

**PAPAGO PARK, ARIZONA ~ WWII GERMAN P.O.W. CAMP**  
 Selected Memories of an Army Of the United States (AUS) Guard  
 ( December 1943 through Jul 1944 )

**The German Navy Prisoners of War**

The first war prisoners arrived at Papago Park on 3 January 1944. They were German. They were German sailors. All of them were the 'elite' of the German navy, *submariners!* Most of the later arrivals also were submariners. All of these war prisoners were dedicated, highly disciplined followers of their German homeland.

In the 16 months of their wartime residency, escape attempts were infrequent, but there were more than just a few. Some were thwarted at the camp boundaries. More escapees were caught en route to Nogales and Mexico as US Intelligence quickly detected several escape routes. A massive escape occurred in December 1944, slightly less than 1 year of the first PWs arrival. They all were caught and returned.

The Papago Park POW Escape is credited as being the biggest U.S. POW Camp Escape of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. There were some larger escapes during the 1860s military conflagration between our northern & southern states.

Papago Park POW Camp was also the locale of a PW murder by fellow PWs. There were other murders between prisoners on US soil during WWII. The murder at Papago Park was the most vicious and horrifying of them. A group of PWs charged the victim and found him guilty in their own kangaroo court for being a traitor to Germany. He was immediately punished by multiple body piercings and simultaneously being hung to die.

The murder occurred in March '44, about two months after the first PW arrived.

The Papago Park murder is unique in that seven PWs were legally tried, convicted and hung for the death by PWs. The quantity of seven hanged PWs for a PW murder on American soil was the highest in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There are 14 in all at the Fort Leavenworth, Kansas POW cemetery during WWII.

**Papago Park POW Camp – Post War**

The European War Hostilities ended 8 May 1945 VE Day. European War Prisoners on both sides would be repatriated reasonably soon. Papago had served well during 16 months of hostile European combat. The PWs were transferred out for return to Germany over the next year or so and the POW base closed. PW barracks became homes. The hospital became a VA Hospital. The PW officers compound is an enlarged Motor Pool. The "American" part was basically leveled and also became homes around 2000. The only buildings left are the Officers Club that became Elks Lodge 2148, and the base headquarter building that is now a Seniors home.

**Papago Park – Before the Prisoners**

The camp was built in the '30s for a CCCs. Before it became a POW Camp, Papago Park Military Camp housed a cavalry unit prior to the infantry unit of the early '40s. 1944 Latrine-o-grams said that differences between military and civilians ended up in open hostilities. The Papago troops were transferred out. Subsequently, the general area had a midnight curfew for All Services Personnel. Papago Park Camp was designated to become a POW facility and was completed & ready for prisoners by January 1, 1944.

**Papago Park Camp – basic layout - 1944 on**

After the 1942 civil/army unrest, Papago was altered into a POW camp. A golfer might say the American part was about 3 Par by 4 par sized. It straddled today's 64<sup>th</sup> & Oak Sts. Army companies were on the east with headquarter and officers on the west. The motor pool, compound guard house, rec. hall, auditorium & post theatre were south of Oak St, backing up to the POW double fenced complex.

New PW barracks etc were built between the company areas and the canal. Twelve to sixteen rows of old base

Company areas south of Oak and east of 64<sup>th</sup> became PW barracks, mess halls & latrines. They were divided into 2 separate /contained compounds. These PW buildings were identical to those housing US companies. There was a large open space between them and the canal. The 4 compounds exited into a common marshalling area, as did the officers compound and the new hospital that served PWs and US personnel.

The entire PW & hospital area was encircled by a service road around the fenced PW complex. Manned Guard towers with strong searchlights oversaw the complex and outside surrounding desert east, west & south. PW compound & hospital gates were guarded to control traffic into the marshalling area.

About 100' south of Oak was the main Stockade Gate. The Stockade Guard house where the guards remained during the 24 hour duty tour of 2 "on" & 4 "off" was adjacent. All entrants to the marshalling area, hospital and PW compounds passed through that Main Stockade Gate.

The fenced in stockade size was about 80% of the total camp area.

64<sup>th</sup> St was not a street. It was a wide driveway into the camp. It began at Thomas Rd and extended a couple hundred feet south of the water reservoirs, just past the livery tables to the west. The Main Camp Gate then controlled all traffic in and out. Nearby was the Provost Marshall Office and Communication Center building.

Papago was very isolated. The nearest 'main drag' roads were Thomas to the north, Van Buren to the south, Scottsdale at the east and about 48<sup>th</sup> at the west. In between were farms, pastures, groves, a small reservation & desert. McDowell Rd stopped at 40<sup>th</sup> St. Traffic to very small Scottsdale went north to Thomas and east. Traffic to Tempe went south toward Tovrea's slaughter house and east on Van Buren.

There were two connections to the outside world. One: was the infrequent buses between Phoenix & Scottsdale... that was the best as it came to the camp. Two: was buses between Phoenix & Tempe via Van Buren which dropped us off at about 48<sup>th</sup> St & Van Buren. We then had about a 4 mile walk past Hole-In-The-Rock and the Amphitheatre a mile or so southwest of the nearest camp guard tower.

### American Camp personnel

Headquarters Company people dealt with all camp matters, including being liaison & supervisory of PW compounds and problems corresponding. They were in place before the guards first arrived in early Dec '43.

Two Guard Companies manned the Stockade's towers, internal compound gates & walking posts. We also guarded PWs on work details in camp or out among the civilian population. Arriving a month 'early' we were farmed out to the Florence Italian PW camp for on-the-job experience. We returned before Christmas. There must have been about 450 American military in camp.

The 497<sup>th</sup> & 498<sup>th</sup> Military Police Escort Guard Co's. had just completed a infantry type basic training at Fort Custer, MI. All had qualified in 30 cal rifles & carbines. All shot hand guns, shotguns, Thompson mach guns & other. All had trained in close combat, riot control etc. Most of us were raw recruits. All of us were classified limited service for some physical constriction or other...not for overseas service. The TO charts scheduled almost all of us to remain Privates. Somehow, I was soon promoted to Pvt. 1<sup>st</sup> Class.

### This guard's selected recollections & comments

To me, the Stockade duty was more inconvenient & tedious but less hazardous than chasing after 15-20 PWs with only a 5 shell shotgun or a 5 cartridge clip in a 30 cal 1917 Enfield bolt action rifle.

Stockade tour was noon to noon covering two days. "Chasing" was 0700-1700 on non-stockade days.

It did not take very long to realize that these 'fierce' Nazis were not scheming to maim or kill us. Fair was Fair!

Of the many Chasing days I had, three stand out in my memory:

- 1.) In the first week of PWs, groups of about 40-50 at one time were taken to the Provost Marshall Office area near the Main Gate by several guards. One guard would escort 6 or 8 inside for photos, ID etc. Waiting their turn we had them sit on benches. Still gun shy of them and quaking a bit by the close proximity, this fuzzy cheeked 18 year old put on a gruff, tough front. In the taught German commands, I told them to "Setten zi zich!!" They just stood & looked at me. I did it again - but a lot more menacingly. They just stood & looked at me again. About 10 silent seconds later, one PW speaking poor English with a German accent said "He say sit down" and they sat down with BIG grins. Realizing what a horse's ass I'd been, I laughed with them, pulled out my ½ pack of Lucky Strikes kept 4 for me and tossed the pack and a match book to them. We then got along well. Se la guerre!
- 2.) About 4 months later, two guards and about 40 PWs trucked out at 1600 to a Phoenix laundry for about 10 hours of laundry work duties. They had been there many times before, I had not. Inside, they asked me why the women workers weren't there. I guessed that the laundry had lots of nooks and crannies to "fraternize" in, which probably is why the PWs were so happy on the trip into town.
- 3.) In between the above instances, the camp was clamping down on "losing" prisoners when outside of camp on work details. One day I was on a 1 guard detail of 12-15 PWs. They were to clear out roadside overgrown culverts along Thomas Rd in a deserted area with farms and shrubs behind. After a while, 1 german meandered farther and farther down the road and looked like he just might take off and get my butt in a sling. The rest just looked down and worked but I could not leave them. All ignored my first two "HALT" bellows with rifle at port arms. Ditto after the 3<sup>rd</sup> shout. The near PWs heard the bolt slam a cartridge in and saw me raise the rifle. A couple of quick, loud German PW shouts to the 'meanderer' brought him back with a "who me? innocent look". I'd been tested and *had* - *again* - but that ended that BS. Later, in the heat of the day, we were in front of a watermelon patch. I moseyed over there and swiped 2 for the PWs. The melons stained my bayonet when I sliced them. The drive back to camp was a pleasant one, but I never forgot that I had almost shot at a human being

Being a small camp with little to do was especially tough on married GIs whose pay went home to wife & kids.

I saw many kinds of people who I never knew existed, and learned a new kind of understanding & acceptance. As a 'people watcher' my 8 months at Papago shaped my attitudes about others more than any other period of my life - for the better!

Papago GIs were the only NON- Air Corp GIs in the area and I experienced my first taste of discrimination *against me* from both civilian men and gals and air corps GIs.

A black GI was accidentally transferred into the 497<sup>th</sup>. He stayed overnight until a correction was made. I showed him to an empty barrack and got him a bunk. Military rules, you know, were very color conscious. He ate alone after we ate at our mess. After I went with him to the PX many of my 'friends' became "unfriendly".

The Phoenix USO brought some of their volunteer gals in for a dance in the camp auditorium but the chaperones insisted the lights be kept brighter than even those at the downtown USO dancehall. Sheez!!!

The Phoenix USO was near the bus depot on Van Buren at 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> St. It was quite nice with a lounging and sports & recreation area apart from their dance hall and free coffee, cokes & snacks. The "jukebox" took our nickel and a female voice asked for our selection... said "Thank You" ... and shortly after we heard our pick.

One day at the USO I saw a fattish older civilian man shooting pool with a couple of GIs. They did pretty well against him. A bunch of GIs collected & cheered. Then the old guy took over. He ran more than one rack of balls. He then did an hour of unbelievable trick shots that had everyone *google eyed*. He was Erwin Rudolph, a US star billiard player, like Minnesota Fats & Willie Hoppe, entertaining 20-30 GIs free - on his own time.

USO closed about 11:30 p.m. so we would be off streets & on the bus before Phoenix area midnight curfew.

Papago was a slightly more informal camp than others I was stationed at. Most officers also were less 'stiff'.

One 497<sup>th</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. was considered quite 'chicken shit' and would chew us out if our salutes were a bit sloppy.

He was standing just outside of the theatre one day as it let out. GIs came out in small bunches and gave him sharp salutes which he had to return. As more and more of us straggled by and saluted he got a bit PO'd and finally turned his back to the flow. A Capt. saw this, confronted the Lt., ordered him to face the flow again and sharply return every salute until all had passed, then quickly departed from the red faced Lt & grinning GIs.

Sometimes 200-250 PWs attended Hollywood movies at the theatre outside of the compound. They marched out. That 400' and a lot of curious GIs required the street being well lined with 'chaser' guards. The PWs were NOT allowed to goose step but they looked very sharp with heels hitting the dirt road with one whack. They marched proudly as if they were in front of Hitler! Three closely abreast, they outdid the Rockettes for precision, stature and dignity. They hit that corner, did the wheel around it straight as a wheel spoke.

PWs in-camp or out-of-camp details always marched with pride. The white PW on their clothing singled them out but seemed to be worn like a red badge of courage - or the Iron Cross. We GIs seemed to respect that.

PWs played soccer in their compounds. They played hard. It was standard procedure to have a US ambulance and medical corpsman near the sidelines during the game. Nearby tower guards enjoyed the games.

An over zealous Cpl of the Guard once snuck up on a tower guard one, catching him asleep. It became an example case and the guard found guilty. Sentence: 6 months labor at Turlock, CA, federal prison & a Dishonorable Discharge. The DD was later reversed. The popular Cpl became a pariah. Later, many night tower guards kept an eye out for "dark headlights" & flashed beacons into other towers for alerts. There were easier escape ways than through or over the double fenced perimeter barrier.

Winter nights on towers were sometimes windy and cold. Before the late night watches, we often wore the long johns, uniform, leggings, field jacket, heavy overcoat & stocking cap under helmet liners. We were not supposed to go inside the tower shack. Yeah, sure!! Those freezing windy nights were almost as bad as Chicago's.

One wet winter night, a tower guard called in to say it was getting foggy. He was told to stay with it. Later he called again, saying it was so foggy he could not see beyond the double fence. Again... "stay with it". As it was clear at guardhouse, the corporal investigated. The tower was clear but the tower shack windows were steamed over. So much for not going inside. The guard really caught hell but escaped the court marshal.

One warm spring night, a gentle breeze wafted the sweet smelling aroma of the nearby orchard's orange blossoms across the canal & over the nearby towers. My tower had a heavy dose. I forgot my allergy & rubbed itchy eyes. Dumb! That would have been avoid *inside* the tower shack. Soon, my eyes were just slits and I barely could see the fence but stuck out the last 1/2 watch hour. (a debilitation allergy affliction was cause for 4-F classification ~ also getting a medical discharge or worse). After the routine watch change, I too caught hell & no court marshal.

One of my squad members was court marshaled. He was charged with (1) buying something a PW made & (2) not paying the agreed upon price. Both were major flagrant violations. The PW reported it to the compound. GI non-com who reported it to higher ups. Court Marshals are tricky things and our officers were *not* familiar to them. Some of us attended for moral support. The trial seemed to be a "setting an example trial" to us. The GI was convicted on hearsay, questionable & amateurish lawyer's advice. The army had wisely sent a JAG major as a proceedings observer. Before departing he informed Papago authority that he would have the verdict reversed. My buddy was quickly freed and his record cleared.

A PW officer was segregated from the others. The rumor was that Lt Ritter (Reuter?) had supplied America information that caused capture or sinking of navy surface vessels. PWs saw him as Traitor to Germany.

In early March '44, a 2nd batch of PWs at Papago arrived late one afternoon. They were inter-dispersed among the others. At the PW early morning roll call one new PW was missing. Searching for him, the US compound non-com bumped into him in the compound dark shower room....**hanging from a rafter!**

It was not a suicide. Before, during and/or after the hanging, German PW Werner Dreschler had been stabbed with knives, forks and other sharp instruments. The torso also had body bruises. The exact quantity of body punctures escapes me. Two numbers come to mind - 127 and 154. A fork would make 4 puncture marks.

There were other US soil PW murders by PWs. Papago's was the **Most Vicious & Gruesome Murder!**

The camp became a swarming beehive, including the FBI, US Army JAG and other military and civilian investigative agencies, including Geneva convention observers. IT REALLY HIT THE FAN! Camp heads would later roll. A new base commander and others were put in place quite soon.

One PW was quickly isolated and imprisoned in a Stockade Guardhouse cell. He became the key figure. He & others tried a Traitor, pronounced and carried out the sentence. Most GI guards considered them **heros**. We'd expect the same to American Traitors. (This was before 'brain washing' became an acceptable alibi) Some guards would give him candy etc or even a PX hamburger & coke, and call him 'Freddy'.

Dreschler had been in a previous US POW camp. He, like Lt Ritter, had given information to US captors that caused destruction of German submarines and surface ships. Other Papago PWs had been in the same camp and immediately recognized him on arrival here. They were the nucleus that gave evidence in the Papago compound trial by his fellow PWs. Poetic justice or not, the USA had to treat the case like the murder it was. Note: Dreschler's body was never claimed by his family or the German government and remains in the USA.

The above was the Murder status when I departed from Papago Park 8/1/44. Through the internet and other sources, the following was learned. "Freddy" and 6 others, were transferred to Ft Leavenworth, KA. They were further interrogated. It was determined that Dreschler had been a "fink" informer as noted above. He was recognized on Mar 12, '44 arrival at Papago, secretly tried by PWs, found guilty, immediately brutally murdered 6 ½ hours after his arrival. The seven PWs were tried and convicted at a Fort Leavenworth Court Marshal.

PWs Helmut Fischer, Fritz Franke (Freddy?), Guenther Kuelsen, Heinrich Ludwig, Bernhard Reyak, Otto Stengel and Rolf Wizny were hanged & buried at Fort Leavenworth on August 25, 1945. They were 7 of 14 the July & Aug PW murder hangings in the US. All are still in a 14 headstone and grave row in that POW Cemetery.

**Like the Dec '44 Great Escape, the seven PW Hangings for one PW murder is a WWII largest quantity.**

In late June '44, all guards of limited service classification were re-examined for that limiting determinant only. Although my nearsighted 20/400 was correctable to 20/30, that was my problem. Waiting my turn, I memorized the top 2 chart lines for a 20/100 rating. (I wanted to be overseas).

Wangling an 8 hr on & 16 hr off watch for Main Camp Gate and Main Stockade Gate made life a bit more fun.

Early on, all were pressed to buy monthly or tri-monthly war bond purchases. My 2 buddies & I did the latter, cashing them in every 3<sup>rd</sup> month for money to pay for the last week's shared beer or booze.

The livery stable just north of the camp was owned and run by an old retired Prescott cowboy. Bill Lorenz, his wife Mary and her sister Adelaide Preston, a retired teacher, also lived in their home there. We road their horses quite often. Bill, Mary & Adelaide used to tell me about their Prescott life and town. I never saw it but fell in love with Prescott. Fifty years later my wife and I visited Prescott, fell in love with it and retired there in 1991.

Most GIs made close friendships with a few other company GIs. Most ended with the war. Mine did also.

In late July '44 I received orders and shipped out with 497<sup>th</sup>'s Gene Piznarski and Leo Kulesza. We went to the 1489<sup>th</sup> Engr Co & overseas to New Guinea & Philippine Islands. When atom bombs hit we were on short alert for deployment marshaling of the Honshu invasion. We learned about "suicide" civilian, naval, air and military defenses.

Gene, Leo & I helped the 1489th win a Meritorious Unit Citation and the Asiatic Pacific Campaign Medal with 3 Bronze Battle Stars during 14 months overseas. I somehow had earned three stripes. On the ship home we saw former 497<sup>th</sup> 1st Sgt Ira Kaplan, then a Lieutenant, and 2 other Papago officers, learning details of the Papago Escape. Piznarski, Kulesza & I mustered out Feb 13, 1946 at Fort Grant & drove home to the Chicago area together.

*Thank you for your patience. R James "Jim" LeGros, Oak Park, IL; Arcadia, CA and Prescott, AZ.*

About the writer, R James "Jim" LeGros.

Pearl Harbor greatly affected me very much. I turned 17 the next day. I tried to enlist within two weeks but turned down because of age and NO parental consent. My widowed mom would not give such then or when I high school graduated 7 month later in June 1942. During that summer and fall, all armed force branches told me that my 20/400 vision would keep me out despite being corrected to 20/30. A cousin with slightly better sight had been declared 4-F.

On my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, at college in central New York State, my best bet was the Army. They informed me that all enlistments were frozen and that I would have to go through the draft. I left college at Christmas semester ending and filed draft papers. I asked for immediate induction. I had determined to join the Merchant Marine if I failed the draft exam. Summer of '43 I was called up and passed the physical. I was assigned to the wartime Army of the United States.

Post war sent me back to college and graduated. I met and married a War Widow of an Army Air Corps pilot. We are married for 54 years in March. Three daughters, seven grandchildren and four great-grandchild resulted. When I met my bride to be, I was already slated to move to Pasadena, CA. We married and resided primarily in next town east called Arcadia.

My work life was industrial management of various metal commercial products and also the industrial/military complex. We retired to a big small city not more than 2 hours from a BIG city - "warmer than Chicago and colder than Los Angeles with some snow in a rural setting". After 3 years of searching, we found Prescott, AZ.

Both of my brothers and both of my wife's brothers were Navy Lt. Jr Grade Officers... 1½ stripe. I gleefully claimed that my three chevron army stripes out ranked them - but I was outnumbered.