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# The Enemy in our Backyard: A Study of the German POW Experience in North Carolina and the Program's Effect on World War II.

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# The Enemy in our Backyard

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## *A Study of the German POW Experience in North Carolina and the Program's Effect on World War II*

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Department of History

Honors Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of honors

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# Introduction

The United States made the decision to enter World War II on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941. The Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor, and the United States could no longer avoid the war that had become increasingly imminent over the previous years. American soldiers fought on all fronts surrounded by vast devastation and suffering, but those remaining on the home front had a very different view of the war, one that is often overlooked. Between the years of 1942 to 1946, some 400,000 German prisoners of war were brought across the Atlantic to their temporary homes in the United States.<sup>1</sup> This was the United States' first attempt at a successful POW program. The prisoners were placed in hundreds of camps in towns all across the America to live out the remainder of the war. The prisoners each had their own unique experiences. Some actually enjoyed their time in America, making memories and making friends that they continued to correspond with after the war. However, there were always some who refused to embrace their time at the hands of their captors, and anxiously longed for the day they would return home to their families.

The experiences of the German prisoners in America differed from the experiences of German prisoners taken by Russians, Soviet prisoners taken by the Germans, or even the Americans captured by the Japanese.<sup>2</sup> Those prisoners suffered far more harsh and repulsive conditions. German prisoners in the U.S.

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, (New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1979), vii.

<sup>2</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, vii.

were given the opportunity to work, study, and even enjoy recreational activities, such as the favored soccer game, in and around their camps. The POW program in America was very important, and had a great but silent impact on the war. The treatment and well being of the German prisoners in the United States had an effect on the treatment of the American troops held as prisoners overseas. For this reason, many people may have the wrong impression of what the prisoner of war program was really like. A better understanding of the prisoner of war program may alter one's fixed notions, and offer a different point of view than most have received in any other reading regarding World War II.

The thing that is most puzzling is the lack of informational sources dealing with the POW program in America during World War II. It seems to be a neglected part of American history. It appears that historians have not shown a great interest in the American POW program throughout the years, and as a result there are many people who may be completely unaware of this program and its effects on American life, and on the war effort during World War II. It is regrettable that not much attention has been paid to the POW program, because now much of the valuable information is no longer attainable. Personal accounts of those who were prisoners, or who were associated with the POW program, are more and more hard to come by with the passing years. Also, there are not many surviving documents from the POW camps, because many were discarded when the camps were disbanded. Many of the physical remains of the camps have also been torn down over the years.

Jake W. Spidle Jr., in his bibliographical essay, suggests “published material in English on the POW operations is limited, both in quantity and scope.”<sup>3</sup> I would have to agree. I have had a great deal of trouble tracking down sources with which to conduct my research. Thankfully, throughout my research I have been fortunate to make contact with people who know a great deal of information on the camp and have led me to other sources of information. I first became interested in this topic because of information given to me by my grandfather. My grandfather, Tommy Bailey, grew up in the small town of Butner, North Carolina. During World War II, Butner was home to a rather large military base spanning parts of three counties. Many units spent time training at Camp Butner, including the famous 78<sup>th</sup> Lightning Division. Camp Butner also housed a prisoner of war camp. I was unaware of this information until my grandfather, quite the history buff, told me of how his parents had German prisoners work on their tobacco farm during the war. This fact was always very interesting to me, but it remained only a fact until I was given the opportunity to conduct significant research on the topic. I did not know anything else about German prisoners in the United States, only this small piece of information that I had learned from my grandfather several years back.

As I developed a greater love for history, I also developed a desire to learn more about those prisoners my grandfather had mentioned years before. He once told me about a letter written by one of the prisoners who worked on my great-grandparents’ farm. Of course, I was excited and wanted to learn more about this forgotten part of our history. When I chose this as the topic for my thesis I had no

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<sup>3</sup> Jake W. Spidle Jr., “Axis Prisoners of War in the United States, 1942-1946: A Bibliographical Essay,” *Society for Military History* 39, no. 2 (April, 1975): 62.

idea how difficult it would be to access information on the POW program. Luckily, I only live a short distance from the forgotten camp, and several local people pointed me in the right directions. When I was visiting the local newspaper I was pointed to the National Guard, who seem to have taken on the duty of preserving the history of Camp Butner. I was pointed to a small, inconspicuous maintenance shop that has become sort of a makeshift museum preserving Camp Butner's history. I asked my grandfather to tag along when I visited the shop, and we were completely amazed by all of the pictures, and documents, and other artifacts that had survived. The National Guard had acquired these amazing reminders of our history and preserved them through the years, but no one knew. My grandfather had lived in Butner his entire life, but knew nothing about this hidden treasure. I was finally able to gather some valuable information on the camp, which has now been incorporated as the town of Butner. However, I was a little troubled by the fact that all of this history had been preserved, but most of the public was completely unaware of the rich history of the town in which they lived. I was pleased when I heard that the National Guard was in the process of clearing land to build a museum to house the collection of materials. They already have old barracks from the camp in place to house the wonderful collection. This project will be a great way to continue to preserve the history of Camp Butner. I am hoping that I will be able to help with the creation of this museum, as well as conduct more research along the way. It is my hope, in writing this thesis, to bring more awareness to this important, but forgotten part of our nation's history. I will attempt to examine the POW program as a whole,

as well as focus my research on the POW experience in North Carolina, specifically Camp Butner.

## **Establishment of the POW Program**

In the beginning, the United States was hesitant to take part in the Prisoner of War program, in fear that their cooperation with other countries would stand in the way of their independence during the war.<sup>4</sup> In addition, a program of this scale had never been attempted in the United States. Ultimately the United States had little choice, as more and more prisoners were being taken captive daily. The U.S. first started taking prisoners during the North African campaign in November 1942, so many in fact, that they established several compounds to hold the prisoners.<sup>5</sup> At this point, the United States had no choice but enter into a prisoner of war program. The number of prisoners became so overwhelming that the Army had to establish several makeshift POW camps until the prisoners could be processed and sent to the United States. The United States had not housed prisoners of war since 1812, when they held British prisoners, so past experience was of little help.<sup>6</sup> The first stage of processing was a medical examination much like any enlistee would experience before entering the service. During the next stage, the prisoners were assigned serial numbers to identify them during their stay in the camps, with the first part of the serial number identifying where the prisoner had been captured (such as 81 for

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<sup>4</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Arnold Krammer, "German Prisoners of War in the United States," *Society for Military History* 40, no. 2 (April, 1976): 68.

North Africa, 31 for Europe, and 5 for the Western Defense Command), and the second component was a letter identifying the army in which the prisoner had served (such as "G" for German, or "A" for Austrian).<sup>7</sup> For example, the letter found by my great-grandparents and written by the prisoner who worked on their farm contained his serial number, 31g 1007872, identifying him as a German captured in Europe. The prisoners were then required to fill out a form with information such as medical history, fingerprints, serial numbers, and capture history.<sup>8</sup> This form served as a permanent record to be kept by the War Department, and was similar to the records kept on American soldiers. This seems like a very daunting process, but for the most part took place without any major problems.

However, there were several minor problems that occurred during the initial processing of the POW's, which is to be expected when dealing with such a large number of foreign persons. The first, and most obvious, would be the language barrier, and the lack of interpreters. Most of the interpreters were being used by military intelligence to interrogate, monitor, and interpret as part of the war effort.<sup>9</sup> There were not enough interpreters to go around, and as a result, many prisoners were able to take advantage of the situation, causing problems with initial processing, and aggravating the guards to the point that they would just let them through without having accurate records.<sup>10</sup> The prisoners would refuse to answer questions, withhold information, or falsify information during their initial

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<sup>7</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 5.



processing. Although this caused a stir initially, it was a minor problem in the grand scheme of things, and did not do much to hinder the program's success.

Another problem stemmed from attitudes of American soldiers who were assigned to the POW program instead of serving overseas.<sup>11</sup> Many American troops were assigned to the POW program because they were not needed elsewhere. Many felt as though the Army was assigning them to a menial job because they lacked qualifications to serve in other areas, which was true in some cases. Some soldiers may not have been fit for combat due to physical or mental reasons, but could be of great use to the POW program. It may not have been a choice job in the army, but someone had to do it. As a result, many American troops would steal medals, decorations, and pistols from the prisoners to acquire souvenirs so they could have some memory of the war in which they would never fight.<sup>12</sup>

Low morale became an issue for those soldiers who were assigned to the POW camps, and it was soon brought to the attention of the War Department. There were a series of conferences, and as a result several training programs were established throughout the country to help American troops adjust to their jobs.<sup>13</sup> Though they may have felt as if their service was less important than that of their counterparts serving in Europe and elsewhere, their service was equally important, and perhaps their service was ultimately more valuable than they were initially given credit for. The United States' efforts in creating a successful POW program greatly affected the lives of American troops captured on foreign soil, and the

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<sup>11</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 6.

<sup>12</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Krammer, "German Prisoners of War in the United States," 69.

success of the program was of utmost importance to the War Department, which wanted to do everything in its power to ensure the safety, of American POW's. It was an understood fact that in order to ensure the safety of American men overseas, we had to run a successful POW program in America. Most know the Golden Rule: "Treat others as you would want to be treated." For the War Department, this became the only rule. They wanted to treat the German prisoners in the same way we wanted our captured Americans to be treated overseas. It was an understood rule on all sides, and it was the job of the War Department to ensure that it was enforced.

One of the biggest problems faced was separating those prisoners who possessed strong Nazi sentiments from the prisoners who were more inert in their beliefs. The initial group of German prisoners that had been captured in North Africa consisted of some of the most fervent Nazis, who stirred up trouble within the camps for several months.<sup>14</sup> The fear was that those prisoners would disrupt a peaceful, organized program, and could possibly create a strong Nazi movement within the camps. Camp personnel tried to combat this issue by separating those deemed to be a threat from the regular enlistees, such as separating officers or members of the Nazi party from the average soldier. The War Department hoped this would impede any efforts to rise up against American soldiers holding them captive. In many instances, guards developed friendships with the German prisoners and issues, such as politics, were not mentioned, so there would be no discord between them. In some cases, the guards had a hard time distinguishing

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<sup>14</sup> Krammer, "German Prisoners of War in America", 71.

between incidents motivated by boredom and those motivated by Nazism.<sup>15</sup> Many would probably believe that with the great number of German troops brought to the United States this would have been a major problem, but for one reason or another this issue never amounted to any serious trouble for the Americans.

The next stage in the processing of the prisoners was their journey across the Atlantic to their temporary homes in the United States. The prisoners were taken to various embarkation points, such as Casablanca, and held until an available ship could transport them to the United States.<sup>16</sup> The journey lasted roughly six weeks, and concluded in Newport, Virginia or Shanks, New York.<sup>17</sup> From here, the train took the prisoners to their final stop—the camp. Many prisoners were surprised by the excellent treatment they received from the American troops during their processing and journey to the United States. Many prisoners ceased resisting and thought themselves to be fortunate compared to those captured by the Russians. Another surprise to the prisoners was the fact they did not see any bomb damage on American soil as they were led to believe through Nazi propaganda.<sup>18</sup> Once the prisoners realized those allegations were false they were eager to see as much of America as possible.

They soon arrived at their respective camps, but the placement of the camps was a decision that involved much thought and preparation. The security of the camps and the American citizens living nearby was the first priority of the War Department. They thought it to be in their best interests to have the camps located

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<sup>15</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 152.

<sup>16</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 15.

<sup>17</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 15.

<sup>18</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 24.

on or in close proximity to military bases, and as a result many camps were located in rural areas in the south, southwest, and the central United States.<sup>19</sup> This placement allowed for quick action from nearby soldiers if any trouble was to arise, and also may have eased the mind of the locals who were not too happy with the prisoner's arrival. The War Department also viewed it necessary for the camps to be a certain distance away from the borders of Canada, Mexico, the coast, or important industries relating to the war.<sup>20</sup> Although, ironically, there was a camp in Arizona in close proximity to the Mexican border, from which several escapes were attempted. The risk of prisoners escaping to other countries or hindering the war effort in any way was too problematic to be ignored. In North Carolina, there were eighteen camps, with Fort Bragg and Camp Butner being the two largest.

Many makeshift camps were established while the other camps were being prepared. The conditions of the camps were fair, and perhaps even surprising to many incoming prisoners. "The camp at large housed a hospital, chapel, and showers and laundry tubs with unlimited hot and cold running water. The addition of a post office, a warehouse, and utility area completed the standard layout of the prisoner of war camp."<sup>21</sup> The camps were initially much nicer than to be expected by any prisoner of war. Many civilians living in close proximity to the camps would jokingly call it "The Fritz Ritz".<sup>22</sup> The initial arrival of the prisoners in towns all across the United States intrigued many citizens who would carefully watch as the train full of prisoners rolled in. Where many camps held 4,000 to 8,000 prisoners,

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<sup>19</sup> Krammer, "German Prisoners of War in the United States, 68.

<sup>20</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 27.

<sup>21</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 28.

<sup>22</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 28.

citizens of Crossville, Tennessee were astonished when 15,000 German and Italian prisoners stepped off of the train in their town, which had a population of 2,000.<sup>23</sup> The communities had no choice but to adjust to these visitors unless they wanted to move elsewhere, and many did just that; however, there were always a few who resented the fact that Nazis were being held in their towns, and treated with what they believed to be undue kindness and respect.<sup>24</sup> It is not surprising that some people disliked the program. Many thought the prisoners had it far too easy and were treated far better than they should have been, especially when many had husbands, brothers, or fathers overseas fighting against the Germans.

The Geneva Convention assigned certain rights to the prisoners, as well as listed obligations to their captors. The Geneva Convention guaranteed the prisoners a right to appoint a spokesperson to speak on their behalf in regards to camp conditions and treatment. This gave the prisoners quite a bit of control, which undoubtedly influenced American actions regarding the prisoners, for if the spokesmen reported any mistreatment from their captors, American prisoners overseas would surely have suffered retaliation.<sup>25</sup> Any complaints by the spokesman were sent directly to the Camp Commander to be dealt with accordingly. The Convention also stipulated that the prisoners be treated humanely, and protected against violent acts and insults.<sup>26</sup> This never seemed to be a problem for the prisoners, except in cases where Nazi leaders in a camp abused their fellow

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<sup>23</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 44.

<sup>24</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 45.

<sup>25</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 38.

<sup>26</sup> John Brown Mason, "German Prisoners of War in the United States," *The Journal of International Law* 39, no. 2 (April 1945): 203.

prisoners. With the exception of a few minor events, the prisoners were treated with respect, and never worried about any retaliation from the camp guards. The articles in the Geneva Convention are meant to protect the prisoners, as well as provide guidelines for their captors in hopes of maintaining order throughout the POW system. The Geneva Convention also indicated how often the prisoners were allowed to correspond with their families. Prisoners are allowed a certain number of letters and post cards each month based on their ranking.<sup>27</sup> Under strict guidelines, prisoners are also allowed to receive packages from family members back home. Some items, such as books, magazines, or newspapers were subject to censorship at the discretion of the camp personnel.<sup>28</sup>

Many prisoners, on arrival to their camps, were allowed to keep personal belongings; however, any money they had was taken and kept in an envelope to be held until they were released.<sup>29</sup> This precaution was taken to limit the likelihood of an escape—without money they would not get very far! This was also the reason that their wages were paid in canteen coupons that could only be used at the camp PX.<sup>30</sup> The prisoners were given adequate clothing and other supplies to sustain them while living in the camps. Upon arrival, the prisoners were given a belt, two pairs of cotton trousers, two pairs of wool trousers, a pair of gloves, a wool coat, an overcoat, a pair of shoes, four pairs of socks, four pair of drawers, four undershirts, one raincoat, and one wool shirt.<sup>31</sup> The prisoners were well taken care of, and were

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<sup>27</sup> Mason, 204.

<sup>28</sup> Mason, 204.

<sup>29</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 46.

<sup>30</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 47.

<sup>31</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 47.

perhaps more privileged than the many thousands of people living in the war torn cities in Europe. The Geneva Convention also guaranteed that the prisoners would be housed in buildings or barracks that were held to high standards of cleanliness and healthfulness, as well as required the detaining power to provide adequate and free medical treatment to the prisoners while they were held captive.<sup>32</sup> The Geneva Convention was very thorough, leaving nothing out, with the goal of maintaining the best standards for all prisoners of war.

A typical day for the prisoners started around 5:30 AM when the prisoners were required to make their beds and be ready for breakfast by 6:00.<sup>33</sup> Most were probably not unaccustomed to early mornings, and a strict routine, because they had been soldiers in the German Army. After breakfast they were given time to shower, and clean the barracks, and at 7:30 their work projects around the camp would begin.<sup>34</sup> Later, a labor program was established and the prisoners were taken to their jobs outside of the camp. The prisoners ate lunch around noon, went back to work around 1:00, and ended their day at 4:30.<sup>35</sup> Once the work programs were instituted, the prisoners lived daily much like the average farmer, and were perhaps more fortunate because their livelihood did not depend on the future of the crops they tended. The soldiers ate dinner between 6:00 and 7:00, and afterwards they were free to spend the remainder of the evening however they chose.<sup>36</sup> The prisoners were treated to very decent meals during their time in the camps. The

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<sup>32</sup> Mason, 206-208.

<sup>33</sup> Kramer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 47.

<sup>34</sup> Kramer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 47.

<sup>35</sup> Kramer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 48.

<sup>36</sup> Kramer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 48.

Germans were surprised to see such an assortment of food at the camps, such as, eggs, jam, and peanut butter; however they were not accustomed to these types of food back home.<sup>37</sup> Though the quality of the food was good, it was not quite what many of the prisoners were used to eating, and before long many of the meals had been catered to their tastes.<sup>38</sup> American troops living on rations on the war fronts probably resented the fact that the soldiers they took prisoner were getting better treatment than they were. However, it was necessary in order to ensure the fair treatment of American prisoners overseas.

The prisoners had a lot of free time to engage in activities of their choosing, the most popular being soccer matches.<sup>39</sup> Soccer became so popular in the camps that they collected an audience, often composed of guards and their families.<sup>40</sup> These sorts of activities probably took both the prisoners and the guards mind off of the war that was raging overseas, and allowed them to unwind after a grueling day of work. Many prisoners also put on plays and other performances as a form of entertainment for fellow prisoners.<sup>41</sup> The types of entertainment ranged from orchestras, choirs, or smaller ensembles depending on the size of the camp. The German culture is a rich in the arts, and these productions gave the prisoners a chance to make America feel a little more like home, as well as help pass time until they were able to return to their families. Many prisoners spent their free time reading, and some were fortunate to have access to many books at their camp in

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<sup>37</sup> Carlson H. Lewis. *We Were Each Others Prisoners: An Oral History of World War II American and German Prisoners of War*. New York, New York: Basic Books, 1997.

<sup>38</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 49.

<sup>39</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 51.

<sup>40</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 51.

<sup>41</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 51.



makeshift libraries, and many larger POW camps had a collection of films and movies that were shown on occasion.<sup>42</sup> The Geneva Convention also made specifications for their prisoners' leisure or religious activities. By the Convention, space was provided for indoor and outdoor recreational activities. The Convention also specified that the prisoners had religious freedom, and they were ministered to by captured Army chaplains, or by American Army chaplains if no others were available.<sup>43</sup> It is easy to see why most of the prisoners had an enjoyable experience here in America, and also why many Americans resented their luxuries.

## **The Education Program & Camp Activities**

An education program was soon established for the prisoners in most camps. Most of the prisoners had a desire to learn English, which would be a great benefit to the prisoners as well as their American guards who often struggled with the language barrier. It would also allow for more of the translators to be used overseas. The War Department soon authorized the establishment of classes at every camp, and among the classes available were English, Spanish, German literature, shorthand, commerce, chemistry, and mathematics.<sup>44</sup> The curriculum was well organized and prepared, and many of the prisoners received a genuine education while in the camps. The prisoners took every advantage of these

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<sup>42</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 54.

<sup>43</sup> Mason, 209.

<sup>44</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 62.

opportunities, and were even given high school and university credit in Germany for the classes they had taken while in the camps.<sup>45</sup>

Though these were good diversions, the prisoners were plagued with boredom. They longed to be back on the battlefields with their comrades. To help alleviate the problem, the prisoners spent a lot of time in the camps participating in a wide variety of activities from sports, theater, music, and art, to taking classes, and spending time on other personal hobbies such as painting and writing.<sup>46</sup> The prisoners appear to have had a very enriching experience while in America, an experience that may have benefited them even after their return home. The camp was still a prison, and they were still far away from their homes and their families; however, many prisoners look back on their time in America with fond memories of their friends, and consider those days some of the most enjoyable in their lives.<sup>47</sup> Many prisoners just longed for the day that they would return home, writing their friends and family as often as they could.

These kinds of comforts afforded to the prisoners enabled the War Department to use them as an object of propaganda.<sup>48</sup> Publicity showing the respectable treatment of German prisoners gave the captors of American soldiers the motivation to treat them with the same care. All of these comforts awarded to the prisoners in the camps were to the benefit of American prisoners taken captive overseas. "In attempting to create a positive environment for the prisoners, the War

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<sup>45</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 63.

<sup>46</sup> Carlson, 61.

<sup>47</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 74.

<sup>48</sup> Gerald H. Davis, "Prisoners of War in Twentieth-Century War Economies," *Journal of Contemporary History* 12, no.4 (Oct., 1977): 625.

Department was driven by the highest of motives. By taking such special care, Washington was, hopefully, insuring that Americans in enemy hands would receive the best possible treatment and that contented POW laborers would work harder, thus shortening the war and saving lives."<sup>49</sup> It is evident that the War Department was successful in their efforts, and through their careful handling of the POW program they did indeed did save American prisoners from unnecessary cruelty at the hands of their captors. American prisoners after the war could testify to the fact, that although their treatment may not have been as good as German prisoners in America, it was far better than the treatment of the French and Russian prisoners.<sup>50</sup> Many American citizens could not see the benefits of the special treatment of the prisoners at the time, and many were angered that their friends and family were suffering while the enemy was in America receiving, what appeared to be, all the luxuries they could ask for. Most American citizens were concerned only with the war effort, and the safety of their family members overseas, but did not realize that the POW program, in fact, was playing a major role in the protection of American troops abroad.

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<sup>49</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 77.

<sup>50</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 77.

## The POW Labor Program

In 1943, the government made a decision to utilize POW labor. The recruitment of much of the labor force, once the U.S. entered the war, caused a severe labor shortage that the prisoners could help alleviate. Many of the countries engaged in the war had enlisted 35 to 65 percent of their labor force.<sup>51</sup> This would have been detrimental to their economies without the aid of the POWs. The Geneva Convention of 1929 stated that prisoners could be required to work while in the hands of their captors; however, they were not allowed to do any labor that was related directly to the U.S. war effort, or perform tasks that were dangerous or degrading.<sup>52</sup> There was always a fear that the German prisoners might try to tamper with equipment being used in hopes of hindering the U.S. army in some small way. Those prisoners who were officers were not required to work, but many of them requested work, and were given work when available.<sup>53</sup> Many prisoners preferred the work, which occupied their time, as opposed to being kept within the camp all day. Most work was outside of the camp, and it gave the prisoners the opportunity to see a little more of the country they were being held in, as well as provided them with a productive means of passing their time.

Farm work seemed to be the most popular employment opportunity for the prisoners, especially in states that dealt heavily with agriculture, such as tobacco or cotton. “From the end of 1943 to early 1946, war captives were employed on every

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<sup>51</sup> Davis, 626.

<sup>52</sup> Davis, 626.

<sup>53</sup> Mason, 211.

major agricultural crop in nearly every state in the union.”<sup>54</sup> Working in agriculture was typical for many prisoners because there was no need for training or any previous experience. If the prisoners did not know how to complete the tasks given to them when they first arrived, they quickly learned. Another area in which the prisoners were employed was the lumber industry. Many of the POW camps were in the south and located in close proximity to many southern lumber operations, and because of decreased production and labor shortages, this was seen as a suitable use of POW labor.<sup>55</sup> The southern lumber industry was hurting during the war, because of a shortage of labor, and the employment of German prisoners helped keep the industry alive. “By April 1945 the utilization of prisoners was over 91 percent...one third of pulpwood in the South and in Appalachia was cut by POWs.”<sup>56</sup> It was hard work, and dangerous work, but the prisoners did the job to the best of their abilities. Although there was often the issue of whether their employment in the lumber industry met the guidelines of the Geneva Convention, their work was of great value to the industry and many employers saw the prisoners as saviors. Many American officials interpreted the terms of the Geneva Convention loosely; however the prisoners were aware of their rights and privileges guaranteed under the Geneva Convention, and often refused work that was too dangerous, or related to the war effort.<sup>57</sup> Most of the prisoners knew the Geneva Convention inside and out. Though most of the prisoners had fairly good experiences in the

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<sup>54</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 89.

<sup>55</sup> James E. Fickle, Donald W. Ellis, “POWs in the Piney Woods: German Prisoners of War in the Southern Lumber Industry, 1943-1945,” *The Journal of Southern History* 56, no. 4 (Nov., 1990): 695-697.

<sup>56</sup> Fickle, Ellis, 699.

<sup>57</sup> Fickle, Ellis, 705.

labor program, some would say they were mistreated and their rights according to the Geneva Convention were violated. According to a POW working in the orchards in Michigan, poor treatment was to the disadvantage of the employer because it would lead the prisoners to perform poorly.<sup>58</sup>

There was a lot of red tape involved in employing POW workers. First, potential employers had to receive a Certification of Need after submitting a request to the War Manpower Commission, second, the employer had to assure the agent that the use of POW labor would not affect the wages and conditions of returning American workers, and lastly, the Department of Agriculture's Extension Service decided how many prisoners were needed to complete the task (usually 20 men, or none at all).<sup>59</sup> Only after all of these initial steps could the prisoner begin work. However, the War Department was insistent that prisoners should not be hired if there were able civilians to do the work.<sup>60</sup> For those citizens who were fearful of prisoners taking their jobs, this was a welcome relief.

In some smaller camps, such as Camp Butner, North Carolina, it was not as difficult to acquire the labor of POWs, and a farmer in need of just a couple of prisoners was granted permission without any hassle. One of the only problems that resulted from the implementation of this program was the low productivity of the prisoners. They lacked the motivation to work as hard as the American employees. Many of the prisoners knew that regardless of whether they worked or

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<sup>58</sup> Carlson, 23.

<sup>59</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 87.

<sup>60</sup> Davis, 627.

not, they would have adequate food, clothing, and shelter.<sup>61</sup> The prisoners didn't need a lot of money considering that the few items they could buy within the camp were fairly cheap. Low productivity was a minor problem, and for the most part prisoners worked to the best of their abilities. "At the end of the war the Prisoner of War Operations Division's "Historical Monograph" concluded that if the prisoners were thoroughly trained and instructed and knew what was expected of them, "good results were obtained..."<sup>62</sup>

The implementation of the POW labor program was one of the most effective, and economically viable decisions the War Department made concerning POW's. The labor program allowed the United States to utilize the abundant manpower, and was a major benefit to many employers as well. Many men and women were part of the war effort at home, or abroad, and the labor program helped many employers maintain their businesses even though they may have lost some of their employees during the war. The labor program also gave the prisoners something to keep them occupied during their internment. The POW labor program is due some credit for helping to keep the American economy stable during the war years. Some prisoner's may not have had any prior experience or training in the fields in which they would be employed, but most were willing and able to learn. The relationship between the prisoners and their employers was always amiable, and most of the time they treated each other with mutual respect. There were some, who continued to resent the above average treatment of the prisoners, and some industries would not employ the prisoners. The Roosevelt Administration decided against assigning

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<sup>61</sup> Fickle and Ellis, 712.

<sup>62</sup> Fickle and Ellis, 717.

prisoners to areas of work that were highly unionized, in hopes of calming the discord.<sup>63</sup> Though there may have been some minor problems along the way, the POW labor program was quite successful.

## **Escapes**

The War Department had security as a high priority when beginning the POW program, but soon saw that it would not present much of a problem. They feared that many of the prisoners would try to escape and cause problems for American citizens living near the camps, but that never seemed to occur. Soon their fears were quieted by several factors that worked in their favor. The first thing was the strict military upbringing of the incoming prisoners.<sup>64</sup> They were relieved that the hundreds of thousands of prisoners brought to the United States were not uncontrollable individuals that would cause mayhem in and around the camps. Most of the prisoners were very obedient, especially to their own officers. The War Department soon saw this as a solution to what could have been a problem in the camps. The lower ranks were already trained to obey the higher ranked military officials, so control of the lower ranked prisoners was turned over to them.<sup>65</sup> This seemed to be a very helpful tactic in maintaining order and control inside the camp, and limited the number of escapes. Another factor that helped in reducing the number of escapees was the introduction of recreational and educational programs

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<sup>63</sup> Kramer, "German Prisoners of War in the United States," 69.

<sup>64</sup> Kramer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 114.

<sup>65</sup> Kramer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 115.



to incoming prisoners.<sup>66</sup> These programs were appealing to many of the prisoners, and kept their minds and bodies occupied, which in turn gave them less time to contemplate an escape attempt. The third factor that helped in maintaining control and reducing escape attempts was the simple fact that there was nowhere for the prisoners to go if they were successful at their attempt.<sup>67</sup> Many prisoners probably contemplated an escape attempt, but once they realized just how difficult it would be they set their minds on better things. Going north or south would just take them to the secure borders of Canada and Mexico, and east or west would just take them to the oceans; not to mention, they would not receive any sympathy from any Americans in passing.<sup>68</sup>

Though these factors helped a great deal in maintaining the control of the prisoners, there were still those who thought it worth the risk, and tried to escape, though most were caught within a day or less of their escape. By the summer of 1944, there had been a little over 1,000 escape attempts in camps across the country; but considering there were nearly 300,000 prisoners in camps across American, the ratio does not seem that bad. Once the escapees were captured, they were punished according to the Geneva Convention. Article 45 stipulated that administration pressure and disciplinary action were the two methods of punishment to be used, and they included a verbal reprimand, withdraw of privileges, discontinuance of pay, extra work, or hard labor.<sup>69</sup> There were more than 425,000 prisoners in the United States between the years of 1942 and 1946;

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<sup>66</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 115.

<sup>67</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 115.

<sup>68</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 115.

<sup>69</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 141-142.

nearly 3,000 escaped, and all were eventually recaptured except one, but I will save that story for a bit later. The success of the POW program depended greatly upon the security of those in, and outside of the camp; and thankfully, the problem of prisoner escapes never materialized into a great crisis.

## **The Reeducation of Hitler's Soldiers**

Once the war started coming to a close, Americans and the War Department began to ponder what to do with the prisoners who had spent their years in POW camps all across the United States. This was a very controversial subject and there was a great deal red tape involved. The War Department had the very strict Geneva Convention to adhere to, and the often-criticizing American public. Though it seemed that America and the forces of democracy would win the war, the future of how Germany's ideology would be affected by the outcome still remained.<sup>70</sup>

It seemed that many Americans were in favor of a reeducation program geared at teaching the Germans the ideals of democracy. Many Americans believed that if the Germans were educated on democracy, they would see the benefits and turn their back on the polluted Nazi form of government.<sup>71</sup> The reeducation of the German POW's seemed only logical, and almost a right, according to many Americans. A committee was formed in the spring of 1944 push for the reeducation of the prisoners, and their first priority was segregating the Nazis from the rest of

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<sup>70</sup> Kramer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 189.

<sup>71</sup> Kramer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 191.

the prisoners.<sup>72</sup> Segregating the true Nazis from the rest of the German POWs would allow for the proper reeducation of the men without the fear of Nazi's corrupting the minds of the other prisoners. The biggest controversy in the matter of reeducating the prisoners was the urgency. Many argued for the immediate reeducation of the Germans, while others argued that reeducation could only begin after Germany was defeated; however, the ultimate obstacle would be the War Department who did not see the sense in beginning a reeducation program during the little time the prisoners would remain in America.<sup>73</sup> Many Americans were critical of the War Department for not taking every opportunity to impress upon the Germans the benefits of a democracy. The government had been contemplating a reeducation program for some time, but it appeared as though they were in no hurry to initiate the program. The program was first discussed in early 1943, but was tabled for nearly an entire year.<sup>74</sup> It is uncertain why discussion about the matter was postponed for such a long time. It seemed obvious to most Americans that a reeducation program was not a priority of the War Department. Many Americans became frustrated with the unconcerned attitude of the War Department, and they began writing to the magazines and newspapers about the urgency of a reeducation program, eventually taking the issue to Eleanor Roosevelt, who seemed to be empathetic towards their cause, and she took it upon herself to speak to the president on the matter.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 192.

<sup>73</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 192-193.

<sup>74</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 194.

<sup>75</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 194-195.

After much controversy, and media attention, the War Department could no longer ignore the request for the reeducation of German prisoners. There were a couple of obstacles the War Department would have to face before a proper program could be implemented. First, the Geneva Convention had certain stipulations that would prohibit them from certain activities, which could hinder the establishment of such a program. The Geneva Convention was very strict, and the War Department had obeyed the rules outlined within since the POW program was established. They wanted to continue to do so for the safety of American troops still held captive overseas. The War Department knew that the German officials would not be happy if they started pushing American ideologies on their soldiers. It became obvious that the reeducation program would have to be done in secrecy. With so many qualified American soldiers still fighting overseas it was going to be very difficult to initiate a reeducation program. In April, after much debate, the Secretary of State wrote the Secretary of War suggesting that a reeducation program be established.<sup>76</sup>

The first, and most obvious problem the newly established reeducation program would face would be finding qualified staff for the project. Once the basic structure of the program was decided, the Provost Marshall General created the Prisoner of War Special Projects Division, and appointed Colonel Edward Davison as the head of this new program.<sup>77</sup> The hard part came when trying to find qualified staff with specific skills that would be useful to the Special Projects Division. The staff needed to be creative, innovative, and most importantly, they needed to be

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<sup>76</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 196.

<sup>77</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 196.

familiar with Nazi ideology. It was also necessary for many of those recruited to be fluent in German. Davison selected many highly educated men to help with the establishment of the program, and they quickly began laying out the plans for this assignment. The staff decided that the objective of the program would be to convince the prisoners that the Nazi ideology was malicious and unrealistic, and hopefully by helping them to understand the American ideals they would accept a democratic form of government.<sup>78</sup> However, this objective was going to be quite difficult to accomplish since they had to be very clandestine in their efforts. It was necessary for the program to be somewhat of a covert operation, because the War Department feared that if word of the German reeducation program reached the ears of German officials, American soldiers might suffer the consequences of a similar program geared toward teaching against democracy.

The Special Projects Division outlined ways in which to provide the prisoners with the proper reeducation without violating the Geneva Convention. The Geneva Convention stipulated that propaganda could not be forced on the prisoners. However, if their recreational and leisure activities were dotted with subtle truths about democracy then they were safe. It was decided that films, promoting democracy and the American way, would be available to the prisoners, books stressing Christian ideals would be placed in the libraries, and a national newspaper geared towards turning Nazis away from their corrupt form of government would be consistently available to the prisoners.<sup>79</sup> This appeared to be the only way to reeducate the prisoners without violating the rules of the Geneva Convention, or

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<sup>78</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 197.

<sup>79</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 197-198.

endangering the lives of American prisoners. The Special Projects Division could only hope that this program would be as successful as the other programs established by the War Department throughout the war.

The Special Projects Division had a list of qualities they wanted the staff to possess. "They had to be reasonably objective about the Germans they were going to instruct; they had to be patriotic but not irrationally so; they had to be fluent in German; they had to have a college education (preferably in liberal arts); and they had to have imagination and good judgment."<sup>80</sup> This proved to be especially difficult during the war with so many of the German-speaking personnel working overseas in Intelligence. Once they saw the difficulty in finding men with these qualifications, they decided to change the language requirement, and were able to get the personnel they needed in order to move on to the next step of training them for their future jobs.<sup>81</sup> Although this seemed to be the toughest obstacle the POW program would face throughout the war, the War Department was hopeful that it would have a lasting impact on the prisoners, as well as bring some sort of purpose to the Prisoner of War Program as a whole. If they were effective in reeducating the prisoners, and tearing away at their Nazi ideals, it could have a profound impact on Germany in the years following the war.

The training of the personnel for the reeducation program took place through a series of conferences, consisting of lectures and seminars, and by the end of the training there were a total of 262 officers and 111 enlisted men accepted.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 198.

<sup>81</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 198.

<sup>82</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 199.

The program now had an adequate number of personnel, and could begin ironing out the details of how to initiate the program. The program now had new people, perhaps with new ideas, and it was time to put those ideas into action. The Special Projects Division established a headquarters, called “The Factory”, where the new personnel could brainstorm ideas, and test their effectiveness on willing prisoners.<sup>83</sup> This project seemed to be flowing smoothly, despite some initial problems. It was also during the planning stages that several identified anti-Nazis volunteered to help with the program.<sup>84</sup> These prisoners could aid in stifling the resentment some of the more dedicated Nazi’s would have towards the program, not to mention they could all speak German. The Factory was organized into several sections. The film section’s priority was to review and recommend films for the prisoners that possessed democratic or anti-Nazi sentiments; the translation bureau translated surveys taken by the prisoners, as well as pamphlets prepared by the division; the camp administrative section was responsible for the supervision of the program; the review section evaluated an materials submitted for use; the newspaper section was in charge of reviewing all camp newspapers, and the national magazine section was responsible for the periodical published for the German prisoners.<sup>85</sup> Of course, all of this had to be done in secrecy, which would be a constant struggle for the Special Projects Division. They finally had everything in order, and their last and final step would be to introduce this program to the prisoners.

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<sup>83</sup> Carlson, 169.

<sup>84</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 201.

<sup>85</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 201-202.

Classrooms for instruction had already been established in most of the POW camps throughout the United States, and the Special Projects Division decided to take control of these classrooms to implement their reeducation program.<sup>86</sup> This made the transition to the program easier for the program, as well as the prisoners. The prisoners were already allotted literature and other diversions at their leisure, and now the newly created Review Section could control what kinds of literature the prisoners were reading. The Review Section quickly began replacing other books with ones that were more blatantly anti-Nazi, and more supportive of American democracy. In hopes of gaining prisoner interest, the Special Projects Division even began introducing works by famous German authors that had been banned in Germany.<sup>87</sup> This subtle approach seemed to be very successful, and the prisoners seemed very taken in by the new diversions. The Special Projects Division decided to write some of its own literature for the prisoners, and introduced booklets and other handouts outlining the history of America.<sup>88</sup> These booklets would be a great way to introduce important American ideals without offending the prisoners, or provoking them in any way.

Not only were books used as part of the reeducation program, but film and other forms of entertainment were used to promote their cause as well. The Film Section took on the project of reviewing and introducing new films to the prisoners, and as a result there were 115 motion pictures that gave the prisoners a positive

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<sup>86</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 206.

<sup>87</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 207.

<sup>88</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 208.



view of America and the achievements of American citizens.<sup>89</sup> Many of the prisoners enjoyed watching the films as one of their leisure activities, and this proved to be yet another way in which to educate the prisoners in secrecy, and without deliberately attacking the German way of life. Another, not so subtle method of reeducating the prisoners was showing the, so-called atrocity films to the POW's. Though one may think this would anger the prisoners, it actually did quite the opposite. Many of the prisoners were unaffected by the films. Some kept their eyes closed and ears covered during the viewing; however, some were seen wiping their eyes at the end of the film.<sup>90</sup> The prisoners appeared to feel guilty after viewing these types of films. The reeducation program used every type of outlet possible to indoctrinate the prisoners. Music, plays, sports, and even religion were saturated with anti-Nazi ideals, and it seemed to be working. Church attendance by the prisoners even rose dramatically between October 1944 and February 1945.<sup>91</sup> Only time would tell if these programs would have any lasting effects on the prisoners.

The reeducation program may have faced several issues at the beginning, such as the short time to plan and implement the program, and the fact that it had to be done in complete secrecy, but in the end the program proved to be a success. Though their secret came close to being revealed several times, the Special Projects Division did a great job of keeping the operation under wraps until May 28<sup>th</sup>, 1945

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<sup>89</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 209.

<sup>90</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 210.

<sup>91</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 211.

when the reality of an reeducation program was finally announced to the public.<sup>92</sup> Much media and public attention was paid to the program before its introduction, however after the existence of the program was announced it seemed that the end of the war had brought new concerns to the public's attention. Regardless, the time came to evaluate the program to see if it had any lasting effect on the prisoners. Many prisoners signed petitions calling on Germany's surrender; others renounced National Socialism, donated money to the American or German Red Cross, pledged their support of democracy, and some even volunteered to fight against the Japanese!<sup>93</sup> This illustrates the initial effect that the program had on the prisoners, but more interesting to the War Department were the lasting effects this program would have on the POW's. It was initially difficult to determine just how effective the program was; however they attempted to do so by taking a prisoner poll. A poll taken of over 22,000 prisoners concluded that 74 percent of German prisoners left with a positive view of democracy and positive feelings toward their captors, 33 percent were anti-Nazi and pro-democratic, 15 percent were not severely Nazi but were also not positive towards democracy, and only 10 percent were still radical Nazi's.<sup>94</sup> It appeared that the program did have some positive lasting effects on the prisoners, and Americans seemed to be satisfied, as well, with the success of the program. The war seemed to be at its end, and the last job of the Prisoner of War Program would be the repatriation of the German prisoners.

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<sup>92</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 212.

<sup>93</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 217.

<sup>94</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 224.

## Repatriation

On May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1945 the United States celebrated its victory over Europe, but V-E Day also brought about the question of what was next for the 400,000 German and Italian prisoners that had been detained here during the war. The War Department was unsure of how to handle this issue. The Geneva Convention did not offer much in the way of guidance, because it relied mostly on the experiences of the First World War, and America had not previously entered into a prisoner of war program.<sup>95</sup> America's Allies offered little help, so the War Department was to handle this situation entirely by their own ingenuity. This was a daunting task for the War Department, but it had to be done; and now that the war was over, it had to be done quickly. Their first job would be to figure out how to stop the flow of prisoners from overseas into the United States.<sup>96</sup> Troops had been continually pouring in since the United States invaded Normandy on June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1944, and now they had to figure how to reverse the situation.

After much debate, the War Department finally settled on a repatriation plan that they believed would solve their problem. They decided that German prisoners in the U.S. following the end of the war should be returned as soon as it was made possible (as outlined in the Geneva Convention), that Nazis and noncommissioned officers would be the last to be released, that able prisoners would be utilized throughout Europe where labor was needed, and that the remainder of them should

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<sup>95</sup> Kramer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 228.

<sup>96</sup> Kramer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 229.

be turned over to other European nations.<sup>97</sup> Of course, once the American public received news of this plan there was much debate, and many different opinions in regard to the prisoners' repatriation. Many Americans who rejected the idea of prisoner labor from the beginning demanded that the prisoners be returned to Germany immediately, while others saw it hazardous for the prisoners to return to an area full of devastation and chaos.<sup>98</sup> Europe was in shambles. The sight of all the devastation could trigger anger in the prisoners, which could have terrible consequences. On the same side, there were the farmers and other employers who were worried that they could not survive without the prisoner labor that kept their farms and businesses running over the duration of the war. After all the mixed opinions, debates, and dissension, the War Department finally issued a memorandum detailing its plans for the repatriation of the German prisoners.<sup>99</sup> They took public opinion into consideration when deciding the best route to take; after all there was no precedent on how to handle the repatriation of the prisoners. The War Department considered the need for prisoner labor, as well as the availability of shipping facilities, and fact that the return of the prisoners would depend fully on whether they could be received in Europe.<sup>100</sup>

The War Department faced public backlash when it was revealed that the most hard-core Nazi prisoners were to be the first to return to Europe (opposite of their original decision).<sup>101</sup> The War Department realized that the most fervent Nazis

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<sup>97</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 231.

<sup>98</sup> Carlson, 202.

<sup>99</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 235.

<sup>100</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 235.

<sup>101</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 236.

would not be useful, and wanted to hold on to those prisoners who were filling in the gaps in the work force as long as they could. Also, plans were being made to use the most effective workers in the rebuilding of Europe. The government tried to calm public fears by saying that all of the prisoners were still going to be held as prisoners with no privileges or freedom, but to no avail.<sup>102</sup> It did not seem fair to punish those prisoners who had been the most cooperative and useful during their time in the United States. Many prisoners were not sent directly back to Germany after repatriation; some remained in Britain or France for another year or more to help rebuild the war-ravaged countries.<sup>103</sup> The German prisoners were angered, but the labor was much needed in Europe for rebuilding, as well as filling in where there was a shortage in the labor force. The shortage of labor in the coalmines throughout Germany became a priority, and soon several thousand German prisoners were sent back to Europe to assist in this effort.<sup>104</sup> Though some progress was being made, it seemed as if the process was moving rather slowly; and there was still much debate revolving around the details of repatriation.

The War Department soon became aggravated with the slow pace of repatriation, so they issued a schedule and dates for the departure of the remaining prisoners in U.S. custody, and committed to having all prisoners repatriated by the spring of 1946.<sup>105</sup> Hundreds of POW's were being readied for repatriation, and they were provided with the basic necessities to take back home. "Each man, for example, was provided with a barracks bag, several woolen blankets, a first aid kit,

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<sup>102</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 236.

<sup>103</sup> Carlson, 201.

<sup>104</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 237.

<sup>105</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 238.

and eating utensils, though the War Department memo itself acknowledged that the real task was not that of providing them with the bare necessities of life but of preventing them from taking too many of their unnecessary belongings.”<sup>106</sup> The prisoners could have been sent back empty handed, but the War Department was still making all efforts to adhere to the Geneva Convention and to insure the safe return of American prisoners. Many prisoners had bought radios or other leisure items while in America, which were deemed unnecessary to return with the prisoners to Europe. The prisoners were obviously unhappy over this matter but, since the weight of their luggage was limited to a maximum of 30 pounds, they didn’t have much choice.<sup>107</sup>

The process was steadily speeding up, and the War Department was becoming more aware that this major undertaking was about to come to an end. Large numbers of German prisoners were beginning to be sent back to Europe, and just as when they first came into America, there was a process they had to go through before repatriation was complete. It was bittersweet for many of the POWs as they went through their final processing before returning home. Of course the prisoners longed to be home with their families, but once the reality set in that their time in the United States was coming to an end, many prisoners wanted to stay. The idea of returning to a Germany they would not recognize was often terrifying for the prisoners, who had not seen the full extent of the damage across Europe. Many prisoners had grown fond of the very country they were fighting against in the war. They had come to respect American ideals and the American way of life. They

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<sup>106</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 243.

<sup>107</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 244.

respected their employers, and considered them friends. In fact, many prisoners returned to America, once it was made possible. Guenter Mellage, a POW from North Carolina, returned to the state after the war to become a carpenter in High Point.<sup>108</sup> The prisoners had truly grown to admire the country that had been so merciful towards them during the war.

Camp Shanks, New York was the main Port of Embarkation, and where the prisoners boarded one final ship home.<sup>109</sup> The trip home was much like their trip to the United States after their initial capture. When they reached Europe they were teased by the fact that home was so close, because many would not see their homes and families for another 6 months or more. It was unimaginably hard for many of the prisoners once they were sent to work in the labor forces throughout Great Britain and France. On July 23, 1946, the last prisoners departed from the United States.<sup>110</sup> As the prisoners waved goodbye to the place they had come to admire, and America said goodbye to a very significant part of her history.

## **North Carolina and Camp Butner**

There were eighteen camps in North Carolina during World War II, the largest being Fort Bragg and Camp Butner.<sup>111</sup> North Carolina was one of the first states to house POWs during the war. Many of the prisoners were captured in North Africa from Rommel's Afrika Korps, and others from Normandy and other areas

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<sup>108</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 266.

<sup>109</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 245.

<sup>110</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 255.

<sup>111</sup> Robert D. Billinger Jr. *Nazi POWs in the Tar Heel State*. (Florida: University Press of Florida, 2008), 20.

throughout Europe. The first German prisoners in North Carolina were survivors from the submarine, U-352, that sank off the coast of Cape Lookout on May 9, 1942.<sup>112</sup> These prisoners spent time at several camps throughout the state, including Bragg, Davis, Sutton, Mackall, and Camp Butner.

Camp Butner was established on June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1942. Named after Major General Henry Wolfe Butner, it was a military base established for the training of American troops due to the imminence of the United States entering World War II. The camp included many ammunition ranges, a pistol range, and a flame-thrower training pad. The POW camp at Camp Butner was activated on September 7<sup>th</sup>, 1943, and commanded by Col. Thomas L. Alexander.<sup>113</sup> The camp spanned parts of three counties, including Durham, Granville, and Person. Ironically, the area where I live, Wilton, was the preferred site for the establishment of Camp Butner, but the area was not used due to much opposition from farmers and local residents. Tobacco was the primary crop in North Carolina during this time, but in the late nineteen thirties a disease plagued the tobacco crop in the Butner area, called the Granville Wilt by local farmers. This caused political leaders to turn their eye to the area that is now the town of Butner, and after much debate construction of the camp began in mid-1942. Though this was a military base for the training of soldiers, Camp Butner eventually housed the POW camp.

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<sup>112</sup> Billinger, xiv.

<sup>113</sup> Billinger, 58.



Camp Butner's initial prisoners arrived in May 1944 from Camp Jackson, South Carolina.<sup>114</sup> Camp Butner, like the rest of North Carolina, had a very diverse prisoner population with prisoners captured in North Africa, at Normandy, and in other parts of Europe. Camp Butner had six branch camps in the state, such as in Williamston, Winston-Salem, Wilmington, Seymour-Johnson, Ahoskie, and New Bern.<sup>115</sup> This allowed prisoner labor to be utilized throughout the state in areas hard hit by the labor shortage. By December 1944, there were a total of over four thousand prisoners in the Camp Butner system.<sup>116</sup> Camp Butner initially held a number of Italian prisoners, but they were soon replaced completely by German prisoners. The German prisoners were far different than the Italian prisoners and had to be handled in a very different manner. The issue of Nazism was soon faced by many of the camps that had previously only held Italians. Those with a strong Nazi allegiance needed to be separated from the rest of the prisoners to insure safety and camp order. Camp Butner had a unique group of prisoners. "Of the original POWs, 128 were kept in a separate compound... they were Russians, Czechs, Poles, Frenchmen, and Belgians who had served in the German army but who expressed a desire to join the Allies in the fight against Nazism."<sup>117</sup> There was a separate compound in most camps to hold the prisoners that may threaten order in

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<sup>114</sup> Robert D. Billinger, "Nazi POWs in the Tar Heel State," (ca. 2008), report on visit by Dr. R. W. Roth, Swiss Legation, and Eldon F. Nelson, Department of State, to the prisoner of war camp at Camp Butner, North Carolina, 28-29 June 1944, RG 389, Entry 461, Box 2657, quoted in Billinger.

<sup>115</sup> Billinger, 62.

<sup>116</sup> Robert D. Billinger, "Nazi POWs in the Tar Heel State," (ca. 2008), report of visit by Verner Tobler, Swiss Legation, and Carl Marcy, Department of State, to the prisoner of war camp at Camp Butner, North Carolina, on 11 December 1944, RG 59, Entry 1353, Lot 58D7, Box 23, quoted in Billinger.

<sup>117</sup> Billinger, 60.

the camps, or those with strong a Nazi allegiance. At Camp Butner, Compound C was considered the “Nazi Compound”.<sup>118</sup> Camp Butner was no stranger to the problems faced by many of the other camps across the country. Colonel Alexander, like many others, faced the issue of poor morale of the guards at Camp Butner. National policy sent the most qualified soldiers overseas, leaving those unfit for service overseas to stateside duty, and decreasing the performance and quality of the men left to guard the POWs.<sup>119</sup> Eventually, the men came to realize their importance to the war effort, and embraced their new vocation.

As mentioned earlier, with so many men serving overseas during the war, America faced a labor shortage. Farmers, who relied on their farms for food and resources, were hit the hardest. The prisoners at Camp Butner were utilized for labor in the surrounding area, especially on farms. According to the Burlington Daily Times-News, representatives from the War Manpower Commission, County Commissioners, and twenty-five representative farmers were present at a meeting to discuss the new labor program.<sup>120</sup> Many farmers were excited to have the extra help just in time for the harvest that might have otherwise been lost. “Half of the prisoners worked in the Camp Butner storerooms and in the kitchens of the Camp Butner General Hospital.”<sup>121</sup> The others were used to help ease the pains of the labor shortage by working with area tobacco farmers. My great-grandparents had

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<sup>118</sup> Billinger, 64.

<sup>119</sup> Billinger, 61.

<sup>120</sup> “German Prisoners of War Now Working On Farms In County,” *The Burlington Daily Times-News*, 23 June 1945, 7.

<sup>121</sup> Robert D. Billinger, “Nazi POWs in the Tar Heel State,” (ca. 2008), report of visit by Dr. Werner Bubb, International Committee of the Red Cross, to the prisoner of war camp at Camp Butner, North Carolina, 7, 17, and 18 June 1945, RG 59, Entry 1353, Lot 58D7, Box 23, quoted in Billinger.

two prisoners that worked on their farm priming tobacco. Johann and Walter were the two prisoners working on the farm, and they worked with my great-grandfather to do the work necessary to keep up a tobacco farm. Walter was the German who wrote the letter that was later found in my great-grandparents' house, the same house they lived in during the war. There were nearly two thousand POWs employed in the surrounding area during the war; many were used for post detail, but others were contracted out to private companies or farmers.<sup>122</sup> Usually the prisoners were sent out in groups, but like the two prisoners working for my great-grandparents, exceptions were often made. There were 218 working in the pulpwood industry, thirty-three worked in the chemical industry, fifty worked in agriculture, eight in food processing, and 110 were actually employed as mess attendants at Duke University, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.<sup>123</sup> Many civilians were worried that the use of prisoner labor would prevent returning soldiers from acquiring a job upon their return to the states. The military addressed this issue, and it was covered in many newspapers during the war, in hopes of reassuring the citizens that prisoner labor was a huge help and not a hindrance. The Burlington Daily Times-News contained a short bit noting that Col. Poole of Camp

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<sup>122</sup> Robert D. Billinger, "Nazi POWs in the Tar Heel State," (ca. 2008), report of visit by Emil Greuter of the Legation of Switzerland and Louis S.N. Phillipp, Department of State, to the prisoner of war camp at Camp Butner, North Carolina, 26-27 April 1945, RG 59, Entry 1353, Lot 58D7, Box 23, quoted in Billinger.

<sup>123</sup> Robert D. Billinger, "Nazi POWs in the Tar Heel State," (ca.2008), report of visit by Emil Greuter of the Legation of Switzerland and Louis S.N. Phillipp, Department of State, to the prisoner of war camp at Camp Butner, North Carolina, 26-27 April 1945, RG 59, Entry 1353, Lot 58D7, Box 23, quoted in Billinger.

Butner stated that it was the War Department's policy not to use prisoner labor where civilian labor was available.<sup>124</sup>

The forestry industry did not utilize as much POW labor because of its dangers. The Geneva Convention was strict with regard to the types of labor in which POW's could be utilized, and it stated that they should not be employed to do work that was extremely dangerous. Occasionally, the prisoners would stage strikes against POW labor, much to the annoyance of camp guards. Sometimes prisoners would refuse to work, such as the case of a group of prisoners from Camp Butner who refused to work in the Durham tobacco plant in 1944; they were confined in a guardhouse and reduced to short rations because of their behavior.<sup>125</sup> However, there were some that did work in forestry, and there were also some prisoners that died as a result. Sergeant Willi Schaeffer was struck by a falling limb and killed in June of 1945; his funeral was held at the military cemetery at Camp Butner.<sup>126</sup>

There were several prisoners that died during their internment at Camp Butner, and were buried at the camp cemetery. There were nineteen graves in North Carolina during the war, eight that are still at Fort Bragg and eleven at Camp Butner.<sup>127</sup> Most of the prisoner deaths were caused by illness or accidents while working, though some were suicides. Kilian Kernberger's death was investigated by

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<sup>124</sup> "P.O.W. No Barrier," *The Burlington Daily Times-News*, 27 July 1945, 9.

<sup>125</sup> Robert D. Billinger, "Nazi POWs in the Tar Heel State," (ca. 2008), in labor report, Camp Butner, North Carolina, 31 October 1944, RG 389, Entry 461, Box 2520, quoted in Billinger.

<sup>126</sup> Robert D. Billinger, "Nazi POWs in the Tar Heel State," (ca. 2008), translated in Fickle and Ellis, "POWs in the Piney Woods," 702, from *Der Aufbruch*, 8 July 1945, quoted in Billinger.

<sup>127</sup> Billinger, 181.

military authorities because it appeared as though some foul play could have been involved; however, after the investigation it was ruled a suicide.<sup>128</sup>

For the most part, the fears of camp uprisings and disorder were stifled by the good behavior of the prisoners; however, there were occasional instances where punishment was necessary. In March 1945, eighty-five prisoners were listed as receiving disciplinary action, this number was higher than usual, but not surprising considering that Camp Butner was home to over 2,000 prisoners that year.<sup>129</sup> Insubordination and refusal to work were probably the two most common behaviors that elicited disciplinary action. The prisoners could receive thirty days in prison, fourteen days of a restricted diet, or the withholding of pay for their actions.<sup>130</sup> There were relatively few prisoner escapes in North Carolina during the war. Of the escapes that did occur, most of the prisoners were caught within twenty-four hours or several days, though a few were fugitives much longer. Based on available documents, there were at least 29 escapes from camps throughout North Carolina, 22 of those being from Camp Butner.<sup>131</sup> This was not a bad statistic considering there were more than 10,000 German prisoners in the camps throughout the state. For the most part, the prisoners were treated far better than they probably expected and this could have kept the rate of escapes to a minimum.

The first escape in North Carolina was in July of 1944 when Helmut Haerberlein escaped from Camp Davis sometime during the night. He left a letter apologizing for his escape, but informing the guards that he wanted to explore the

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<sup>128</sup> "German Prisoner at Butner Found Dead," *The Robesonian*, 19 January 1945, 3.

<sup>129</sup> Billinger, 118.

<sup>130</sup> Billinger, 118.

<sup>131</sup> Billinger, 124.

United States, promising that he would not do any harm to anyone or anything, and that he would return voluntarily if not caught. "He added in the letter that he was once told that two weeks in America as a free man would make him never want to return home." After several months of empty leads and dead ends, Haeberlein's body was eventually found in the Hudson River in New Jersey; investigators detected no signs of foul play. Werner Friedrich Meier was the second prisoner to escape in North Carolina. He escaped from Camp Sutton, and was shot down by camp guards. His body was sent to Camp Butner to be buried in the POW cemetery.<sup>132</sup>

Another interesting story involving escaped prisoners was that of a trio of escapees from Camp Butner in September 1944. An Austrian, a Pole, and a Lithuanian were apprehended by two Durham police officers. The police officers were said to have captured the three fugitives before the camp guards even knew they had escaped. The nationalities of these men point to the fact that they were probably drafted into the German army out of territories controlled by Germany.<sup>133</sup>

The War Department wanted to keep the news of escapes a secret from the public, so as to suppress the fears of local residents. However, this was often hard to do, especially when local police officers captured the escaped prisoners. Often, the officers would be more willing to divulge information to local newspapers about the incident than would the FBI or War Department. There was another incident involving Gerd Roempke, who escaped from Camp Butner and attempted to swim

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<sup>132</sup> Billinger, 124-129.

<sup>133</sup> "Three War Prisoners Captured Here after Escape from Camp," *Durham Morning Herald-Sun*, 24 September 1944, 1.

across Lake Michie. Gerd Roempke had attempted an escape twice before, and each time was recaptured by local officers, much to the dismay of the FBI. A great effort was put forth to maintain the image that these were foreign workers who posed no threat to civilian life; however continuous newspaper articles on prisoner escapes did not aid the military in this matter.<sup>134</sup>

Perhaps the most interesting escape story is that of Kurt Rossmeisl, who was a fugitive for fourteen years. “Rossmeisl was a former member of Rommel’s 10<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division.” He was said to have pushed a wheelbarrow past several guards at Camp Butner, and then boarded a train to Chicago. He escaped in 1945 and turned himself into the FBI in Cincinnati in 1959. He had lived under the name Frank Ellis, and worked many jobs throughout his fourteen years as an escapee. He eventually became tired of looking over his shoulder, and decided to turn himself in.

Rossmeisl’s success at diverting authorities those fourteen years is owed, in part, to the fact that he could speak Italian, Russian, and Spanish, as well as English with a British accent.<sup>135</sup>

Like many other camps in the U.S, Camp Butner had certain luxuries for the well-behaved prisoners to enjoy. There were motion pictures played on occasion, they could take courses, check out books at the camp library, and they even formed an orchestra.<sup>136</sup> If the prisoners were lucky, they may have even had the privilege to view the famous weekend boxing matches at the Camp Butner sports arena, which is now used to host area recreational league basketball games. The POW camps in

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<sup>134</sup> “Recaptured Nazi Helps Look for Partner in Lake Michie,” *Durham Morning Herald-Sun*, 19 April 1945, 12.

<sup>135</sup> Krammer, 138-139.

<sup>136</sup> Billinger, 68.

the United States allowed many more freedoms to their prisoners than would be allowed by the German or Russian captors overseas. They were allowed to receive packages and send letters to their families at home. Many wrote of how they were safe, and enjoying their time in the States, though most wrote of their desire to return to Germany and their families. Walter V., one of the German prisoners that worked for my great-grandparents during the war wrote a letter to Klara, whom I have concluded to be his sister. The letter is not lengthy, but it expresses his desire to be reunited with his family, specifically his wife and child. The letter was kept in my great-grandparents attic for many years, and is now showing some signs of decay. The paper is now very thin, and is torn in several places. I had the letter translated, and minus a few gaps, all the information is present.

Dear Klara,

U.S.A Oct. 26, 1945

I want to quickly write you a few lines. I'm writing these lines outside. The chaplain is going to take it along to the post office. I'm okay. I hope you are well too. I am still well and healthy. One just wants to be home with wife and child. But we aren't so lucky. I don't know when we will be able to go home. And so we have to wait until the day comes when they send us home. Did you get my letter that I sent to you a week or so ago? I got your letter and also the address of the Red Cross. Thanks. If you want to come to me, (unclear writing) from home. One cannot write everything. If you want to visit me then you will have to write to the headquarters regarding the day you can come. My address here is

Walter V (unsure of last name)  
31g 1007872  
P.O.W. Camp Butner, Co. 8  
Camp Butner, NC

I am going to close now. The chaplain is waiting. I wish you well and hope to see you again soon, your brother, Walter.

Greetings to everyone, Walter<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Walter V., letter to sister, October 26, 1945.



Another soldier from Camp Butner, Walter Strchmeyer wrote home concerned for the safety of his family in a war torn Germany. He wrote to his assumed wife, Margaret, on October 8, 1944, and stated, "It is my wish that you can cope with the hardships and survive the days ahead."<sup>138</sup> Many prisoners felt guilty that they were being treated so well, while their families were suffering in Germany. No matter how well things may have been for the prisoners in America, they just wanted to go home.

Once victory for the Allies became evident, talk of a reorientation program in the camps caused much debate, as noted earlier. Camp Butner, of course, implemented the new program at their camp, as well. The Prisoner of War Special Projects Division was in charge of organizing this new program and introducing it to the camps. The plan was to create intellectual diversions, which the prisoners took advantage of, that would advocate democracy, and a respect for American ideals. This was a sly effort on the part of the Special Projects Division, and it was organized under complete secrecy. Not even the American public was aware of such a program, though many were calling for one. Camp Butner, began the new program, and seemed to have much success. Joseph H. Waxer and Richard Meyer of the Special Projects Division visited Camp Butner in 1945 to check on the progress of the new program, and they reported that Camp Butner was "cooperating wholeheartedly."<sup>139</sup> Films, books, newspapers, and radio programs were used in the

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<sup>138</sup> Walter Strchmeyer, letter to wife, October 8, 1944.

<sup>139</sup> Robert D. Billinger, "Nazi POWs in the Tar Heel State," (ca. 2008), quoted in a Field Service Report on visit to Prisoner of War Camp, Camp Butner, North Carolina, 7-10 April 1945, by First Lieutenants Joseph H. Waxer and Richard Mayer, RG 389, Entry 461, Box 2657, quoted in Billinger.

program, but some trickery had to be employed so that the prisoners believed they were absorbing this media of their own choosing. "More and more of them [films] would be about America's National Parks, its democratic form of government, or American heroes like Abraham Lincoln."<sup>140</sup> Nazi atrocity films were shown to the prisoners, and though the overall effect may have been less than hoped for, the initial effects on the prisoners are worth noting. A 25-minute atrocity film was shown to prisoners at Camp Butner, and after the film the prisoners burned their German uniforms disgraced by what their fellow Germans were doing overseas.<sup>141</sup> Many of the prisoners seemed surprised, and shocked by the images they were seeing, and many were brought to tears. Camp Butner also utilized professionals from area schools, such as UNC-Chapel Hill, to come and lecture to the prisoners about certain American ideals, and about foreign policy.<sup>142</sup> The prisoners seemed to be quite receptive of the new diversions, and very interested in learning more about the place they had spent many days during the war. Progress was being made, though it is hard to judge whether the changes would be permanent. The event that garnered the most attention at Camp Butner, and perhaps some controversy, was a political election, which proved that ninety-five percent of the German prisoners at Camp Butner were in favor of democracy.<sup>143</sup> This event was criticized, as well as praised, but there was no doubt that the program was having some success.

Repatriation was a longer process than many of the POWs expected. German POW's would still be in North Carolina until April 1946, and Camp Butner held

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<sup>140</sup> Billinger, 144.

<sup>141</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 210.

<sup>142</sup> Billinger, 144.

<sup>143</sup> Billinger, 145.

prisoners right up until the night before the camp was to be disbanded. Werner Lobback spent most of his years in Camp Aliceville in Alabama, but spent at least one night at Camp Butner before repatriation. He returned to the United States several years back to visit Camp Aliceville and other places he had been during his internment. He stopped by the State Archives in Raleigh, North Carolina, and in an interview with Sion H. Harrington, the military archivist, he talked about his time in the United States and at Camp Butner. He spoke of his last night in Camp Butner, and how he was surprised that the barbed wire had already been taken down. There was nothing to prevent the prisoners from escaping, but everyone knew that doing so would only delay their return home.<sup>144</sup>

Even when the prisoners left the United States, many of them were not sent home immediately. Many were utilized throughout France and Britain for rebuilding, and some lucky Germans were sent back to Germany because they possessed skills useful in helping rebuild Germany. Those who were citizens of the restored Austrian republic were allowed immediate repatriation to their homeland. Max Reiter, and Erich Moretti of Camp Butner were sent back to Austria to help rebuild their newly restored state.<sup>145</sup> Some of the prisoners were still property of the British army, and were sent back to Britain before they could go home to Germany. Fritz Teichmann was put on labor assignments throughout Yorkshire, and during his time in Britain he recalled spending Christmas in the home of Dr. G. A. Chase. Eventually, all of the prisoners were granted what they had wanted for so

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<sup>144</sup> Sion Harrington, interview with Werner Lobback, May 2004.

<sup>145</sup> Billinger, 173.

long.... freedom. They were allowed to go back to Germany, back to their homes, and back to their families. The war was over.

One of the most heartwarming stories of Camp Bunter is that of Erwin Harlfinger. His experience is a true testament to the true respect and kindness shown to many of the prisoners in Camp Butner during the war. Erwin Harlfinger was born in southern Germany in a town that is now a part of Poland. His parents died when he was very young, and he became an orphan. He attended school when he was a teenager, and after graduation signed up for the German Army. Harlfinger entered WWII when he was only 18, and was captured in 1945. He was sent to Camp Butner, and worked in the fields for a local farmer. Harlfinger said that the farmer would often invite the workers to breakfast before they started their work for the day, and he said that he has never forgotten the kindness shown to him by the Americans during his time in America. After the war was over, and he returned to Germany, he decided that he wanted to return to America. He moved to Richmond, Virginia in 1949, and took on several jobs until he suffered a collapsed lung. While he was hospitalized in Richmond, he was very curious and asked many questions. Someone asked if he wanted to be a doctor, and he said that he would like to, but would probably never make it. He decided to try anyway, and went on to graduate from what is now Virginia Commonwealth University; after which, he put himself through medical school. He became an American citizen, and also an obstetrician/gynecologist. His story testifies to the fact that even in the darkest

times in history, there still remains, at the heart of humanity, kindness. Even the worst enemies can become the friends.<sup>146</sup>

Camp Butner was disbanded following World War II, and is now a thriving town. Not much remains to remind residents of Butner's place in history, other than the concrete slabs in nearly every backyard where barracks were placed. There is a historical marker by Murdoch Center, an institution for the mentally disabled, that hints at Butner's rich past. The State Employees Credit Union of North Carolina, where I have worked on and off since high school, sits adjacent to the place where the camp headquarters were located. Until recently, one could still see the lonely sidewalk that would have led up to the front doors of the HQ, but now leads to the woods behind a local baseball field. The post office in Butner is, ironically, located in the same place as Camp Butner's post office was during the war. The Camp Hospital has since been turned into John Umstead hospital for the mentally ill. Perhaps most ironic is the fact that the exact location of the POW camp is now a large federal prison that houses the likes of Bernie Madoff. Few signs remain of the time when Camp Butner housed hundreds of soldiers preparing to fight in Europe, as well as thousands of German prisoners who were captured there.

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<sup>146</sup> Bill Lohmann, "Richmond Man Among German POW's Brought to U.S.," *Richmond Times Dispatch*, 23 September 2010.

## **Conclusion**

America's first attempt at a prisoner of war program was a success. The program helped ease the stateside pains of the war, such as the labor shortage. Also, the strict adherence to the Geneva Convention and fair treatment of the prisoners gave the enemy little reason to mistreat American prisoners. No one can argue that prisoner labor was not a great help during the war. The prisoner labor helped keep the American economy stable, and also allowed many men to go serve if they so chose. There may have been some debate regarding whether or not the good treatment of American-held German prisoners had any effect on the treatment of American prisoners overseas, but according to many soldiers on the front lines the benefits were apparent. Most German soldiers were aware of America's adherence to the Geneva Convention, and said that it became "a great factor in breaking down the morale of German troops and making them willing, even eager, to surrender."<sup>147</sup> It was no secret that the German prisoners in America had the better end of the deal, as far as POWs were concerned; however the Americans did not suffer as badly as the Russians, and that was something to be thankful for. During the war, Germany had a hard time obtaining the necessary resources to care for their own citizens, much less enemy prisoners. Medical supplies and food were hard to come by, which explains why the American POW did not have the same comforts afforded the German POWs. Germany was maintaining their end of the deal to the best of their ability, and despite the occasional violence against American prisoners, the War

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<sup>147</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 256.

Department seemed to be satisfied with the outcome. The American prisoners were treated as well as could be expected by a country that was losing the war. Though Germany may have pushed the envelope at times, the prisoners, by most reports, were guaranteed their basic rights.<sup>148</sup>

The years following the war were full of transitions. The many camps that housed the prisoners were no longer needed. Camp facilities were auctioned off, camp materials were taken by various government agencies, and the land was sold back to its previous owners or to the city.<sup>149</sup> Many of the camps buildings were utilized for hospitals or other institutions. With all these changes, the camps were all but forgotten. With the exception of broken foundations hidden by undergrowth, historical markers on the side of the road, and the few oral histories that remain, not much is left to remind us of the American experience during World War II.

Thankfully, there are those who live to preserve this history, and make it available to those who wish to know more about their local history. Hopefully through their efforts, these events will not just be another piece of history ignored, but they will help us gain a better understanding of our nation's history, as well as the history of the places we call home.

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<sup>148</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 259.

<sup>149</sup> Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 260.

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