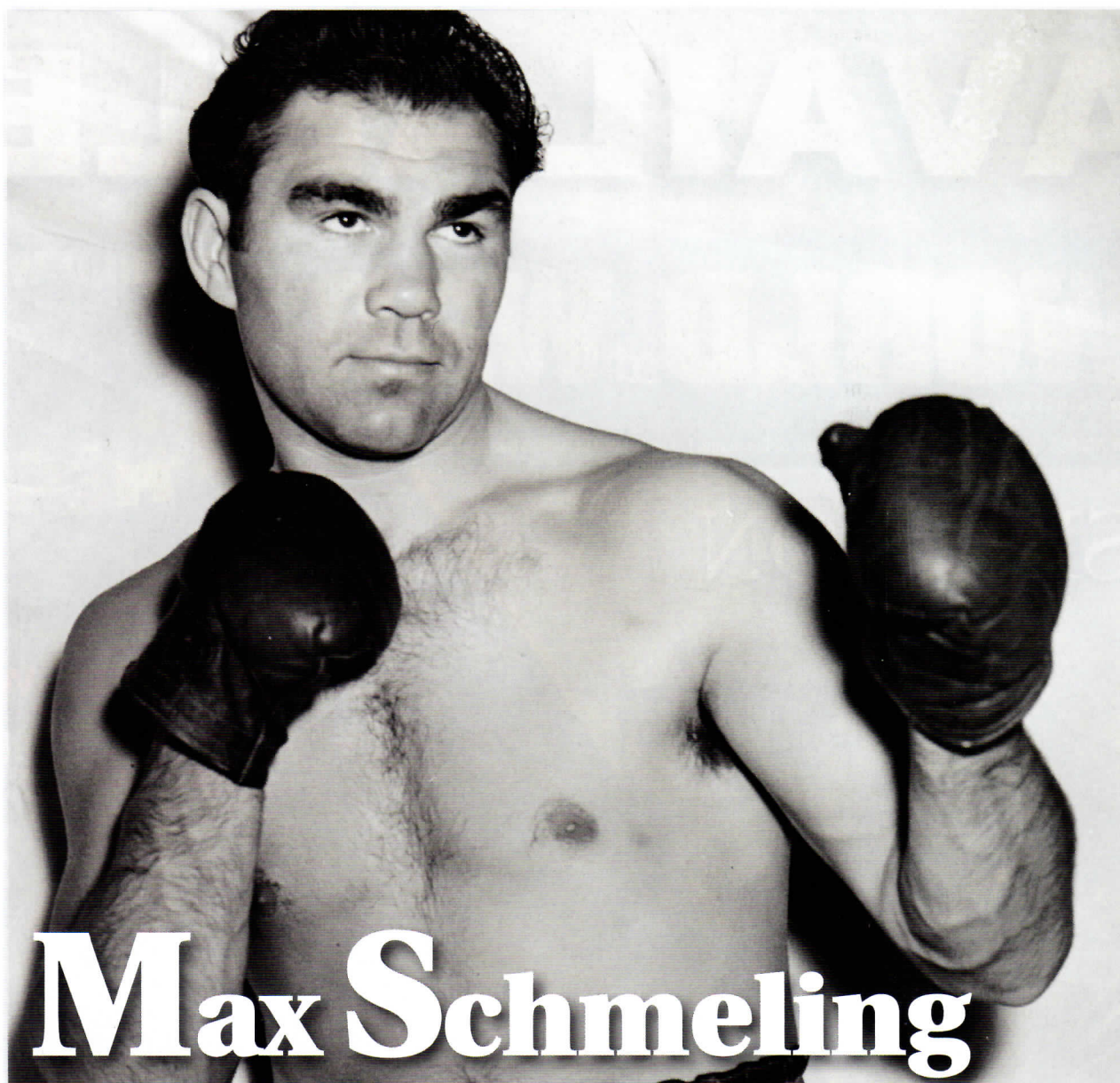




Observation Post



Max Schmeling

Boxing Legend & *Fallschirmjäger*

By Jon Cecil

Maximillian Schmeling (pronounced Schmayling) was born 28 September 1905 in Brandenburg, Germany. As a teenager he saw a film of a boxing match between Jack Dempsey and Georges Carpentier and was instantly captivated. Leaving home, he moved to western Germany where he started boxing in amateur tournaments. He won the European Championship

in 1927, the first German ever to do so. During the Weimar Republic era the sport of boxing had become a popular spectator activity and Schmeling enjoyed celebrity status. Unfortunately for him, these personal associations would later earn him the personal enmity and disapproval of Adolf Hitler.

Schmeling defeated American boxer Jack Sharkey at Yankee Stadium in 1930, before 80,000 boxing fans, and

claimed the title of heavyweight champion of the world. He held the title for two years until Sharkey defeated him in a controversial rematch.

Four years after that Schmeling went toe-to-toe with Joe Louis, an African-American who until then had never been defeated. Schmeling stunned the boxing world when he knocked down the 'Detroit Brown Bomber' in the fourth round and

then knocked him out in the 12th. Overnight, Schmeling became an international media sensation as well as an icon of German racial superiority to be exploited by Joseph Goebbels's propaganda machine. That image would be tarnished considerably two years later, when Louis won a rematch in the 1st round.

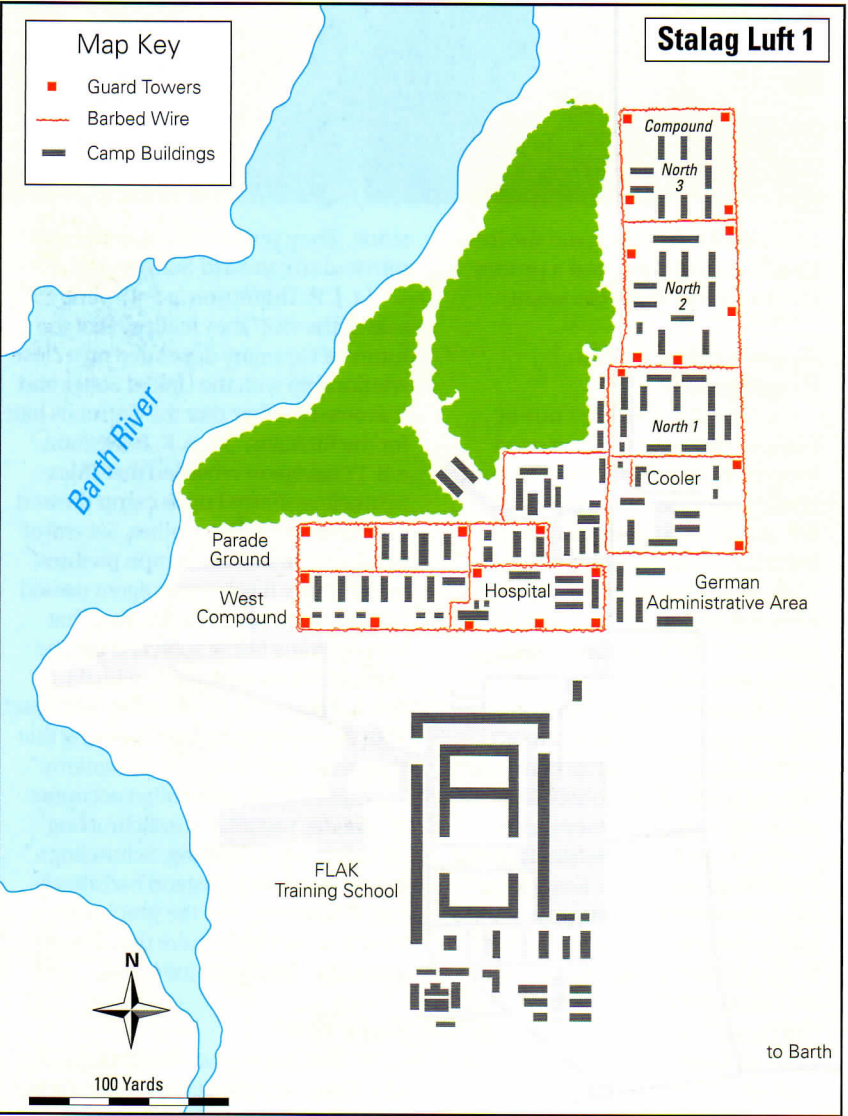
With the outbreak of war in Europe in early September 1939, Schmeling was drafted or volunteered (sources conflict) into the Luftwaffe. He was assigned as a mortar man in the elite airborne light infantry, or Fallschirmjäger.

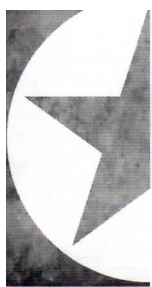
He was assigned to 4.Kompanie/I. Bataillon/Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 3/7.Flieger-Division (4./FJR 3) in time to participate in Operation Mercury, the invasion of Crete. The average age of his comrades was little more than 18; the 36-year-old Schmeling was an old man by comparison.

The unit successfully parachuted near Agya Penitentiary, a sprawling prison complex close to the town of Chania (Canea). Schmeling's contribution to the battle was short: he was treated for heatstroke attributed to dysentery. He was reportedly wounded in the leg, but later admitted, "I was on a stretcher, but I was not wounded. The rumor that I had been hit in the knee was false; Goebbels had it sent out as propaganda." British newspapers reported he had been killed. "The truth was much simpler," said Schmeling, "I was suffering with cramps in my stomach."

Gefreiter (Corporal) Schmeling had taken ill while stationed in Greece prior to the assault on Crete. He had notified his commanding officer, Hauptmann von der Heydte, prior to the jump, but was ordered to carry on. He later recalled, "A hundred and fifty feet in the air I jumped from the plane, and I remained lying among the bushes with those awful pains in my belly. When I read about my [gunshot] wound, I denied the rumour at once in an interview. Goebbels has never forgiven me for that denial. He has even threatened to summon me before a military court as a defeatist. If Germany were to lose the war, Goebbels would have me shot."

After serving two days on the frontline he was evacuated to a hospital in Athens where he spent a month recovering. For his service in





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Schmeling and some comrades in a Ju-52 transport.



Crete, Schmeling received the Iron Cross, second class, and a promotion to Unteroffizier (sergeant)

Accomplice to Nazi Propaganda

Schmeling was kept out of combat thereafter, being used for public appearances to bolster civilian morale. He eventually fell out of favor with the Nazis because of his association with Jews, avant garde artists, and other persona non grata. Schmeling also made several controversial remarks that reportedly caused embarrassment to the regime. He was quietly relegated to a Wehrmacht hospital in Ulm where he worked with seriously wounded soldiers in the treatment unit.

On 4 April 1945 Schmeling and Field Marshal Albert Kesselring made a controversial propaganda and publicity tour of Stalag Luft One, a prisoner of war camp for Allied officers near Barth on the Baltic Sea. Several American officers were eyewitnesses to the visit and recorded their impres-

sions. They reveal mixed emotions, particularly toward Schmeling.

Lt. J. E. Thompson, a P-47 pilot, said of the visit “they realized that the future of Germany depended on a close relationship with the United States and it showed the fear that the Germans had for the Russians.” Lt. B. K. Bockstanz, a B-17 navigator recorded that “Max Schmeling showed up in camp dressed in very natty civilian clothes. Several of the boys had him autograph pictures, which a very handy press agent passed out. He acted very friendly. Said that we’d be going home soon and that he wished that he were going with us. I recall that several POW’s were very upset with the autograph seekers, saying that they were trafficking with the enemy.”

Interestingly, most other accounts of that day mention only Schmeling by name, not Kesselring. Schmeling’s stature as a boxing legend had clearly not diminished over the years even though it had been more than seven years after his loss to Joe Louis.

Post War

Following the war Schmeling attempted to restart his boxing career

but could not recapture his earlier success. He retired from boxing and eventually became wealthy distributing Coca Cola in the Federal Republic of Germany. He later became friends with Joe Louis, helping him financially and serving as a pallbearer at Louis’ funeral. It was only revealed many years later that Schmeling had risked his life and reputation to save two Jewish youths during Kristallnacht (“Night of the Broken Glass”) in November 1938.

Schmeling’s legacy is a mixed one. While never a card-carrying member of the Nazi Party, and even associated with targets of the regime, he clearly enjoyed the fame and fortune that came from being one of the regime’s heroes and the favor of Hitler. He paid a price for this association because the Nazis ruthlessly exploited his name and pointed to his success in the boxing ring as evidence of racial and ideological superiority.

From all accounts he appears to have been a faithful husband, a generous philanthropist, and steadfast friend. The former boxing legend and one-time Fallschirmjäger died in his sleep in 2005 at the age of 99. ★