, the Tour Officer replied that in the British Army NCOs do not need to get permission to leave a vehicle.

- In response to demand for an explanation for the binoculars found in Sgt Woods' possession, he stated that he knew nothing about the binoculars, but that he did, on the other hand, recall that the Tour NCO was a keen ornithologist.

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<sup>8</sup> Tour Officers carried a copy, in English and in Russian, of the RMA, which could be used to good effect if the Soviets (or East Germans) tried a legalistic accusation against the Tour.

- In answer to: 'What kind of birds is he keen on watching?', the Tour Officer replied: 'Swans!' This reply was the cause of much mirth.

- Finally the Tour Officer stated that the accusations of observing columns and using observation devices were barely credible and could only be categorically denied.

25. At this stage the Komendant gave up the unequal struggle and the COS appeared to find the entire dialogue a splendid entertainment. Both sides agreed to differ on the circumstances of the detention.

26. A request to use the telephone to ring the BRIXMIS Mission House in Potsdam was refused (despite communications being guaranteed under the RMA). The specious excuse given by the Komendant was that the telephone could only receive incoming calls.

27. At this stage East German vodka was produced by the home team, while the visitor broke open a packet of English cigarettes. (The Tour Officer in question normally carried a bottle of NAAFI whisky for just such eventualities.) The conversation now turned to a wide range of topics including:

- The Neutron Bomb: In answer to a loaded question from the Interpreter on the neutron bomb, the Tour Officer reverted to the hackneyed 'I'm just a simple infantry officer' line in order to kill the subject.

- UK Politics: The Tour Officer gave an explanation of the British multi-party system. The Komendant wanted to know which party the 'typical worker-peasant' voted for. The Interpreter asked how typical British officers voted; the reply given was that they were mostly conservative with a little 'c' or apolitical.

- Ulster and Terrorism: After the Tour Officer attempted to explain the Irish problem to the Komendant, the Interpreter tried to score a point on the subject of terrorism in the West. The Tour Officer replied that for all he knew there was terrorism everywhere – indeed, his initial reaction to the detention, when he had seen an armed man leap across the path behind the car, had been that it must be an act of terrorism. The Interpreter ridiculed this assertion. The Tour Officer killed the subject by pointing out that just because Eastern European newspapers made no mention of terrorism in the East, it did not mean that there was none – and in any case (lying through his teeth) he had never seen a terrorist in the West for that matter.

- Literature and the Press: The Interpreter asked what Russian books the Tour Officer had read in Russian and was horrified to receive the reply: 'None, but I've read Dr, Zhivago and most of Solzhenitsyn's works in English'. The COS was intrigued, but the Interpreter went on the attack, praising the works of Sholokhov ('Quiet flows the Don', etc). The Tour Officer admitted to glancing through 'Pravda'. 'Izvestiya' and 'Krasnaya Zvezda'<sup>9</sup>, but denied ever having seen the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany (GSFG) daily newspaper, 'Sovetskaya Armiya'<sup>10</sup>. The Komendant said that he could not imagine that there was much room for news in a British newspaper because of all the advertisements.

- Family details: The Interpreter wanted to know all about the Tour Officer's family and claimed that he must come from a privileged background because both his father and his grandfather had been British Army officers. The Tour Officer poured scorn on this suggestion and the Komendant sided with him, pointing out that his own father had been a wartime officer. They were all very impressed that the Tour Officer's father had successfully escaped as a POW in Italy.

## **The Release from Detention**

28. At about 0600 hours a Captain entered the room and muttered something to the Komendant, who promptly got busy finishing off the Akt. (The suspicion that crossed the Tour Officer's mind was that the activity due to happen at Elster-Gallin – a divisional river crossing or whatever – had now taken place and so it would be safe to let the Tour go). The Komendant invited the Tour Officer to sign the Akt, but he refused to do so (in line with BRIXMIS SOPs). This refusal did not cause any real surprise. The Komendant asked if the Tour crew had any complaints to make about its treatment at the hands of its captors or subsequently. The Tour Officer replied that the Soviets had behaved entirely correctly, but that he had not liked the way in which loaded and cocked assault rifles had been pointed at the Tour crew during the initial stage of the detention. The COS answered this by stating that there was nothing for the Tourers to worry about because the Soviets never carried live ammunition on exercises. The Tour Officer claimed to be relieved to hear this.

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<sup>9</sup> 'Krasnaya Zvezda' (Red Star) was the Soviet Ministry of Defence's daily newspaper; it was provided to the Allied MLMs by the Soviet External Relations Branch (SERB) in Potsdam.

<sup>10</sup> 'Sovetskaya Armiya' (Soviet Army) had been declared by HQ GSFG to be a 'restricted publication' and therefore 'not for the eyes of the Missions'. Tours found copies anyway on Soviet training areas and rubbish dumps. It contained little of real value.

(In fact, this was clearly untrue and Sgt Woods had seen the live rounds being replaced in the AKS-74 magazines after the weapons were made safe.)

29. The COS bade a warm farewell to the Tour Officer, asking him to return to Wittenberg and dine with him in more congenial circumstances – an offer that he was unfortunately unable to take up. The Komendant, on the other hand, was polite but less informal as he handed back the Tour's Soviet passes, formally ending the detention. The weary Tour crew was glad to see the back of the Wittenberg Komendatura and set off to return post haste to Berlin, via the Mission House in Potsdam, to report on this lengthy incident. Fatigue took second place, however, to the excitement of knowing that the Tour had experienced a unique and unprecedented detention – one involving a Cold War amphibious crossing of the river Elbe by Anglo-Soviet Forces.

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