



WWII Prisoner-of-War Camp Hearne, Texas

During the Second World War, the Allies captured large numbers of Axis soldiers. The first combatants captured by the American Army belonged to Rommel's *Afrika Korps*, captured in Tunisia in May 1943. These prisoners were brought across the Atlantic and interned at camps throughout the United States. By June 1945, over 425,000 Axis prisoners of war (ca. 371,000 Germans, 50,000 Italians, and 4000 Japanese) were housed in over 650 POW camps across the United States. While historians have chronicled the POW program (see Kramer's *Nazi Prisoners-of-War in America*), none of these POW camps were extensively studied until the mid-1990s when Dr. Michael Waters and his team from Texas A & M University investigated Camp Hearne in Hearne, Texas.



At a time when these camps and the entire generation who experienced them were disappearing, Waters uncovered the intriguing, often dramatic, story of German POWs on Texas soil. The Waters team searched through archives, dug through buried camp remains, and interviewed dozens of former occupants on either side of the Atlantic—both former inmates and MPs who guarded them. Based on this research, a comprehensive view of Camp Hearne has emerged and is captured in Waters' book, *Lone Star Stalag, German Prisoners of War at Hearne, Texas*.

Camp Hearne's Story

In 1942, the U.S. Army Provost Marshal General's Office was searching for sites to locate POW camps. The civic leaders of Hearne, Texas, felt that a POW camp would bring economic prosperity to their city and began lobbying for a camp. Chamber of Commerce President Roy Henry sent a letter to Congressman Luther Johnson on March 10, 1942, suggesting Hearne as a possible site. Congressman Johnson in turn contacted Colonel B. M. Bryan of the Provost Marshal General's Office with this proposal. By the end of the month, Colonel Bryan dispatched engineers to Hearne to conduct a preliminary survey of the area. Hearne perfectly fit the criteria for an ideal camp location: specifically, Hearne was located in a rural area far from critical war industries, it was not within the coastal blackout zone (from the coast to 170 miles inland), and it was over 150 miles from the Mexican border. The Hearne site also appealed to the Corps of Engineers because of its proximity to a railroad; it was 500 feet from an important boundary or public thoroughfare, yet in a remote, basically flat area with an adequate supply of water and electricity. By mid-April, the inspection was completed and Hearne was selected for a camp. By the end of June 1942, Colonel Bryan approved the plan for Camp Hearne. The Army acquired 720 acres of land although only 290 acres were used for the buildings and grounds. Construction of the camp started in September 1942 and the camp was completed in February 1943.

Officially activated on December 15, 1942, Camp Hearne was considered a base camp. It was originally designed to accommodate 3000 prisoners, but the plans were modified to house 4800 POWs. Camp Hearne followed the standard camp layout approved by the Provost Marshal General's Office, meaning the installation was divided into three compounds with each compound subdivided into four companies accommodating 400 prisoners. Each company area had a mess hall, lavatory, company office, and 8 barracks. Barbed wire fences isolated the camp and each compound was enclosed with additional fencing. The buildings within the compounds were not designed to be permanent structures, but were temporary, "war mobilization" structures designed to provide service for twenty years. All camp barracks, regardless of whether they housed POWs or American guards, had walls composed of wooden beams covered by black tar paper with mineral surfaced roll roofs.



The first POWs arrived in June 1943. For the most part, the prisoners at Hearne were members of the German *Afrika Korps*, captured in Tunisia. When Hitler ordered General Rommel back to Europe leaving his command without supplies and a way home from Africa, the British and US troops forced their surrender by May 1943. Certainly the British did not have the means to detain these prisoners nor was it appropriate to leave them in Africa without the means and resources to house them, not to mention the proximity to the war's front lines should they escape. So, the ships that brought our troops to the coast of Africa now returned to the US with a new cargo -- more the 275,000 German prisoners. Camp Hearne would eventually intern more than 4700+.



Most of the prisoners at Camp Hearne were non-commissioned officers (NCOs) in the army or air force. Because they were NCOs, they were not required to work according to the Geneva Convention. As a result, the prisoners at Camp Hearne had much leisure time, so they devoted themselves to recreational and educational programs. The inmates organized classes on various topics such as history, accounting, and foreign languages. They played soccer and other games on the sports field, made crafts, painted, and read books. There were weekly movies, musical concerts, and theatrical performances at the camp in theaters built by the inmates. For a time, Hearne had one of the best orchestras in the county because Rommel's band,



along with their instruments, had been transferred to Hearne, and members (and a conductor or two) of Germany's leading orchestras experienced the same fate.

The enlisted men at the camp had a different life. According to the Geneva Convention, they could be required to work. At Camp Hearne, the enlisted prisoners (about 20% of the POW population) worked at a shop that repaired blankets and rain coats, and the rest worked for local farmers harvesting cotton, onions, and pecans.

Despite a wide array of activities financed by the U.S. military, the Camp experience serious problems. A small group of Nazi sympathizers controlled the camp through fear and intimidation, a fact most clearly demonstrated in the murder of Corporal Hugo Krauss in 1943 for being too friendly towards the Americans. The prisoners had secret short-wave radios hidden beneath barracks that received the news from Germany every day. Several prisoners tried to escape, but all were caught. One prisoner at Camp Hearne committed suicide by jumping in front of a train when bad news from home left him in despair.

One distinction of Camp Hearne is that it became home of the Central POW Post Office, responsible for the distribution of all censored mail coming from Germany to the prisoners in the United States in March 1944. This unit was very successful in moving the mail; however, the inmate mail clerks were poorly supervised in what became a Nazi-controlled operation. Prisoners would often insert messages to their friends in other camps and write greetings on the outside of envelopes. While this was harmless, a more sinister use of the postal system emerged. The Nazi element within the camp infiltrated the post office and developed a secret system for inter-camp correspondence. The Nazis had access to the names of all POWs in the United States and they compiled a list of anti-Nazi prisoners that would be dealt with after the war, spreading the intimidation that made for sleepless nights at Camp Hearne. This situation continued until numerous investigations revealed the problems and the postal unit was transferred to another camp in July 1945.



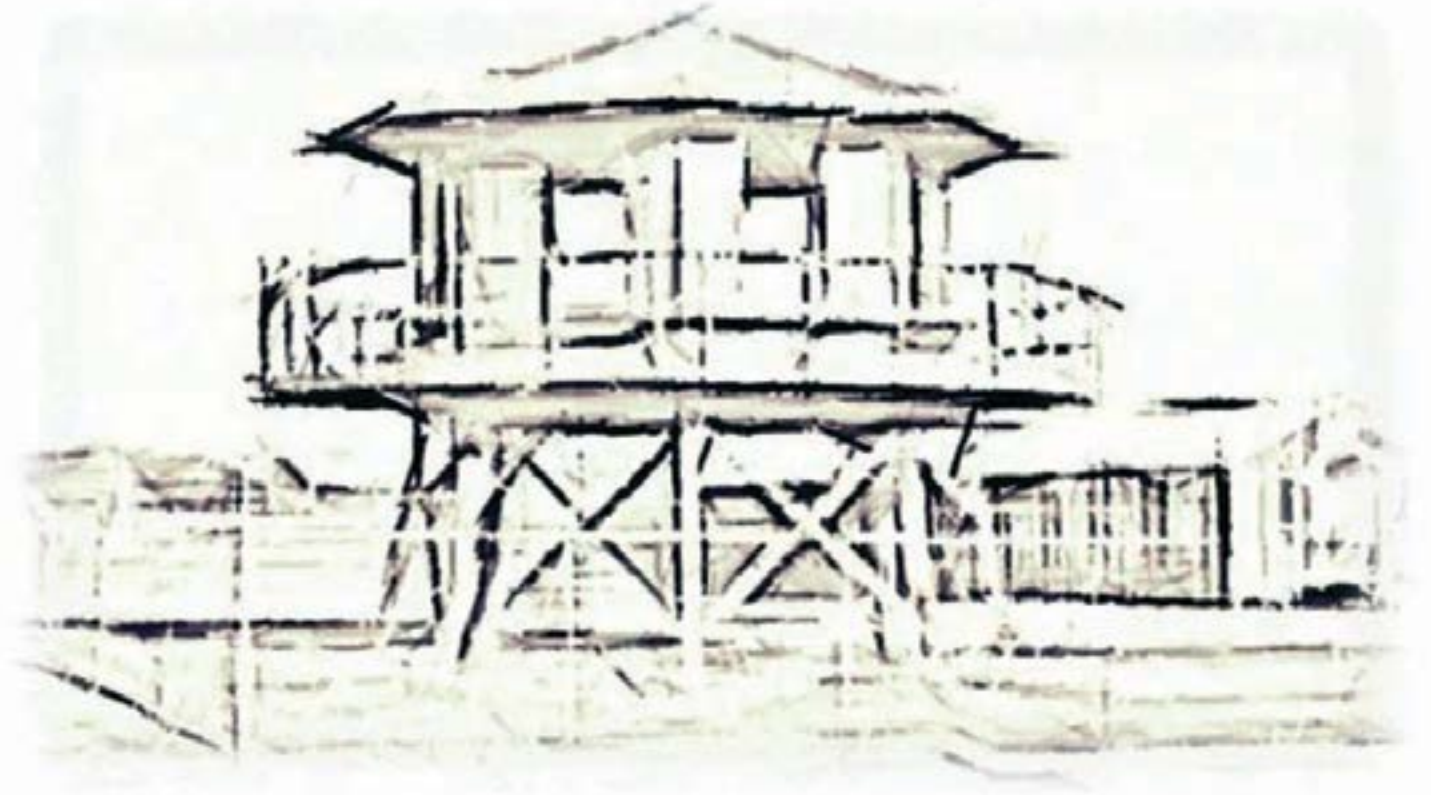
Japanese prisoners were briefly held at Camp Hearne near the end of the war. A few hundred Japanese prisoners of war arrived in the summer of 1945 and were repatriated to Japan in October 1945. Compound 3 was cleared of German POWs and the Japanese were isolated there. The Japanese prisoners sent to Hearne were to be part of a reeducation program. However, the war ended before the program could be implemented and the Japanese prisoners were returned to Japan.

All the German POWs at Hearne and other camps in the United States were repatriated to Europe by January 1947. Almost all of the prisoners were first sent to England, Scotland, France, or Belgium where they worked on farms, in mines, and repaired war damage. After serving a year to two years in these countries, they returned home to Germany.



The Army closed Camp Hearne in January 1946. The buildings and property were sold as military surplus. Eventually most of the land was purchased by the City of Hearne. Dr. Michael Waters, TAMU archeologist, surveyed the camp grounds in 1995 which lead to his book and began the collection of many artifacts, documents and objects related to the POWs camp's brief existence in Texas' history. Since all camps were very similar in operations thanks to the US Army's "cookie-cutter" management style, Camp Hearne truly represents America's home front role as a humane captor. In comparison to Axis-run POW camps, perhaps our naive benevolence seems foolish. However, it was truly believed that "...violation of any [Geneva Convention]... provisions is not only a violation of the laws of the United

States, but may also result in retaliation by the enemy against our own prisoners of war, and may subject this nation to unfavorable criticism in the public opinion of people throughout the world." (Field Manual 19-5, Military Police) Certainly, the U.S. emerged as the victor without sacrificing a very basic rule-- *do unto others...*



ROLL CALL - Friends of Camp Hearne is a 501(c)3 organization working with the City of Hearne to preserve and interpret Camp Hearne's story. Their **mission goals** are as follows:

- Base decisions for preservation/ stabilization/ restoration/ reconstruction on carefully researched priorities derived from historic documentation, interpretive values, relative significance, integrity, condition, cultural landscape considerations, initial costs, and costs for ongoing maintenance.
- Manage the extensive museum collection, including historic artifacts and archives, to provide proper storage, protection and interpretation, utilizing the latest technology, interpretive exhibits, and up-to-date procedures.
- Minimize the effects on the historic scene by non-historic development both within and outside the boundary.
- Preserve/ restore/ reconstruct only that which is essential to interpreting the Camp's story. It has been determined that total restoration would not be practical or prudent nor is it essential to interpreting the history of the Camp.



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