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ONE MORE JUMP: A NOSTALGIC RETURN TO THE SKY

By John B. Larrimer



Thomas Wolfe notwithstanding, you can go home again. Soldiers can always go back to the barracks with the boys – swill beer at post exchange prices, sing old songs, jump out of airplanes and be 19 years old again.

There were a few minor differences in my latest paratrooper experience. Among the 40 boys were a couple of girls; the barracks and mess hall were the visiting bachelor officer quarters (BOQ) and nicely appointed dining hall of the Polish Army's

On a day when bad weather prevented jumping, "Operation Polish Eagle 95" participants visited the museum and education center on the site of the Auschwitz concentration camp.



version of the US Military Academy (the "Higher Academy for Officers," with its own parachute school in the Silesian city of Wroclaw); and the "boys" were Greek, Polish, Canadian, American, German, Australian and Chinese, ranging in age from early 20s to late 60s.

This group of current and ex-military paratroopers included a father-son team and a husband-wife team. The ex-military paratroopers among us shared a common bond -- we had to jump just one more time.

Our 11-day trip, "Operation Polish Eagle 95," was superbly organized and executed by Bernie Hasenbein, head of the International Airborne Society, which is headquartered in Memphis, Tenn. We spent the first night in a modest but comfortable East Berlin hotel (formerly used to billet members and guests of the *Stasi*, the infamous East German secret police), and, after a hearty breakfast, toured Berlin by bus.

We then took a comfortable three-hour bus ride to the eastern outskirts of Wroclaw, where we received a warm welcome from Col. Wladyslaw Kozminski, the commandant of the parachute school. We were given our double room assignments in the BOQ along with a delicious (albeit unhealthy) dinner of soup, sausage, ham, cheese, cabbage, bread, tea and chewable coffee.

For the next three days it was cool, windy and overcast with intermittent drizzle. The weather was lousy for jumping, but perfect for a sobering day trip to the

Auschwitz concentration camp, which is now an impressively reconstructed and well-staffed museum and educational center.

We also had free run of the military academy, including its firing ranges, where we fired the full array of Soviet-made automatic weapons in service with the Polish armed forces, and went horseback riding at the academy's immaculately maintained stables. Cadets receive 30 hours of horsemanship training at the academy as part of their four-year course to impart, according to the colonel, "posture." And, of course, we took the indispensable jump refresher course, which included familiarization with the Russian D-5 parachute--a first-rate piece of equipment--all under the tutelage of Col. Kozminsky's capable and professional instructors. Conspicuously absent from the training were the colorful invective and not-so-gentle laying on of hands that I vividly remembered from my U.S. Army jump school days.

Communication problems were few, as most of us spoke at least two European languages learned during US Armed Forces Institute language courses back in the days when the Poles and other members of the Warsaw Pact were our sworn enemies. Owing to the frequent shifts of Eastern European borders over the past couple of centuries (Wroclaw was Breslau under German suzerainty), the Polish participants were conversant in German and Russian, and knew some English. Communication problems that did arise were ably handled by the indefatigable Lt. Col. Zygmunt Zukowski, chairman of the academy's foreign language department, who displayed fluency, charm and wit.

Our evenings were devoted to roaming center-city Wro-

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The international group of parachutists assembles for a photograph beside the Russian Antonov-26 aircraft that took them for their first jump.

claw, a 30-cent, 20-minute ride from the academy on the "A" bus. For the more circumspect among us "of a certain age," the beautiful gilt rococo-style opera house offered Verdi's "Nabucco," with orchestra seats for \$1.20. The ballet the next evening was a bit pricier--\$1.80.

Wroclaw offers a wide variety of charming restaurants, pubs and breweries. Four courses at a fine restaurant, with wine, liqueurs and a generous tip, cost a mere \$15 a person. First-class hotel rooms abound, at \$40-\$50 a night. For shoppers, there is a profusion of local handicrafts, not least among which is a bewildering selection of amber and silver jewelry, at "this must be a mistake" prices. The flea market offered assorted detritus of the Soviet withdrawal to the east--berets, binoculars, bayonets, belt buckles, medals, night-vision scopes and uniforms.

The warmth and energy exuded by the Wroclaw neo-capitalists was genuine and uncontaminated by the surly indifference of their former communist occupiers to the east, or their jaded old-capitalist cousins in Paris or western Berlin.

We occupied one floor of the BOQ, which offered a kitchen, dayroom and around-the-clock hot showers. The toilet paper, of course, was made of recycled cardboard shipping tubes from Soviet 82-mm mortar shells, and those among us who had been east of the Elbe before brought our own. The orderly room on the ground floor was staffed 24 hours a day by a noncommissioned officer who sold beer, soft drinks, cigarettes and

chocolate bars, at 40 cents a piece.

Friendships flourished, multilingual jokes were exchanged, and the cadet visitors did a booming business swapping insignia, uniform accoutrements and other assorted militaria. Beer and coffee flowed around the clock, but every conversation eventually turned to the weather.

When it finally broke, clear and warm, we were bused to the airfield for our first jump from a Russian Antonov-26, a scaled-down, twin-turbine version of the C-130 Hercules, the workhorse of the American airborne forces. It was old hat for some, but for me, whose last jump was 32 years ago, it was an adrenaline rush beyond compare. The D-5 parachute, trailing its one-meter diameter stabilizing chute (which kept one's head up, and attenuated the sometimes brutal opening shock delivered by the old American T-7s and T-10s when the jumper was tumbling upside down) worked like a charm, and the lush turf of the rain-soaked, treeless drop zone was soft as a mother's arms. We made four subsequent jumps over the next two days with academy cadets and members of the Polish 6th Airborne Brigade. We jumped from Russian Mi-8 helicopters, which shuttled up and down on the drop zone at altitudes up to 9,000 feet, and with ripcord-pull delays of up to 15 seconds.

There were 16 jumpers in each lift. A meteorology officer was on the drop zone monitoring winds and giving barometric pressure settings for the backup automatic opening devices for our chutes, and Col. Kozminski's instructors were there for us at every turn, helping to adjust harnesses, secure ripcords and spot our exits from



Jumpers board a Russian MI-8 helicopter.



A Polish jumpmaster helps attach a reserve parachute for Jerry Leguire of Findlay, Ohio.

the aircraft. We sustained only two casualties--one turned ankle and one uncomplicated broken leg (both by younger members of the group). They were ably tended to by the academy's resident orthopedic physician. (Talk about job security!)

The last three days were free, and, although three meals a day were available in the dining hall, most of us lit out for town and made substantial contributions to the Polish economy. Our next-to-last evening was spent around a campfire on the edge of the drop zone with the colonel, his staff members and their families. We roasted kielbasa, drank anything that could be brewed or distilled, watched Polish parachutists drift to earth and exhausted our repertoires of airborne anthems. On our last evening we were treated to a lavish banquet, had our "diplomacy" conferred upon us by the colonel, and were awarded our Polish parachute wings. Countless rounds of toasts abated only when no one was able to stand and raise a glass.

The following morning we were poured into the bus back to Berlin. Aspirin was distributed, and sleep was the order of the day. That evening some of us were treated to a home-cooked meal at the home of Berlin friends we had made on the trip, and the next morning we flew back home.

Wroclaw alone is worth a train ride through Eastern Europe. If visitors there should be so fortunate as to be invited into Col. Kozminski's airborne family, it will take the Polish army to drag them away.

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