

The Senior American Officer (SAO) Set The Tone

The Kriegies of Oflag 64 were fortunate to have as their Senior American Officer a hard-nosed, well respected, professional soldier who knew how to lead. Colonel Thomas D. Drake was a highly decorated veteran of World War I who was described by Kriegy Clarence Ferguson as “a very straight, diminutive man with piercing blue eyes whose every movement denoted a person of command.” In the first days at Oflag 64 he organized the camp as an Army unit with the staff set up in a similar fashion with an XO, Adjutant, S-2 (Intel), S-3 (Operations), etc. Everything was run by ranking American officers and discipline was very tight. All POWs were required to shave and maintain as presentable, soldierly appearance as possible at all times to include pressed trousers (dampened and put under mattress between used Red Cross parcel boxes). As described by Kriegy “Boomer” Holder, “Keeping clean and well pressed was considered a major morale factor at Oflag 64.”

But just as important was the relationship he established with the German Commandant, Oberst Schneider. Early on Colonel Drake made it known that he and his staff would be responsible for the internal operations in the camp and the Germans the external part. If a Kriegy was called before a German officer, an American of equal rank always accompanied him. The first meeting between Colonel Drake and Oberst Schnieder probably set the tone for this relationship. As written by Kriegy Frank Diggs, “Colonel Drake and an interpreter were called to the commandant’s quarters for an initial conference. When they were seated, the German rose up, beckoning to the interpreter in a ‘loud voice of command’. The American Colonel then rose up, beckoning to his interpreter, and started for the door. Oberst Schnieder said ‘Was ist los?’ Using his interpreter to emphasize his position of rank, Colonel Drake said, ‘I am a Colonel in the United States Army. One does not address an American Colonel in that tone of voice. When you have learned to act and speak as an officer and a gentleman, I will return for the conference.’ Never again did Schnieder raise his voice to Colonel Drake. In fact, Drake would not deal with any German officer of lesser rank which drove many of the guard officers crazy. The Colonel had established control that would serve as a great benefit to the POWs during their confinement.

