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11-30-90

Prisoners of Silence

In a Small Kansas Cemetery, the Graves of 14 German POWs Represent One of the Last Untold Stories of World War II

LEAVENWORTH, Kan.— There are no women or children buried in the little hilltop cemetery overlooking the Missouri River, only military convicts, about 240 of them, their souls forever tainted by some dishonorable deed that made this Godforsaken place their final outpost.

Unlike the pristine national cemetery half a mile away, this place attracts few visitors; no flowers are laid on the un-blessed ground. The small tombstones bear nothing more than a name and a date of death—but that, 10 years ago, is what caught the attention of Army Sgt. Ken Knox, a corrections officers at the Disciplinary Barracks at Ft. Leavenworth, and began his obsession with

one of the last untold stories of World War II.

"Come here. Look at this," Knox said to his wife, Dianne, while biking around the post one Sunday.

Off to one side, separated from the other graves, were 14 tombstones, each with a German name, half inscribed with the same date, Aug. 25, 1945.

Knox's first thought was that they must have died in a bus accident, but he soon learned that he had stumbled onto the graves of the only prisoners of

war ever executed in the United States, and, delving through archives and libraries, he found that many troubling ethical questions still remained over the circumstances of their hanging.

From his second-floor office, he would look down on the prison courtyard and imagine Walter Beyer and Otto Stengel and the dozen other German sailors and soldiers, handcuffed, each escorted by an eight-man guard, walking to the makeshift gallows the fort had set up in

the elevator shaft of an old warehouse. He could almost hear the Episcopal chaplain, John Sagar, reciting Psalm 130, the litany for the dying: "Out of the deep I have called unto thee, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice. . . ."

"I'm not contesting their guilt, only the injustice," says Knox, who now lives in Sacramento.

"These guys just don't belong in that cemetery. They were honorable military men and, right or wrong, if Germany had

won the war, they'd have been given a medal. They ought to be reinterred in Germany, in a place of respect. That's all I'm trying to accomplish. Besides, they were executed after the war was over, and that raises a lot of questions over whether they were the victims of a society's desire for revenge against all Germans."

The 14 condemned men—one of whom was a grocer in civilian life, one a pattern cutter, another an engineer—were among 400,000 Germans held prisoner during World War II at 500 camps scattered across the United States. The German prisoners worked in the wheat fields of Kansas, stuffed olives with Spanish peppers in Texas, repaired Army vehicles in Virginia, sewed U.S. Army uniforms in Maryland, picked peas

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in upstate New York.

By the end of the war, aided by prison tailors who made them civilian clothes and artists who provided them with forged documents, Germans were escaping the camps at the rate of 100 a month, often melting into American society.

U.S. intelligence officers worked hard to recruit "snitches" among the newly arrived prisoners, and they put unsuspecting inmates in with them in bugged two-man cells.

The information they gathered proved invaluable to the Allied war effort. One snitch, Johannes Kunze, passed on details of the camouflaging of Hamburg intended to mislead British bomber pilots—the roof of the train station had been painted to resemble a highway, the lake had been covered over—and others identified Nazi camp ringleaders and shared secrets about German U-boat strategy.

At 10 p.m. on Nov. 4, 1943, one of the German prisoners at Camp Gruber in Tankowa, Okla., Walter Beyer, a 30-year-old first sergeant captured in North Africa, ordered his company to assemble in the mess hall. Johannes Kunze was one of the last to enter. White-faced and perspiring, he took a seat at a table by the door. Beyer held up two notes in identical handwriting—one unsigned, containing a brief description of Hamburg's camouflaging, the other a letter, signed by Kunze, to his wife in

Leipzig.

"Comrades," said Beyer, whose wife and 2-year-son, Edgar, lived in Hamburg. "I am sorry and it hurts me in my soul to be forced to tell you some sad news, and the case is so grave that I am not in a position to pass judgment myself. Bad as it may seem, we have a traitor in our midst."

Beyer had hardly finished before someone shouted, "That's him! Don't let him get out!" and a score of men pounced on Kunze, who struggled wildly to escape the fists and feet of his tormentors. He died a short while later of a fractured skull and cerebral hemorrhaging. Beyer, court testimony later disclosed, did not participate in the beating.

During the next five months, three other informers were murdered in unrelated incidents at POW camps in Florence, Ariz., Camp Chaffee, Ark., and Aiken, S.C.

The killings led to lengthy investigations—one of the suspects, Otto Stengel, confessed only after being forced to wear a gas mask stuffed with onions and garlic—and eventually 14 Germans were sent off to Ft. Leavenworth to be hanged after being convicted in four separate courts-martial.

Each contended that he had acted as would have any conscientious soldier.

"I am no murderer," the grocer, Gauss, 32, told the court.

"I merely fought for the honor of my fatherland and for respect as a soldier, and I believe that every decent German soldier would do likewise. . . ."

The Germans' defense was based on the argument that their victims were traitors and prisoners of war were obligated to prevent treason against their homeland. To defend Beyer and the four others accused of killing Kunze, the government assigned, part time, Lt. Col. Alfred

sandblaster at the Army Depot in Sacramento.

He has collected 4,000 documents, many of them under the Freedom of Information Act, and has struggled to put together 159 pages of a book. Evening after evening he sits at his computer, sifting through testimony and declassified Army memos, wondering if he has overlooked some clue that would prove the injustice of the Germans' deaths. Friends say to

'I can still remember the moment mother found out my father was dead. I was 5 years old. She was cooking beans in the back yard when it came, a simple, open post card. She read it and started to shake. She let out a wail that I will never forget.'

EDGAR BEYER

Son of executed POW Walter Beyer

Petsch, who described himself as a country lawyer and farmer and who told a review board that he had "practically no experience in matters of this sort." The prosecutor was one of the Army's most respected lawyers, Lt. Col. Leon Jaworski, the eventual Watergate special prosecutor.

Ken Knox, whose father was a decorated aviator in Korea and who himself served in peacetime Korea and warring Vietnam, is retired from the military now after a 22-year career and works as a

him, "What are you doing with your Germans today?" but, he says, they aren't really interested in hearing.

"I can't explain why this thing has become so important to me, I really can't," Knox says, "but it's been like an ulcer. I keep thinking of the families in Germany who've been told their father or grandfather died as a criminal, when this wasn't the case at all. We'd consider Americans who did what they did heroes."

The Germans lingered on Death

Row in Ft. Leavenworth for a year. During that time, 15 of the 90,000 Americans being held prisoner on German soil were also sentenced to death, and Washington and Berlin began negotiating through Swiss intermediaries on a prisoner exchange. Both sides agreed not to execute anyone until the negotiations were complete.

"No death sentence imposed on German prisoners of war in this country will be carried out," said a classified message from the assistant chief of staff to Ft. Leavenworth authorities on April 28, 1945, ". . . until further order from the personnel division."

Nine days later, the war in Europe ended with the German surrender. The 15 Americans sentenced to death were returned to the Allied command, and President Harry S. Truman signed the Germans' death warrants, despite the recommendation of a review board that the sentences be commuted to life imprisonment.

Just past midnight, July 10, the first batch of five German prisoners, all former members of Rommel's famed Afrika Korps, were taken from their cells after a meal of stew, steamed rice and cake.

It was 300 yards from Ft. Leavenworth's solitary-confinement wing, known as the Castle, to the warehouse gallows, and in bright moonlight, accompanied by a Catholic priest and an Episcopalian chaplain, the prisoners crossed the courtyard Sgt. Ken Knox would spend so many hours looking at years later. At their request, all wore their military uniforms. Sgt. Walter Beyer was the first to approach the American soldiers

who waited by the noose.

"The prisoner appeared none too robust and his cheeks were drawn," William H. Radford reported the next day in the Kansas City Star. "A black stubble, matching his hair, indicated that he had not shaved for at least 12 hours. His eyes were those of a trapped beast. They moved nervously from right to left. But he never turned his head or moved his chin from its jutting position. . . ."

"A noncommissioned officer standing beside him removed Beyer's cap and placed a black hood over his head. There was a brittle command, 'Right face, forward march,' and the Nazi pivoted on his right heel in rhythm with the bodyguard of soldiers that brought him into the building and stepped off the remaining 30 feet to the gallows. His bearing was military to the last."

Beyer's wife knew something was very wrong early that spring of 1945 because her husband's letters stopped. But it was a year before she learned that he was dead and several more before she learned the circumstances of his death. By then she could not afford a trip to the United States to claim the body.

"I can still remember the moment Mother found out my father was dead," said Beyer's only child, Edgar, 49, the assistant manager of a Hamburg bank. "I was 5 years old. She was cooking beans in the back yard when it came, a simple, open postcard. She read it and started to shake. She let out a wail that I will never forget. It must

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have lasted 5 to 10 minutes. I thought she was going to die."

The postcard, Beyer recalled in a telephone interview, was cryptic: It was dated Aug. 2, 1946, and gave no details except for the fact and date of death. Eventually, it was followed by a death certificate and a note from the Red Cross stating no further information was available.

For more than 20 years Mrs. Beyer shared her secret with no one, and it was not until Edgar Beyer was about to marry that she sat him down and told him his father had been executed and was buried in a criminal's grave.

"It was a complete shock," Beyer said. "I couldn't believe it."

Nine years ago an aunt gave Edgar Beyer the equivalent of \$4,000 for a trip to the United States on the condition that he visit all the family's relatives as well as his father's grave. He flew alone from New Orleans to Kansas City, drove to Ft. Leavenworth and met an Army officer who told him where the convicts' cemetery was. The gate was locked, so he climbed the chain-link fence and found his father's grave, the first one in the row of 14. The last time he had seen his father was Christmas Day, 1941.

From time to time, German and American military authorities have suggested that perhaps the prisoners' remains should be returned to

lie in a German war cemetery. But while Germany was divided, the West Germany Embassy in Washington preferred that the matter not be raised at all, fearing that East Germany would use it to cause a rift in the Washington-Bonn alliance.

None of the victims' families has tried to claim the bodies. Even Edgar Beyer isn't sure repatriation of the bodies is a good idea. "I'd need time to think about that," he says.

So, Ken Knox in Sacramento keeps poring over his stacks of documents, calling newspapers and TV stations, hoping that someone will share his interest in righting the injustice he perceives. "There was some interest in first," he says, "but it died pretty quickly. What have I achieved in 10 years? Nothing, really. Just frustration. I guess I've reached my limit. I would need someone with more education and experience than I've got to get this done."

A cold autumn wind whipped across the cemetery on Ft. Leavenworth's Hancock Hill one recent Sunday afternoon, murmuring through the leafless trees. It was Nov. 18, a day the Germans call *Volkstravertag*—People's Remembrance Day—and from the road five German soldiers wearing gray jackets, leather gloves and maroon berets approached the row

of 14 tombstones, carrying a wreath of carnations.

Col. Michael Hueber, a 27-year veteran and the son of a World War II paratrooper, came first, remembering on this day of memories the Allied air strike on his home in Kreuzuach that had killed his mother, his grandparents, an aunt and a nephew. With him, in military step, were four other Germans who are attached to the U.S. Army's Command General Staff college here.

They placed the wreath between the tombstones of Pvt. Rudolf Sraub, the 39-year-old pattern cutter, and Pvt. Helmut Fisher, a 22-year-old high school dropout. "We stand here," Hueber said, head bowed, "in front of the graves of young soldiers who died in meeting their given missions. They were just soldiers like you and me."

"They died harder than their colleagues in combat because they realized that, in the end, they would die. But they died so that we could live in freedom, so that Germany could finally end 60 years of dictatorship. That is why the people of Germany pay them their respects today."

Then with a salute, the Germans were gone, their steps rustling through the ground cover of dead leaves, and in the coming darkness the wreath and the 14 headstones were hardly visible at all.

Staff writer Tyler Marshall in Berlin also contributed to this article.

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