

# Escape FROM Papago Park

*A half century ago, twenty-five German sailors made international news by burrowing an elaborate tunnel and sneaking out of a local POW camp – just to find out that the only thing worse than prison was living in the desert.*

BY PAT MURPHY

**A**bout the time Brigadier General Anthony McAuliffe barked his gloriously defiant "Nuts!" to German demands for surrender of the besieged, bedraggled American garrison at Bastogne in December 1944, a German submarine commander imprisoned a half a world away in a prisoner-of-war camp in Arizona demonstrated his own defiance to his American captors.

On December 22, 1944, German U-boat Kapitän Jürgen Wattenberg, then forty-three, presided over the escape of Germans held captive in a POW camp in Papago Park on the outskirts of downtown Phoenix.

Although General McAuliffe's "Nuts!" at the Battle of the Bulge remains the most colorfully spoken bravado of World War II, Kapitän Wattenberg's escape had its own fearless daring: it was the greatest escape of Axis POWs in World War II.

Indeed. Not only was the flight of twenty-five Germans a marvel of deception and courage, but also of imagination and engineering that fifty years later still inspires awe and admiration.

If digging the tunnel was considered impossible, the success of German U-boat crewmen fleeing into hostile, unfamiliar desert was deemed equally improbable.

To pull off this caper, German sailors labored for more than three months excavating a 178-foot long tunnel through pockets of almost impenetrable caliche earth, at one point fourteen feet beneath the POW camp at Papago Park. If their luck held, they'd come out on the west bank of the Arizona Cross Cut Canal, a few feet beyond their barbed-wire enclosure, and avoid detection by guards in sentry towers.

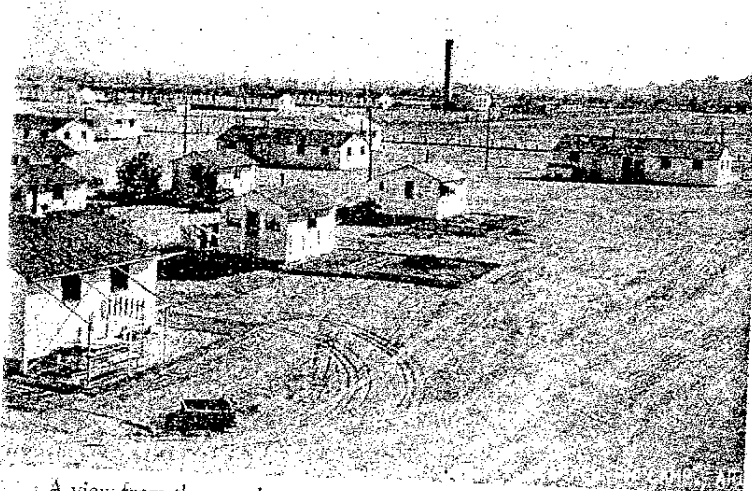
Around nine o'clock on the rainy, cold, bone-chilling night of December 23, 1944, as guards turned their attention to boisterous, bottle-smashing POWs celebrating radio reports of German victories in Europe, the escape began.

Kapitän Wattenberg and his men crept out of their box-like wooden barracks, slipped down into a small, crude shaft and crawled in groups of two and three to freedom. The last escapee was free by 2:30 a.m. December 24.

Not until seventeen hours later did astonished camp guards confirm the embarrassing escape, and only then because one escapee, twenty-two-year-old Herbert Fuchs, surrendered. Chilled by the wintry December rain and frightened by the strangeness of foreign surroundings in wartime Phoenix, he hitched a ride into Phoenix and turned himself in at the Maricopa County sheriff's office.

If laxity of American guards and ingenuity of German tunnel engineering made the escape possible, the difficulty of slipping by suspicious Arizonans, however, would become the ultimate obstacle.

The mastermind of the Papago Park breakout, Kapitän Wattenberg, was of the career military elite: once the navigation officer of the giant German pocket battleship *Graf Spee*, he'd been given command of the submarine U-162.



A view from the guard tower into the German Officer's Compound (Compound 5) at Papago Park during World War II. The building with the tall chimney is the camp power plant.



Courtesy Steve Hoza

Looking south at Compound 2.

While on combat patrol on September 3, 1942, prowling Caribbean sea lanes near Trinidad in search of Allied vessels to torpedo, Wattenberg sighted the British destroyer *HMS Pathfinder*, and decided to attack — discovering too late that two other destroyers were nearby.

For seven hours, Wattenberg put the U-162 through elaborate undersea evasive tactics trying to elude the attackers. But U-162 finally was crippled by depth charges. It surfaced and surrendered the crew, but then sank when internal explosives were set off to scuttle the sub.

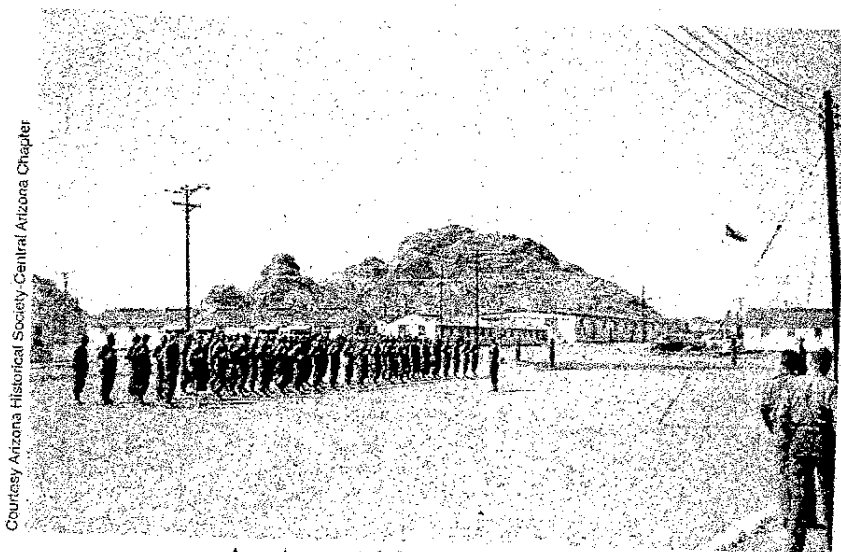
After imprisonment in other POW camps in the eastern United States, Wattenberg and 116 other Germans were transferred to the Papago Park POW camp outside Phoenix on January 27, 1944.

Germans accustomed to life in the churning Atlantic Ocean and Caribbean Sea found the Arizona desert dreary, inhospitable and uninviting. But a POW camp in Arizona had a purpose: it was far from any seaport with which Wattenberg or other U-boat captains might be familiar, and to which they might try to flee and rendezvous with a submarine. Plus, Arizona's caliche earth, according to U.S. Army officers, was impossible to tunnel, a boast that proved embarrassing and key to Wattenberg's escape plans.

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Picturesque today as a park and sightseeing attraction with tidy residential neighborhoods, the Papago Park area in World War II days was a landscape eyesore. A bivouac area for the Arizona National Guard after World War I, it was a Civilian Conservation Corps encampment in the 1930s.

With World War II demands for military bases, Papago Park was commandeered and set aside for the 364th Infantry Regiment, which, in one of those illogical decisions for which the military is notorious, later was shipped from the comforting warmth of Arizona to frigid duty in Alaska.



Courtesy Arizona Historical Society, Central Arizona Chapter

American guards lining up for inspection.

Germany's battlefield defeats increased, and with them the surrender or capture of more thousands of Germans. POW camps were urgently needed. The Ninth U.S. Army Service Command designated Papago Park and several other Arizona locations as POW campsites.

Yet, even as defeat loomed in 1944, and despite utter isolation as a prisoner in the Arizona desert, Kapitän Wattenberg instinctively turned to thoughts of escape: it was unthinkable for an officer of his heritage and honor to passively accept imprisonment, no matter the futility of escape.

The Papago Park POW camp held as many as 2,500 prisoners, many hardened and unbowed despite captivity. Some of them produced crudely drawn anti-Semitic and pro-German propaganda leaflets they'd scatter along roads and streets when riding in trucks to work on farms.

For politically unaware school children of the area, the presence of POWs spawned a new school fad: painting the letters "POW" on sweatshirts, a practice quickly discouraged by teachers fearing youngsters might be wrongly suspected of being escaped prisoners.

Once he settled in the camp and his plans for escape beginning to hatch, the wily Wattenberg discovered an ally in his jailers: an easy-going, almost naive, American complacency and trust.

Wattenberg exploited this: he suggested to camp officers his men needed recreation, maybe a "faustball field" for volleyball games, and part of the campaign to ingratiate themselves with Americans involved prisoners crafting delicate replicas of the Iron Cross medal out of scrap metal for prison guards.

The American camp staff not only saw no harm in that, but made the first unwitting contribution toward the escape: a pile of dirt and an assortment of garden tools for building a playing field.

The escape tunnel began outside a bathhouse, where a movable coal bin concealed the 180-foot tunnel's entrance shaft.

While one man dug with garden implements supplied by helpful American overseers at the camp, another hauled dirt to a third man who disposed of the dirt spread on the "faustball field" that had become the shield for all the German "construction" activity.

Emboldened by their undetected tunneling success, several of Wattenberg's escape team became utterly brazen. They built and tested in a man-made pond a small collapsible raft to float down the Gila River to the Colorado River and out to the Gulf of Mexico.

Ingenious — except no water was being released from Coolidge Dam, and the raft was later abandoned by three escapees on the Gila south of Cashion.

Once completed, the tunnel was tested. A German POW crawled to the opening on the Cross Cut Canal Bank at what now would be near Sheridan and Sixty-sixth streets, reporting to Wattenberg he encountered no difficulties, and could have kept going.

Wattenberg ordered the escape to begin the night of December 23.

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Prisoners of war are an inventive and daring lot, as audiences who saw the 1953 film classic, *Stalag 17*, remember,



Some of the men identified as escapees in late 1944 including Kapitän Wattenberg (standing at center).

Courtesy Steve Hozz

and Jürgen Wattenberg and his fellow escapees were of the same mind and skills.

Between August and the December escape day, while tunneling was under way, they dyed khaki camp uniforms blue to appear more civilian. They squirreled away small amounts of money earned from work details on farms outside the POW camp and from handicrafts they sold to guards.

One team of escapees filched a compass from an American vehicle.

And they'd put together small escape kits stuffed with packets of dried bread crumbs.

For all that, however, the escape began failing within hours.

After Fuchs' surrender to escape the cold rain and unfamiliarity of his surroundings, two more escapees surrendered to a homemaker at the door of her Tempe house about 7:30 p.m. on Christmas Eve.

One more surrendered a few hours later to a different Tempe homeowner, and another at the Tempe railroad depot about the same time.

In the days that followed, other escapees were captured as they tried to make their way to Mexico, sometimes with astonishing results.

The first question asked by one escapee, Kapitän Leutnant Friedrich Guggenberger upon capture, was whether *Don't Fence Me In* was still Number One on the Hit Parade radio program. He'd made a bet it would be for another month.

Indicative of his cunning and refusal to even consider surrender, Wattenberg and two U-162 crewmen, Walter Kozur and Johann Kremer, defied capture by literally hundreds of searchers from the Army and the FBI, as well as thousands of Phoenixians who'd heard of the escape on Walter Winchell's nationwide radio news program, and read bold black headlines such as "Wholesale Nazi Escape



Newspaper headlines promised a \$25 reward for apprehension of an escapee.

Screens 'Big Shot's' Flight," in the Phoenix newspapers.

Wattenberg and the two others made their way from Papago Park to what is now the Clearwater Hills area of Paradise Valley, and holed up east of Squaw Peak. From there, they'd venture forth to pick citrus from residential groves and steal newspapers from vending racks.

Brazenness would not desert the Germans, even now. One of them, Kremer, left the safety of the cave, and joined a work detail returning to the POW camp to pick up more provisions. Alas, he was caught during a surprise inspection of the German barracks.

The other, Kozur, was apprehended by several American soldiers when he ventured out again for more food.

Wattenberg was left as the lone escapee, and here it was a month since he'd fled.

His daring was no less intrepid at this lonely moment.

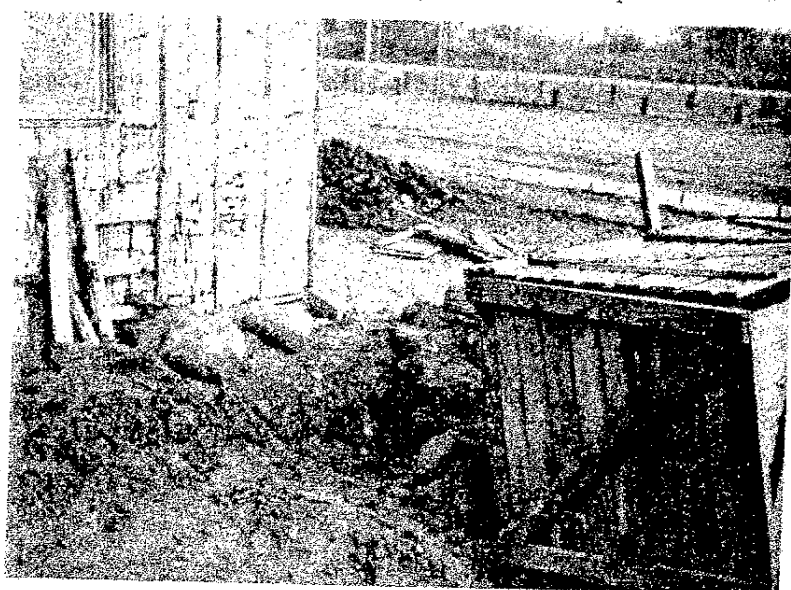
He spoke English and Spanish, and thus believed he'd have little difficulty in navigating the Arizona culture. As it turned out, Arizona geography stumped him.

Wattenberg left the cave, and walked into Phoenix, contemplating several tactics.

Could he get a job as a dishwasher? Or, after scanning a newspaper's church pages, should he seek out a Catholic priest and hope for help in the confidentiality of confession?

In the central business district of downtown Phoenix, Wattenberg went to the American Kitchen. In his crisp, cultured English with the slightest discernible accent, he ordered beef noodle soup and a beer, and glanced at a discarded copy of *The Phoenix Gazette*.

Unable to find a vacancy in any hotel, Wattenberg went to the lobby of the downtown Adams Hotel, slumped in a chair, and soon was asleep.



The entrance to the tunnel.



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At 1:30 a.m., on Sunday, January 28, he awoke with a bellhop staring at him.

The daring that had seen Wattenberg through was now turning to foolhardiness.

Leaving the Adams Hotel, Wattenberg stopped a city street worker, Clarence Cherry, and asked for directions to the Phoenix railroad station, where the German hoped to find an empty boxcar in which to sleep until he could come up with a new strategy to continue the escape.

Cherry pointed, and Wattenberg began the walk westward along Van Buren to Third Avenue.

Moments later, Phoenix police Sergeant Gilbert Brady was stopped by street worker Cherry, who'd pondered the stranger asking directions. Cherry mentioned the man with the Germanic accent to Sergeant Brady.

The police officer caught up with Wattenberg, and asked for his Selective Service card.

Calmly and coolly, Wattenberg said he'd left it at home, in Glendale.

"Glendale, Arizona, or Glendale, California?" Sergeant Brady asked Wattenberg.

"Uh, Glendale, back east," Wattenberg replied.

Wattenberg's geographical blunder, so reminiscent of word association tests American GIs are said to have used

during World War II to detect Germans posing as Americans, tripped him up.

He thereupon confessed he was the "big shot" POW escapee being sought.

Thus, with Jürgen Wattenberg's capture on the thirty-sixth day, ended the greatest escape of Axis POWs from a U.S. compound during World War II.

Kapitän Wattenberg was interned in a different POW compound, denied customary privileges, and subjected to bread and water rations, the severity of his punishment perhaps partly for the embarrassment he caused his keepers with his daring and elusiveness.

A year later, in March 1946, he was repatriated.

Some forty years after his escape, in 1985, retired Kapitän Jürgen Wattenberg returned to Papago Park along with eight other former POWs to revisit the area where they were imprisoned, and to dedicate a plaque commemorating their daring escape.

Today, frail at ninety-four years old, Wattenberg lives in Hamburg, Germany, still chuckling with nostalgia about the American city where newspapers called him the "big shot."

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Free-lance writer Pat Murphy hosts a talk show on KTAR Radio and is a frequent contributor to PHOENIX Magazine.

## Fifty Years Later...

For former Army colonel and retired *Phoenix Gazette* reporter Lloyd Clark, the dramatic escape of twenty-five Germans from the Papago Park POW compound has become a consuming passion for four decades.

Clark, who was the source for this story, is not only the acknowledged historian/biographer of the famed event and the escape's American expert, he also devised and coordinated the first reunions of German escapees in Phoenix in January 1985.

Clark's fascination with the story began in 1954, when his editor assigned him to a feature on the tenth anniversary of the escape — an event about which he'd never heard.

In time, ironically, the "greatest escape" also forged one of post-World War II's most enduring friendships between onetime enemies, and created a series of nostalgic reunions in Phoenix that continue today.

Clark recalls a long conversation with Kapitän Jürgen Wattenberg, the former German U-boat commander, in which he said: "Strange we have to kill each other before we become friends."

During the first reunion organized by Clark, the new German-American friendship seemed doomed for a moment when Clark and several of the World

War II escapees stopped in upstate Ash Fork for lunch while touring Arizona.

A burly former American merchant marine, described by Clark as having tattoos up and down his arm and the attitude of a wrestler, whose ship had been sunk by a German submarine, was told there was a former U-boat commander in the group.

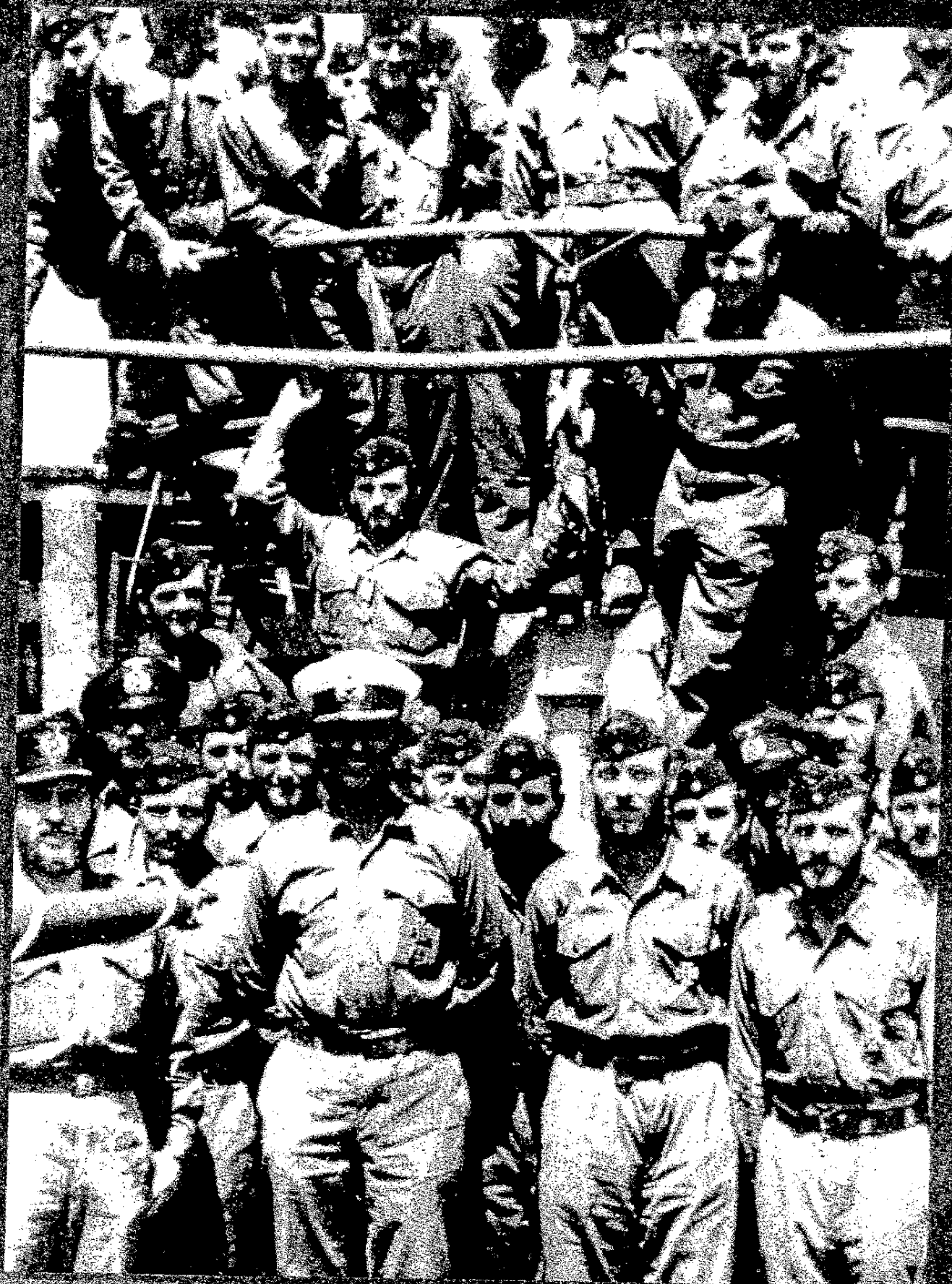
"I've been waiting for this for forty years," the man said robustly, and Clark thought a fight would erupt on the spot.

Instead, the man threw his arms around Wattenberg in a bear hug, saying he wouldn't be alive had it not been for the kindness of the U-boat crew that had sunk his ship: they provided rations and a raft so he could survive.

Although ranks of the German escapees are thinning due to deaths, Clark is keeping their legend and adventures alive in classes he teaches, and in the Papago Trackers, an organization he pioneered to study and provide information about the history of Papago Park, including the escape of the German POWs.

Clark is also hoping to produce a film about the escape.

— Pat Murphy



The crew of the U-boat U-162 at their base in France. Kapitän Jürgen Wattenberg (white cap) stands in front.