

# Working in a World War II Prisoner of War Camp

by Wayne Shoemaker

*Editor's Note: The museum is fortunate to have a description of a young soldier's experience at the Fort Lewis POW camp, written years after World War II. Although there are official reports in the Office of the Provost Marshal General, there are few personal accounts of the local camp. Because so little has been written about the POW camp at Fort Lewis, its makeup is described in a preface to set the stage for Mr. Shoemaker's recollections.*

## Preface

Prisoners of War were at Fort Lewis as early as 1942 when four Japanese, two Italians, and one German were held before being transferred. From that small beginning, the POW camp grew to five separate compounds on post, with branch camps at Spokane, Walla Walla, Vancouver Barracks, and Toppenish, some permanent and others temporary as prisoners harvested crops and returned to Fort Lewis. The prisoner population, consisting of Germans, grew to over 3,000 in 1944 and 4,500 in 1945 before disbanding in 1946.

Based on Army inspections and visits by Swiss consuls and the International Red Cross, Fort Lewis conducted a strict but fair camp with excellent facilities, using the same WW II wooden barracks and administrative buildings occupied by American troops on post. The main camp of three compounds was set up north of Gray Air Field in the area between 41st Division Drive and Pendleton Avenue. A few of the buildings remain near today's PX Main Service Station. A separate compound was located about a mile away for troublesome prisoners and Nazi Party members. A final compound was set up in a previous CCC camp near the present day Logistic Center.

The main camp was organized in three similar compounds, each surrounded by a barbed wire fence and ten guard towers. Each compound (A, B, and C) had four numbered and self-contained prisoner companies with four barracks, a mess hall, orderly and supply room, and a dayroom, manned by German prisoners. Each compound also had a prisoner laundry, canteen, and barber shop. Two dispensaries served the camp, staffed by German doctors and corpsmen under the supervision of an American medical officer. The camp also contained a beer hall, carpenter shop, tailor shop, lecture hall with a library and an aquarium, and two theaters, one built by the prisoners for their theater group and orchestra.

Paid 80 cents a day, or \$24 a month, unless docked 70 cents a day for disciplinary reasons or failure to work, the money could be spent at the canteens and went into a prisoner welfare fund which was used to purchase recreational equipment and supplies. About 360 prisoners worked within the compounds, with the remainder of the enlisted men working on post at jobs such as clearing brush, sawing lumber, repairing clothing and equipment, and similar tasks. In such surroundings, there were few disciplinary problems and escapes, the more notable of which are described in the following edited article.

**T**he material for these recollections comes from my memories of the years of late 1944 and 1945, during which I was stationed at Fort Lewis and assigned to the German Prison Camp. The assignment came as a result of my being rejected at Fort Meade, Maryland, for overseas duty and also because I had taken MP training at Fort Custer, Michigan.

As I got off the troop train at Fort Lewis in late December, 1944, I saw a row of beautiful brick barracks which looked like a dream after some of the barracks I had lived in. However, that dream didn't last; the brick buildings were part of the main post—the ones I was assigned to were just more of the same that I had lived in at other posts, two story wooden barracks.

The afternoon I arrived, a sergeant from the Guard Company came into the barracks and asked if anyone could type. I could, so he told me to report to the Compound Commander. Upon reporting to him, he told me to type a paragraph. This I did and earned the job of Clerk for Company Two instead of being a guard.

The next morning Bill Green came for me, and we went into Compound A together. The fog was so thick that I could hardly see my hand in front of my face. Although I had been trained to work with prisoners, this was the first time I had actually been around them. To tell the truth, I was frightened. I just knew one or two prisoners would be hiding in some dark corner, attempting to escape, and I would be their first victim.

However, much to my amazement, we arrived at the Mess Hall safely, and there I was introduced to all of the German cooks. I also met Adolph Wieglow, a prisoner who would be my interpreter. We sat down, had coffee and some cake, and became better acquainted. The coffee-and-cake sessions soon became a pleasant daily occurrence. From the Mess Hall, I was taken to the PW Company Headquarters, and met the First Sergeant, Emil Metz; the Supply Sergeant, Carl Ripplinger; and another interpreter, Heinz Bullenkamp.

Americans inside the compound included a Compound Commander and Sergeant Major over the four PW companies, the Lieutenant for each company and one clerk whose responsibilities included the combined duties of a First Sergeant, Supply Sergeant, and Company Clerk. That was me. Only the things the clerk couldn't handle went to the Sergeant Major, then to the Lieutenant.

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To my surprise, I went to work inside the compound the first night. Somehow it became my turn to pull Charge of Quarters, staying inside the wire and calling a guard if trouble arose, since we were not allowed to carry weapons inside the compound at any time. And the closest guard was in one of the towers. I pulled my duty in the Orderly Room which was furnished with a bunk, a desk, some chairs, a file cabinet, and a crank-type telephone.

I was allowed to sleep on the bunk whenever I wished, but I didn't try much. This was the first time I had been alone with the PW's. Having heard tales of how PW's had killed GI's at other camps, I just knew one would break into the office. So you see, I didn't sleep much.

That evening prisoners were publishing a camp newspaper, and PW's were going in and out of the building all night long. Others would come into the Orderly Room to mail letters. Each time one entered, he would give a typical Nazi salute by clicking his heels together and throwing his arm in the air. Believe me, this was distracting at first. I would be working away at my desk, the door would open, there would be a loud click of heels, then the PW would march over to the mail box, go back to the door, give another salute, and be out the door. I was told later that the prisoners didn't like American boots because the rubber heels wouldn't click.

I soon got to know a lot of the PW's since it was my job to check the work parties going out the main gate and make sure a medic was with the detail. Raising his hand, the medic would say, "Here, Herr Schumacher," giving my name a German pronunciation. As a result, many of the PW's got to know my name. After I had taken the count, I would go to the Mess Hall and would have to follow the German custom of shaking hands with each other the first thing in the morning. The minute I opened the door, one of the fellows would get a mug of coffee for me, and another would get some cake. When I didn't go, they would want to know if I was mad at them.

There were other jokes made about my name. Every time Otto Schmidt and I would get together, we would argue in a friendly manner. He would say that I was a German, and I would deny it. He would say, "Look at your blonde hair and high cheek bones," and I would tell him that the cheek bones came from my Indian ancestry. He would then insist that my name was actually Schumacher, and I had changed the spelling. I didn't see Schmidt that often. He was from Company One and was always doing something that ended up with his being put in solitary confinement. Since the rules were that a prisoner could not be placed on bread and water for more than two weeks, about every two weeks out of six he was in solitary.

One day, Heinz Bullenkamp and I were talking, and the subject of birthdays came up. He said his birthday was May 20, which was quite a coincidence I thought, since mine was May 21. Although this was the extent of our conversation, I was to learn later that this was not just a casual conversation as far as he was concerned.

My birthday in 1945 fell on a Sunday, and I had to go into the compound for the morning count. Afterwards, I went to the Mess Hall as usual for some coffee and cake. But that morning there was a special cake for me.

Let me tell you about this particular cake. The cooks had saved the cream off the milk for a period of time and also the available fruit, such as cherries and pineapple. The cream had been whipped, mixed with the fruit, and made into a six layer sponge cake with the outside of the cake completely covered with whipped cream. Needless to say, this was one of my favorite cakes made by Paul Spickhoff, their Master Baker.

But that wasn't all. After I had finished my coffee and cake and started back to the barracks, Adolph Wieglow and Heinz Bullenkamp asked me to wait a minute. They went to the refrigerator and brought another cake, along with a card. The men had made a birthday card for me, and all the men in the company had signed it. This really got to me because this was the first time I had been away from home on my birthday, and, as it happened, it was also my 21st birthday, making it sort of special for me.

Other surprises were in store for me. One day I was talking with Heinz Bullenkamp and told him I had to go get a haircut. He told me that in Company Three there was a very good barber and suggested that we go there together and get a haircut. This turned out to be a haircut to end all haircuts; I really received the royal treatment. On our way back, "Bully" asked me if I knew who had cut my hair. Of course I didn't, but then he told me it was Rommel's personal barber. I don't remember his name, but he cut my hair ever other week until I left Fort Lewis. And all it cost me was a pack of cigarettes every two weeks.

Things never seemed the same. On one occasion, the main guard was transferred, so all of the men who worked in the compound had to take guard duty. Then, as soon as we got off guard duty, we would have to go prisoner chasing, taking a group of prisoners to a work detail and guarding them. One day I was one of 50 guards who took 500 prisoners out in the timber so they could clear out the underbrush to cut down on the chance of fire. We formed what we called a screen guard around the prisoners, spreading out so that we could see the guard on either side of us. About two o'clock in the afternoon, I heard something in the brush behind me—it turned out to be two prisoners with double-bit axes over their shoulders. I asked them where they had been, and they said they had been on the other side of the hill; they just wanted to see what was on the other side. These two could just have easily escaped if they wanted to, but they didn't want to because they had no place to go.

The one escape we did have was a man from Company Three. No one knew he was gone until one day he went to the Seattle police and told them he was Kurt Zimmerman, that he was a prisoner of war, and that he wanted to go back to Fort Lewis. As could be expected, there was an investigation to end all investigations.

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We learned that he had crawled up under a supply truck and rode out of the compound. He then went to town where he met a girl and lived with her for two weeks before they had a fight and she threw him out. So he came back.

As part of the investigation, we found out how the prisoners had covered up Kurt's absence. When the PW's would line up for the morning count, they would leave a blank space in a back row on the opposite end of the line where the clerk would start his person-by-person count. After the clerk would pass, one prisoner would duck down and run to the empty space. When the clerk got there, it would be filled, so a report would be turned in that all the prisoners were present.

The only other time we had a problem was on Hitler's birthday, April 20. The prisoners wanted to declare it a holiday, but were told that if they wanted to eat, they had to work. After a big hassle, the prisoners decided they wouldn't go to work even after they were told that all the food would be taken out of the compounds. After the Camp Commander asked the post for help, a company of new recruits was sent to guard us as we took the food from the Mess Halls. They arrived in trucks, armed with Thompson submachine guns, and I saw two of the boy's guns on full automatic, with their fingers on the trigger. It came to us that we were more afraid of the guards than we were of the Germans.

The men who were loading the food went to compounds other than their own so that the prisoners wouldn't be mad at them. As a special treat, the cooks in different companies had baked all kinds of pastries, and in the company where I was helping carry out the food, one mess table was covered with delicious cherry tarts. We knew they were good because every time we passed the table, we took one. There was so much pastry that it was sent over to the companies on post. The strike lasted for three days, and the only rations the prisoners were given was bread. After the strike was over, I found out that in my company they had hidden food, so they didn't really hurt that much. I'm reasonably sure the prisoners in other companies did the same.

I had other, more pleasant, experiences. Once I was invited to a play that the prisoners put on. They would go on their regular work detail during the day and then come in at night and work on the play. Some of the fellows who were to play the part of girls let their hair grow, and by the time of the performance it was quite long. I don't know where they got the women's clothing or if they made it, but they had some.

The fellows in the company kept wanting me to come see the play, so I told them I would go on Saturday night. When I got there, Adolph met me at the door and took me to the front where there were two overstuffed chairs. After I sat down, the Compound Commander came in just before the play started and sat in the other chair. He looked over at me and said, "Shoemaker, what are you doing here?" When I told him I had been invited, he said, "Fine." All during the play he would lean over

and ask what was being said. If I caught it, I would tell him, and even though we didn't understand all of it, we enjoyed the play.

One of the most unusual experiences I had was when I was invited to a proxy wedding. One of the German prisoners was to be married to a girl who was still in Germany. In the ceremony, the PW was to marry the girl's glove in the United States at the same time that she was marrying a German helmet and a German flag in Germany.

In preparation for the wedding, the prisoners had stolen a brass fire extinguisher and some copper tubing to distill some schnapps, making it almost 100 proof in three different flavors—cherry, raisin, and grapefruit. On one of my trips through the company area on the day of the wedding, I went to the kitchen, and the cooks asked me to try the schnapps. I didn't know what it was, but I tried some. They first gave me cherry, and to me it tasted just like soda pop, very good. After I finished, they asked if I wanted to try another flavor. So I tried a second flavor. It also was very good. Then they asked if I would like to try a third flavor. Of course I did. When I had finished the third cup, they asked if I drank a lot. I assured them that I did not, but they couldn't understand how I could drink so much and not be drunk.

Leaving the Mess Hall, I started back to the Compound Headquarters and had gone about halfway there when I felt like a mule had kicked me. When I got to the Headquarters, I guess I had a silly grin on my face, and the Sergeant Major asked me what I had been drinking. I told him, and in about 20 minutes he came back in the same condition that I was in. We sat around for awhile looking at each other, and the Lieutenant came in and asked us what we had been drinking. We told him, and in a little while he, too, came back, higher than a kite. But I made the wedding.

When I was transferred to another camp in Florence, Arizona, the prisoners knew of it just as soon as I did. Adolph wanted to get up a petition to keep me at Fort Lewis, but I thanked him and told him I would rather he didn't. Then he wrote a letter for me and told me that if I had any trouble with the prisoners in Arizona, I should show them his letter and everything would be all right.

Over the years, I've lost his letter and the invitation to the wedding, but my experiences and memories of those men are most valuable to me. I feel that knowing them, living with them, even under the circumstances, most certainly enriched my life.

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*Prisoners usually wore clothing appropriately stenciled.*