

# Elbe



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Around 0600 hours, the sun was barely rising. Lieutenant Kotzebue led William and I near a flimsy fishing boat resting on the river bank of the Elbe. Right now the Elbe looked beautiful, the deep blue water sparkled as the sliver of sunlight bounced off its slippery surface giving the river a warm glow of orange. We were very close to Berlin so it was sensible to suspect some of the more fanatical and diehard Germans would huddle up in some defences to fend off any attempted field trip into their beloved capital.

I held my breath as my boots made contact with the boat, when the canvas contraption didn't fall apart I slowly lowered myself further in, careful to not make any quick movements that may rip a hole on its sides; the boat has definitely seen better days, its thin canvas looking like it would fall apart against a light breeze. William, who doesn't look as concerned as I am about the condition of the boat, practically did a cannonball into the boat. To my surprise he didn't immediately annihilate our poor excuse of a water vessel. After William and I were both in, Kotzebue pushed and heaved the boat towards the water, for a split second the boat dropped into what was the silent river before making a loud splash. Kotzebue quickly climbed in himself before the boat could drift too far off, my stomach leapt as I felt the boat partially submerged under our combined weight, but somehow the boat didn't completely disintegrate and was able to stay afloat. William took the oars which were resting in the boat and began to slowly row, quickly gaining pace as he felt the rhythm of the river with the oars systematically splashing as they hit the water.

I sheepishly sat behind William with my knees pushed up all the way to my chin while Kotzebue was on one knee in the front with a pair of binoculars, scanning the opposite bank from left to right and back again. Still questioning the reliability of the boat, I sat as still as I could, thinking about the suburban home I lived in with my doting mother who would sometimes spoil me rotten and father who would whack me with his belt because I misread the bible and then whack me again when I started to tear up in pain. I laughed bitterly to myself, imagining father on the frontlines, the 50 year old, balding hooligan, marching up and down, waving his cane, howling at the retreating Germans "I'm sorry? Did I say you can leave?! No! Get back here this instant!" That's what father says whenever I accidentally shatter a glass plate and I try to grab a broom from the attic; I've pretty much memorised it at this point. If he was there during the Normandy landings a year prior, the Germans would have no chance to- "I see movement!"

Kotzebue's yell snapped me out of my private thoughts "Behind the trees! 200 feet! North-East!" At this distance, I couldn't make out anything except for a congregation of dark green trees, but I gingerly raised my M1 Carbine and trained its sights towards the forested area where Kotzebue pointed, bracing myself for the vicious chatter of an MG42.

But the chatter never came, even after I saw several figures walk out of the tree line and onto the river bank. Obviously they spotted our boat slowly approaching and began yelling in an indistinct language. I continued to watch them, not wanting to make the first shot when Kotzebue's voice startled me again. "Hold your fire!" Carbine still trained towards the figures. I give a puzzled look towards the Lieutenant

"Sir?"

"They're Russian."

I slowly lowered my gun and hastily slung it over my back as Kotzebue started to frantically wave both arms towards the figures trying to signal them that we weren't a threat. A tense moment later we finally hear a warm welcoming voice in a heavy Eastern European accent, confirming their allegiance.

"Muscovi! Washington! Hitler caput! Hurrah!"

I sighed, relieved that they weren't German and as our boat inched closer, I could finally make out the figures, there were three of them and their ragged uniforms were definitely not the stone grey outfits of the Wehrmacht, nor were they the brown camouflage of the SS either. Two of the figures wore a khaki uniform like us with the third wearing a dark blue, almost black tunic and dark blue trousers that match the tunic, on his head is a hat that I've never seen before, it's a dark grey fur hat that almost looks square with a dark red star which emblazons the front of the hat. We could see them all waving, Kotzebue and I waved back. William tried to wave but as his hand let go of the oars, they began to slowly slide off the boat, realising his folly William quickly reached for the oars and began to row again.

As our boat finally hit the shoreline of the river bank, the Russians warmly greeted us and helped us climb out of the boat, the Russian with the fur hat outstretches his hand and I take, he firmly grips my hand as he pulls me out of our boat while shaking my hand at the same time. He tried to speak to me but I couldn't understand a word he was uttering, but I didn't need to understand, neither did he and neither do the rest of our brothers in arms; a year ago our armies were a continent away, now we're all so

close, close enough to hear their heartbeat, and close enough to see the war's conclusion.

I don't know how much time we spent with the Russian men, it couldn't have been more than an hour, but it certainly felt shorter. It felt like a blend of cheers and laughter as we all walked along a narrow dirt trail within the lush green forest and pathetically tried to communicate with one another, including William curling his fingers into two circles and peering through the circles like binoculars to try and say "We're on a scouting mission." One of the Russian men in Khaki reached for a leather pouch hanging on his left and tried to hand William a pair of glasses - he thought William was nearsighted! From our primitive form of sign language we were able to learn that the Soviets are on the cusp of fully taking Berlin. I distinctly remember the cry of victory Kotzebue made like a wolf howling at the moon.

While we were still trying to communicate, the other Russian in Khaki reached for his gun slung over his back and held it to us, letting us get a good look at it. The design looked so foreign even compared to the firearms used by the Germans! The wooden bottom half including the butt resembles a regular rifle, but the barrel of the gun was steel with several holes on the barrel. But the most alien area was the gun's magazine: a large, thin cylindrical piece of metal that resembles a massive landmine, with the top of the circle neatly attached to the gun. I even got the opportunity to shoot the exotic weapon! Aiming at the base of a tree, I gently squeezed the trigger for a second. In that second, it felt like the world started giving me a thunderous round of applause as the gun shook vigorously, I almost instantly lost control over it, as several rounds immediately flew out of the gun at a rate in which I have never seen and struck the tree in front of me making a "*fwip*" with each bullet landing. I was instantly taken aback at the speed and recoil, nearly dropping the smoking gun in shock. The Russians were splitting their sides as they laughed uncontrollably at my bewilderment. William slowly approached the tree I fired at and started counting the bullet holes "Fourteen." he said at last "In one second". I marvelled at the gun in my hands with awe in my eyes before William started yelling "My turn!" like a child asking to go on a seesaw. I handed the gun over to William who also aimed at the tree and pulled the trigger, he held the trigger for a solid three seconds, turns out William couldn't control the gun's recoil and by the time he stopped shooting he was aiming at the sky, narrowly missing a passing bird. Kotzebue also had a go and was able to fire the gun with far more control and precision. In turn, the Russians each had a go at firing my M1 Carbine at the branches of the tree, with each shot a leaf floated down from the tree - they each had an incredible marksman's ability! My carbine didn't boast the insane firepower of their sub machine gun I just fired, but it did have a rather sleek design which the Russians seemed to like.



Eventually we circled back to our fishing boat which still looked as sad as before, the Soviets had already cleared the forest of Germans a day before we arrived here so there wasn't much purpose in looking, we hugged each other goodbye as Kotzebue, William and I each climbed into the boat and our new friends pushed us into the Elbe which was still just as peaceful and quiet and still sparkled marvellously. As William peacefully rowed us across the river back to our side, I couldn't help but think about the sacrifices we all made to get here. Us Americans are lucky the fighting is literally an ocean away, our Russian friends almost certainly witnessed it right in their backyards. I couldn't imagine the amount of lives it cost to reach the Elbe. Later that day I heard that a group of our men had also encountered the Russians across the river. I never saw my Russian friends again but I pray every night the world could take our meeting as a sign of a peaceful future.

# BERLIN FALLS TO THE SOVIETS!!

On May 2nd 1945, the hammer and sickle of the Soviet flag could be seen flying proudly above the Reichstag overlooking the German capital - the last major stronghold of the Nazis and the remaining German forces in Berlin surrendered to the advancing Allies. It has confirmed that Adolf Hitler has committed suicide in his bunker hours before the arrival of Soviet forces, Soviet authorities are still investigating the exact circumstances of his death.

Although the capital is now under Allied control, remnants of the German war machine continue to resist. However we predict the full, unconditional surrender of all German forces before the end of this month, marking the end of the war in Europe. Throughout the past week, cheers could be heard all along the Elbe as American and Soviet forces met across the river effectively cutting Germany in two, showering their brothers in arms with greetings and gifts. The peoples of each nation have sacrificed dearly to witness this moment, but with an end to the war in sight it is time we think of the post-war Europe, a Europe



which prides itself on tolerance and the respect of the territorial integrity of other nations, a Europe which focuses on progressing as one continent rather than focus on petty incidents in the past and to punish those who have brought the horrors of war to millions of people around the globe. The British, American, French and Soviet governments all reaffirmed their full commitment to the destruction of the German war machine.

