WWII, Camp Alva remembered by former POWs

by Julie Johnson

In the flower of their youth, they were the creme de la creme of the nation. They fought for their country with all the passion and dedication of youth, often unaware of the complicated politics of war and ignorant of what anyone but their own troop was doing. They strived to be good soldiers because they were called by their country to be good soldiers.

"Back then, the Americans carried rifles on their shoulders. We prayed to our God for Germany to win the war. They prayed to their God for America to win the war. Now that I am old -- and I look back -- they were right," says one former prisoner.

The nine former German Prisoners of War of the North Africa Corps and several of the men who were their guards at Camp Alva met again Thursday for the first time in over 30 years.

At first the atmosphere was tense. It wasn't long, however, before members of the Alva Centennial Commission, host of the event; Veterans of Foreign Wars; a bevy of community leaders and interested Alvans were using the universal language of friendship. The former German POWs behaved like true tourists involving everyone in photos and telling war stories.

"I was too young to be a member of the Nazi party," said Werner Friderichs. "I was only 17 when I started in the Army at the beginning of the war. Later, Hitler took old men and young boys off the streets into the army." Most of the guards at the camp were close to the same age as the young German soldiers. "Back then, the Americans carried rifles on their shoulders," said one former prisoner. "We prayed to our God for Germany to win the war. They prayed to their God for America to win the war. Now that I am old -- and I look back -- they were right."

Following their capture, during the period of transfer to the camps, the young German soldiers often felt a deep sense of alienation. "On the trains going to the camps," said Max Woelfel, "the guards would look at us closely to see if we had horns." However, the concensus of the former POWs was that the guards in Camp Alva treated them "very well."

Why would a group of young men, whose only experience with America was spent behind barbed wire, want to return here? "It is very expensive," said Friderichs, "but I have to come. I want to come!"

Kurt Trummer, who organized the POW tours in 1984, has brought many of his comrades in arms to the United States. He began by posting notices in newspapers inquiring as to the whereabouts of men who served as prison guards. He then contacted leaders in communities to find out if the former POWs would be welcome to return to the communities where they had been interred.

Once Trummer had received letters of welcome, he contacted members of German veteran groups and informed them of his intention to form a tour group.

Returning to Alva was, for many of the men, like...
coming home. Their tales of post war experiences echo those of any young soldier who returns to his homeland; they spent the first months back reveling in the freedom to enjoy life as civilians. There was a difference, however.

"Many people in Germany," said Woelfel, "did not know anything about America or Americans other than as the enemy." Woelfel added that many of these people were bitter because they had not been totally aware of what was happening within the military.

Fridrichs and Emil Holtkamp told a story about "The Desert Fox" Erwin Rommel, a German field marshal and leader of the Afrika Corps.

At the first reunion of the corps' 35 years ago in Isalone, Westfalia, West Germany, Rommel's widow told the group of the circumstances surrounding Rommel's death. Fridrichs translated the story as told by Holtkamp.

"Rommel returned to Germany by way of the Normandy front, where he was wounded in the leg by an American fighter plane," Holtkamp said adding, "Rommel went home. There, 14 days later, a German officer from Hitler's headquarters called on the family. Rommel at that time belonged to the anti-Hitler group that called themselves July 17th."

Holtkamp continued, saying, "Rommel's 18-year-old son was rushed to Hitler in a car. He was told Rommel would either be killed or could commit suicide."

Rommel indeed shot himself with his own regular issue German officer's pistol.

Woelfel, who had been Rommel's driver, commented that this was part of the centuries old military tradition of Germany. Officers were allowed to make such a choice.

Rommel's son, Manfred Rommel, is now the Mayor of Stuttgart, according to Holtkamp and Fridrichs.

The attitude of the American guards toward the prisoners reflected the German tradition, according to one prisoner who said that the guards called the well-behaved prisoners "good soldiers," and the belligerent men "dirty Nazis."

"This is the first time I have seen, actually seen, the town," Fridrichs said of the tour the group was given Thursday. As a prisoner he had never actually seen the community of Alva. Many of the men had no concept of where they were in relation to the ocean.

"We were brought in the dark to the camp," he said, adding, "since we went to help in an ice plant and worked inside from 8 p.m. until 6 a.m., and then returned to the camp before daylight. I never saw either the town of Alva or the town where the ice plant was."

The ice plant which Friderichs referred to was located in Waynoka, 26 miles south of Alva. There was a side camp there where the prisoners iced down Santa Fe trains.

At the end of the war, Friderichs explained that all the prisoners were transferred to a camp in Louisiana. It was Christmas. The men were asked to tear all the German army insignia off their uniforms. Out of approximately 5,000 prisoners about 146 refused to perform this final act of renunciation. These men were separated from the rest of the prisoners and not allowed any special rations in celebration of the holiday.

"There was a soccer game going on behind the barracks," said Friderichs. "The ball was opened up, and several men put in some tobacco."

"Then," he paused before adding with a smile, "they kicked the ball over the fence to the other men."

Asked about their return home, which included stays of up to two years in England for some of the prisoners, the men said they were never treated better anywhere than they were in the American POW camps. On their return home, they said they behaved like most returning soldiers, throwing themselves into enjoying their freedom. However, when it came to sharing their impressions of America and Americans, they found few who could relate to their experiences.

The men retained contact with guards who had befriended them during the three-year period of the camp's existence. Many have had American visitors in their homes. For the former POWs, the "enemy" had become the ally.

"I don't know any Neo-Nazi," said Friderichs. "They take only from the bad side, not from the good side."

"They are crazies," he said, adding, "you have crazies here in America, too."

If there was a quiet moment during the day's activities, it was the time spent on the actual site of the camp one mile south of Alva. According to research conducted by Paul Kinzie, the camp covered one square mile.

The original barracks, constructed of sheet rock covered with tar paper, have all been dispersed as have most of the other buildings. Some are in use today as apartments in Alva. One building, the former recreation center, is still in use in Kiowa, Kan.

Now, the grass has covered almost all. Only a few landmarks of Camp Alva, and stories shared from the memories of old men on both sides of the ocean, remain.

**EMIL HOLTKAMP AND WERNER FRIDRICHIS received momentos of their return to Alva from Carolyn Leonard of Oklahoma City who attended the reception. Here the men received American flags.**
FORMER GERMAN POWS WHOSE PHOTOGRAPHS are now hanging in the Cherokee Strip Museum will be contacted, if possible, by the former POWs who visited Alva Thursday. The men also identified the artist who carved the Eagle in the museum's German POW Room. He, too, will be contacted and told of the whereabouts of his artwork.
Remembrances of Alva Camp told

By Patty Nusser
For the Alva Review-Courier

In 1978 I taped an interview with my brother-in-law, Edward (Eddie) Zalewski, about the two years he served as a military policeman at the Prisoner of War Camp. I write this bit of history as a memorial to Eddie, and in the words he spoke to me.

"I was drafted just after my 19th birthday. I was born in Pennsylvania, did basic training of 90 days at Fort Custer, Mich., where 60 of those days were spent in the hospital with pneumonia. From the hospital I went to Iran and Casablanca.

"My buddy I volunteered for an assignment we thought was to go looking for Rommel and his bunch. It turned out to be a trip back to the states on the ship Queen Mary as guards of German prisoners of war. There were about 300 guards, and the hold on the ship was full of the prisoners. The staterooms were our bunks. We served eight hours on duty and 24 hours off.

"As there were so many of them, the prisoners were fed two meals a day. It was impossible to feed them three meals a day. There was continuous cooking on the ship.

"We docked at Boston, Mass. The prisoners were taken to Indian Town Gap, in Pennsylvania, a prisoner of war camp.

"Three days on the ship, and then we were put on a troop train, headed somewhere, we thought it was going to be St. Louis, Mo. Somehow we ended back in Chicago, Ill., a second time as the train got switched around. The windows were covered with black curtains, and we were not to look out, and no one could look in.

"After five days and six nights, we peeked out the windows and stopped. The depot sign said, Alva. My buddy and I thought, 'Where in the hell is Alva!'

"It was August, 1943. Trucks were waiting to take us to Camp Alva from the depot. I will never forget that trip to the camp. The wind was blowing, and it was hot and dry! The tumble weeds were rolling across the bare field, where the camp was built. I had never seen anything like it.

"I called my mother in Pennsylvania. She said, 'Where are you?' I told her Alva, Oklahoma, and her replay was, 'Watch the Indians; don't let them shoot you with their bows and arrows!'

"In Pennsylvania we never heard much about Oklahoma. Even up to the 80's and 40's we thought of it as being Indian Territory.

"The barracks at the camp were all built very plain. Wooden frame buildings with tar paper on the outside and heated with coal burning stoves. They were never too hot in winter or too cool in summer.

"The prisoners had all the same comforts the GI's had.

"The toilet and showers were located in separate buildings from the sleeping quarters. Separate barracks were used according to rank- Privates, Sergeants and Officers.

"War time was ration time. The prisoners got the same rations we did. We were allowed a certain amount of foods such as sugar, coffee, meat and butter.

"I remember along in the fall the Germans would start saving their sugar and butter and during the Christmas holidays they would bake all kinds of good smelling cookies, cakes and sweeties. They had their own kitchen and did their own cooking.

"My parents were of Polish blood and spoke the language, so some of the prisoners spoke to me in Polish, and I could understand them.

"Most of them were easy to handle. Some said they were glad to be out of the war and never wanted to go to war.

"We got in one batch of prisoners, and the camp they were in before being sent to Camp Alva had allowed them to send to Sears Roebuck and Company and order pets. Several of them had dogs when they arrived. Our commander gave orders to gather up the pets and take them to the city pound and destroy them. I spotted a young female German shepherd dog about to have puppies. The German prisoner wanted me to take her. I asked the commander if I could, and he said what would you do with her? I told him my wife lived a short distance away, and if he would let me, I could take the dog to the house. He told me to get going and get back to camp fast.

"The prisoner told his dog that I would be the master now and to go with me. I have a picture of her, and we named her Lady.

"One of the prisoners made me a ring out of a silver dollar which has P.O.W. Camp, Alva, Ok., written on it. I gave the ring to my son. He still has it.

"A number of escapes were carried out during my days at the camp. Once when I was on guard duty, two got away but were captured before they got far.

"One of my duties was to help escort and guard while prisoners were used to load scrap iron onto railroad cars to be sent off to make war weapons. This was not a pleasant job for the prisoners as they knew it meant bombing their homeland. I saw some crying as they worked.

"We marched the new arrivals from the train depot to the camp to start with but because the march turned into a parade for the townspeople and was dangerous, we started unload ing the prisoners at the Noel stop and marching them east to the camp.

"They (the prisoners) were also sent to work loading ice on the rail cars at Waynoka and work in other towns and at the grounds of the camp.

"In the spring of 1945 I was transferred to another camp. The war ended in the summer, and Camp Alva was closed in the fall."
by Marianne Price

It was over 40 years ago that Pvt. Clyde H. "Herb" Barrett, a young man born and raised in Muncie, Ind., was assigned by the U.S. Army as a guard at a prisoner-of-war camp for Germans on the wide-open Oklahoma prairie.

This unlikely assignment, in an unlikely setting, was one of the most vivid war memories for Barrett, as well as the many other G.I.s from all across the nation who were shipped to Alva to pull duty at the internment camp south of town.

Barrett, a retired tool and die maker from General Motors, and his wife, Ila, were in Alva earlier this week to relive some of those experiences during the war years. They visited the site of the POW camp and then toured the Cimarron Strip Museum where some of the memorabilia from the prison camp is housed.

During World War II, Barrett was assigned to non-combat service after he suffered hearing loss from an accident in Basic Training. He and his wife, Ila, were transferred in September of 1944 to the Alva prisoner-of-war camp where Barrett served as a guard in one of the many towers overlooking the prisoners' compounds.

Barrett said most of the prisoners there were "hard-core Nazis," who were either German officers or had been trouble-makers at other prisoner-of-war camps and were shipped to Alva. Later, as Germany suffered more defeats, the camp began receiving German boys as young as 15 and 16-years-old who had been conscripted for military service.

The prisoners were contained in three large compounds surrounded by double fences made of chain link with barbed wire on top. Wooden barracks as long as 100 feet housed the several thousand German prisoners of war at the Alva camp.

The Barretts have some vivid memories of the German soldiers, who outnumbered the population of Alva.

Ila remembers watching them march from the train station to the prison compound. "They'd march the goose step the whole way and a lot of them didn't have shoes on their feet. Many had burlap wrapped around their feet, which is what they were wearing when they were captured. They stayed in step all the way to the camp and they never missed a beat."

Once inside the compound, they continued with their military regimen. "They were always marching, drilling, running with full field pack," Herb remembers.

The German soldiers during the early months of the camp expressed optimism their side would prevail. Herb said "They'd tell the guards one day you'll be down here (in the prison compound) and we'll be the ones up there."

Conflicts between prisoners began occurring when some of the newer prisoners arrived and began telling others that Germany was losing the war. "Those S.S. troopers didn't want to hear that. They fought every night and put a lot of the younger boys in the hospital," Barrett said.
Leaves a Mystery

POW Art Work

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Emily's, a 4-year-old cow, did not get back to Germany and the Heartland of one POW who wrote of his experience. What happened to the POW camp? Was it a 40-year-old camp, or just a 40-year-old experience? The POW camp was called Camp 8, and the POWs were housed in three rows of buildings. The camp was located on a farm, and the POWs were housed in the buildings. The camp was also a place where POWs could go to play sports, and they could also get fresh air and exercise.

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ALVA, OKLAHOMA
THE FIRST 100 YEARS
1886 – 1986

by
Seekers of Oklahoma Heritage Association

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ISBN 0-88108-075-0
J.L. Reed, Musician Second Class Honorable Discharge from the United States Navy.


thing more ominous once stood at the site
The camp was authorized on June 30, 194

Samuel Heasley, Seaman – Honorable Discharge from the United States Navy

NAZILAGER ALVA T121

The one prisoner of war camp in Oklahoma during the Second World War that seems to have been best known to PWs in other camps, not only in Oklahoma, was the one at Alva, which they called the "Nazilager" (Nazi camp). It was the "Devil's Island" or the "Alcatraz" of the prisoner of war system in the United States and just the threat of being sent there could cause even the most recalcitrant PW to quake in his boots. It was built to hold only Nazis and their hard-core sympathizers. When even the Camp Commander of the Papago Park PW Camp, near Phoenix, Arizona, had a small, high-security compound built to hold some especially troublesome and escape-prone PWs, he call it "Little Alva".

The Alva PW Camp stood south of town on the west side of highway 281 in the area now used by the airport and the fairgrounds. Little evidence of the camp remains, except for a lonely chimney, an old military-looking building used by the VFW, and a hulking concrete tower, but they suggest that some-

only that some type of military post was going up and it was not until later that they learned that they were getting a camp to hold the most rabid of the German prisoners of war.

By September 15, 1942, the camp was well under construction with a completion date of November 15. Captain Harry C. Tremblay, newly commissioned from Master Sergeant, was sent in to represent the Army until a regular Camp Commander could be named. On November 10 Capt. Tremblay announced to the press that the camp would hold German PWs, would be open on December 15, and 600 American troops would be stationed there as guards.

Recreation Hall of Alva Prisoner of War Camp. Now located at Kiowa, Kansas, and used by the Kiowa American Legion as their meeting hall. Photo courtesy of Millard and Louise Curtis.

The Army took over from the civilian contractors on November 15 and the American troops started to arrive. The first to show up were twenty-five men of the Quartermaster Corps under the command of Lieutenant Luther Guess and Oscar B. Cruell and six men of the Medical Corps under the command of Lt. Ephraim Lubitz.

The December 15 opening date came and went with no sign of American guards or German PWs, but Lieutenant Colonel H.R. Roberts was now on the scene as the Camp Commander.

On January 3, 1943, Lts. Joseph Moses and Dwight Slavens arrived from Ft. Bliss, Texas, with 140 men of the 401st MP Escort Guard Company. On April 18 a second MP Escort Guard Company arrived, the 391st from Camp McClain, Mississippi, under the command of Lts. Ruper Powell, Jerry Wise, and Lewis A. Erbs, but still there were no German PWs.

May approached and a second opening date was set for May 2. Lt. Col. Roberts was transferred to a camp at Ft. Reno, Oklahoma, and Colonel A.M. Risdon was brought in as Camp Commander. Col. Risdon was only there for a short time before he was transferred to another camp at Hereford, Texas, and Col. Ralph Hall became the third Camp Commander. It was about this time that Lt. Col. Cecil E. Tolle of the Medical Corps arrived to take charge of the hospital.

The first nineteen German PWs arrived on July 31, 1943. This small group was likely trucked to the camp, but when the PWs started to arrive by the train-load, they were marched to the camp. A regular march route was set up for these movements. The newspaper reported long columns of PWs marching in complete silence, looking neither to the right, nor to the left, each man carrying his personal belongings in a small bag. The only sounds were the clop-clop of their boots and the commands to turn when a corner was reached. The streets were lined with armed guards and anxious civilians who stared from behind them at the examples of the “Master Race”.

It is unlikely that the spectators could smell the passing PWs, but Millard Curtis and Leo Meyer, both former guards, recall that they had a strong odor when they first arrived. From the time of their capture until their arrival at Alva, the PWs had not had the

Guard Tower that was located on the northwest corner of the Prisoner of War Compound. Courtesy Jack and Helen Martin.

Millard Curtis at Sign Entrance of Alva Prison of War Camp 1945. Photo courtesy of Millard Curtis.
were, it was reasonable to expect some deaths from natural and other causes. Klaus Eberhard Bork died from peritonitis on August 24, 1944, and Englebert Mayr died from a heart attack on April 23, 1945. There were two questionable suicides. Erwin Grams was found hanged on November 17, 1944, and Erich Schindler was found in the same condition on September 17, 1945, as the camp was being closed. One prisoner, Emil Minotti, was shot and killed during an escape attempt on July 6, 1944. He was the only PW killed in an escape attempt in Oklahoma. The two guards who shot him were tried, acquitted, and transferred to another camp.

There was a small cemetery at the camp for dead PWs. It was located on the west side of Washington Avenue, just south of the last fence of the compounds. After the war the dead were permanently buried in the Post Cemetery at Ft. Reno. This cemetery holds sixty-six PWs, both German and Italian, as well as two German aliens who died in one of the Oklahoma alien internment camps. Not all of the men who are buried at Ft. Reno died in Oklahoma camps, but were moved from PW camps in nearby states.

After VE Day the PWs started to be shipped home, but there were still 2,192 of them at the Alva PW Camp on September 16, 1945. The bulk of them were shipped out before October 1 when there were only forty-five remaining. On September 30, Col. H.S. Richardson, the Camp Commander, had announced that the camp would soon be closed. By October 15 all the PWs were gone. On November 15 Capt. Pat Arnim, the final Camp Commander, officially closed the camp.

A surprisingly large number of guards at the Alva PW Camp have connections with Alva even now. Some were from Alva before the war and others married women from Alva and settled down there.

by Richard S. Warner

THE VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES - BLACK WING POST 2847 ALVA, OK

The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States was founded in the year of our Lord, 1899.

The Black Wing Post 2847, Alva, OK, of Veterans of Foreign Wars, was mustered in and became a chartered post on August 21, 1933. James D. Beem was the first commander of 57 comrades whose names appear on the original charter.

There have been 38 Commanders of the Post from 1933 to 1986, some serving more than 1 years. The most recent Commander is Henry D. Evans whose tenure expires April 30, 1987.

The Post became inactive at the beginning of World War II, December 7, 1941. Throughout the war years, one man, Floyd E. Moore, maintained Post continuity by serving as