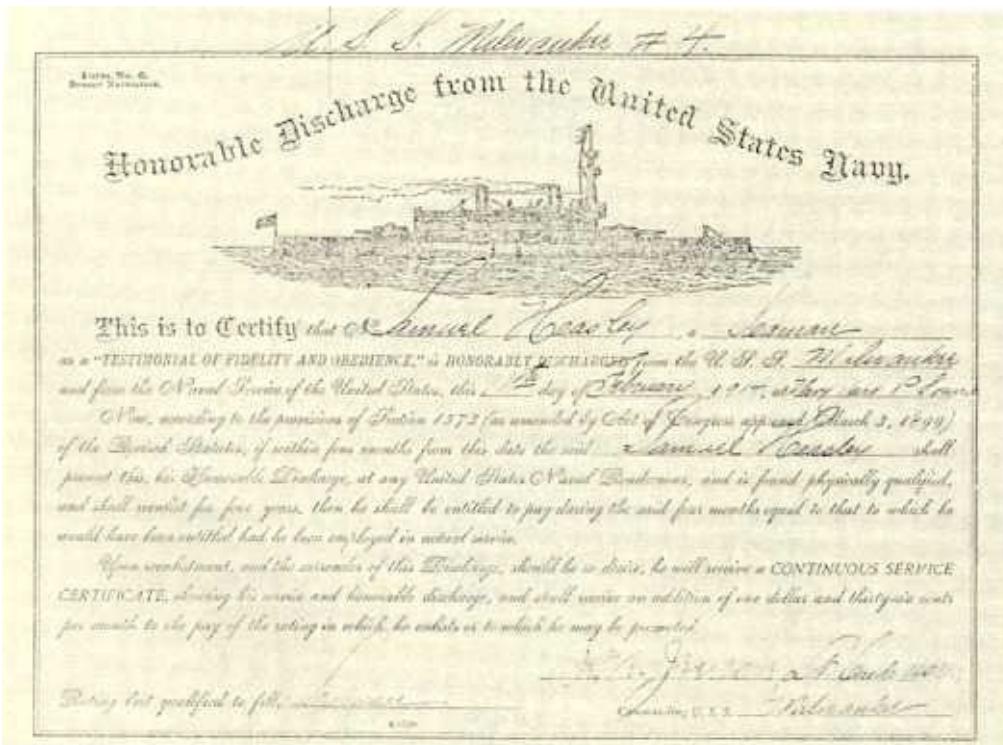




J.L. Reed, Musician Second Class Honorable Discharge from the United States Navy.



Kneeling, L-R: Pfc. Edward J. Bonior; Sgt. Wesley A. Rice. Back, L-R: Sgt. Philip Berman, Cpl. R. Sleek, and Cpl. Jack R. Martin. Courtesy of Jack R. and Helen Martin.



Samuel Heasley, Seaman - Honorable Discharge from the United States Navy



Aug. 1943 - Soldiers stationed at Alva Prisoner of War Camp. L-R, Kneeling: Pfc. Lewis R. Yeager. Standing, L-R: Corp. Jack R. Martin, Corp. R. Sleek and Sgt. Philip Berman.

NAZILAGER ALVA

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The one prisoner of war camp in Oklahoma during the Second World War that seen ~~have been best known to PWs in other camps~~ not only in Oklahoma, was the one at Alva, which they called the "Nazilager" (Nazi camp). It was the "Devil's Island" or the "Alcatraz" of the prisoner of war system in the United States and just the threat of being sent there could cause even the most recalcitrant PW to quake in his boots. It was built

to hold only Nazis and their hard-core sympathizers. When even the Camp Com-

Phoenix, Arizona, had a small, high-security compound built to hold some especially troublesome and escape-prone PWs, he it "Little Alva."

The Alva PW Camp stood south of town on the west side of highway 281 in the area now used by the airport and the fairgrounds. Little evidence of the camp remains, except for a lonely chimney, an old military-looking building used by the VFW, and a hulking concrete tower, but they suggest that some-

thing more ominous once stood at the site. The camp was authorized on June 30, 1942,



Enlisted mens barracks in the background. L-R: Corporal Jack R. Martin, Sgt. Philip Burman, Pfc. Edward J. Bonior. Aug. 1943. Courtesy of Jack R. and Helen Martin.

and contracts were let to construct a facility to hold 4,800 PWs. The people of Alva knew



#2 Guard Tower that was located on the northwest corner of the Prisoner of War Compound. Courtesy of Jack and Helen Martin.



Entrance building at gate entrance of Alva Prison of War Camp. Millard Curtis on right in picture, 1945. Photo courtesy of Millard Curtis.

only that some type of military post was going up and it was not until later that they learned that they were getting a camp to hold the most rabid of the German prisoners of war.

By September 15, 1942, the camp was well under construction with a completion date of November 15. Captain Harry C. Tremblay, newly commissioned from Master Sergeant, was sent in to represent the Army until a regular Camp Commander could be named. On November 10 Capt. Tremblay announced to the press that the camp would hold German PWs, would be open on December 15, and 600 American troops would be stationed there as guards.



Millard Curtis at Sign Entrance of Alva Prison of War Camp 1945. Photo courtesy of Millard Curtis.



Recreation Hall of Alva Prisoner of War Camp. Now located at Kiowa, Kansas, and used by the Kiowa American Legion as their meeting hall. Photo courtesy of Millard and Louise Curtis.

The Army took over from the civilian contractors on November 15 and the American troops started to arrive. The first to show up were twenty-five men of the Quartermaster Corps under the command of Lieutenant Luther Guess and Oscar B. Cruell and six men of the Medical Corps under the command of Lt. Ephraim Lubitz.

The December 15 opening date came and went with no sign of American guards or German PWs, but Lieutenant Colonel H.R. Roberts was now on the scene as the Camp Commander.

On January 3, 1943, Lts. Joseph Moses and Dwight Slavens arrived from Ft. Bliss, Texas, with 140 men of the 401st MP Escort Guard Company. On April 18 a second MP Escort Guard Company arrived, the 391st from Camp McClain, Mississippi, under the command of Lts. Ruper Powell, Jerry Wise, and Lewis A. Erbs, but still there were no German PWs.

May approached and a second opening date was set for May 2. Lt. Col. Roberts was transferred to a camp at Ft. Reno, Oklahoma, and Colonel A.M. Risdon was brought in as Camp Commander. Col. Risdon was only there for a short time before he was transferred to another camp at Hereford, Texas, and Col. Ralph Hall became the third Camp Commander. It was about this time that Lt. Col. Cecil E. Tolle of the Medical Corps arrived to take charge of the hospital.

The first nineteen German PWs arrived on July 31, 1943. This small group was likely trucked to the camp, but when the PWs started to arrive by the train-load, they were marched to the camp. A regular march route was set up for these movements. The newspaper reported long columns of PWs marching in complete silence, looking neither to the right, nor to the left, each man carrying his personal belongings in a small bag. The only sounds were the clop-clop of their boots and the commands to turn when a corner was reached. The streets were lined with armed guards and anxious civilians who stared from behind them at the examples of the "Master Race".

It is unlikely that the spectators could smell the passing PWs, but Millard Curtis and Leo Meyer, both former guards, recall that they had a strong odor when they first arrived. From the time of their capture until their arrival at Alva, the PWs had not had the

opportunity to bathe and they still carried the smells of the battlefield.

In September the capacity of the camp was increased by 1,000 to hold officers who were PWs. The newspaper announced that 117 new buildings were to be built to hold them. This raised the capacity of the camp to 5,800 and by the end of the war the capacity was 5,910.

The PWs arrived slowly, but steadily. By December 12, 1943, there were only 1,035 in the camp, but on February 23, 1945, there were 1,002 officers, 2,477 noncommissioned officers, and 1,478 enlisted men confined there.

A third MP company, the 650th, arrived in November 1943 and two more, the 454th and the 455th under the command of Capt. Fred Staedler transferred to Alva from Ft. Custer, Michigan, before the end of the year. The camp had quarters for five guard companies and the number of PWs in the camp called for five companies.

The Army had acquired a Section of prime farm land for the camp, the north 320 acres from the Wiebener family and the south 320 acres from the Peterman family. After the war neither family was given the chance to regain their land and it was given to the City of Alva. The buildings which covered a little less than one-half of the Section were sold and removed. The land that had not been used for the camp had been left under cultivation.

The camp contained four compounds to hold PWs. The first three compounds to be built were for noncommissioned officers and enlisted men. The fourth and most easterly of the compounds was built later and was only for officers. Each of the three original compounds were identical and contained thirty-two one-story wooden barracks, plus mess halls and the other buildings used by the PWs. Each of the barracks could hold 50 men and that gave the camp the original capacity of 4,800.

The Officers' Compound contained one hundred buildings as compared to only fifty-two in each of the other compounds. Even so, the Officers' Compound only had a capacity of 1,000 which meant that the officers had much more room and the space was probably assigned in accordance to their ranks.

The original three compounds were surrounded by two eight foot high fences and separated from each other by a single eight foot fence. The Officers' Compound was also surrounded by two eight foot high fences. Thirteen guard towers were arranged along these fences.

The street that even now extends south from the Section Line Road was called Washington Avenue and was the main street of the camp. The prisoner compounds began just south of the concrete water tower. These compounds extended about 700 feet to the west, about 1,100 feet to the east, and about 700 feet to the south. The hospital stood just north of the prisoner compounds and west of Washington Avenue with the service and supply area between it and the Section Line Road. The quarters for the American personnel and the camp administrative buildings were north of the prisoner compounds and east of Washington Avenue.

All of the buildings were considered temporary and were constructed of wood. Only one of these buildings remains on the site and is used by the VFW. It was the Officers' Club

and their quarters stood across the street to the east. The large recreation building that stood near the Officers' Club is now in Kiowa, Kansas. The lonely chimney at the site is thought to have been on the bakery. The concrete water tower was actually the base for a large wooden tank.

The Geneva Convention specified that PWs were to be provided with the same type of housing as used by their captors and this was the case at Alva. Also, the PWs had to be fed the same quality and quantity of food as was given to their captors. This was the case, but the German PWs actually ate from a different menu that contained food that they were familiar with and accustomed to eating. This decreased the food wastage, because they would often discard food they did not recognize. Special menus were also designed for the Japanese and Italian PWs, but the cost of these national menus was no greater than the menu used for the American troops.

Although PWs were permitted to retain and wear their own uniforms and insignia, obsolete and repaired American uniforms were provided to them. The PWs at the Alva camp usually wore their German uniforms and the officers even wore their high boots. All outside clothing was marked with a "P" or a "PW" to denote that they were prisoners of war.

The Army issued a directive in September 1943 to allow PWs to be contracted out to work on farms and at other jobs away from the camps just as long as they did not compete with local labor. This directive apparently did not apply to the Alva PW Camp, because the only PWs who worked away from the camp were a group of eighty to one hundred who were trucked to Waynoka daily to ice rail cars. In May 1945 a small camp was set up at Waynoka to house them and the daily truck movements ceased. PWs did work outside of their compounds, but only under guard in the camp or at the railway station.

Guarding the PWs was not always a pleasant duty and former guards have stories to reflect this. Whether they were innocent pranks or not, the PWs often stretched trip wires across the paths of the guards who made bed checks each night. A number of PWs went on a hunger strike at one time that was only broken up after the guards tossed tear gas grenades into the buildings. Although there was little unofficial contact between the PWs and the guards, it was reported that the noncommissioned officers and enlisted men could be pleasant at times, but the German officers always seemed to show hatred in their eyes and were threatening. Even an American civilian who was in the camp on an act of mercy did not feel safe. Dr. Clifford Traverse still recalls the glaring eyes of some German officers who were permitted to watch him operate on one of their countrymen. He had been warned not to wear a necktie in the camp and he understood why after this.

Things could even be worse for PWs who seemed to be straying from the Nazi line. Cries of help could be heard at night by tower guards and the Wiebener farm house was eventually turned into a "safe house" to hold PWs who were removed from the camp for their own safety and finally transferred to other camps. Although there is no evidence that any PWs were killed by other PWs in the

camp, this did occur at the camp at Tonkawa and there were two suicides at Alva which were suspect.

Under the Geneva Convention escaping from a PW camp was not a crime and was the accepted duty of a prisoner. The punishment was slight unless some real crime was committed during the escape. The maximum penalty for a simple escape could be thirty days in solitary confinement on bread and water, but the usual penalty at Alva was eight days. The recaptured PWs were confined in the Guard House that stood between the prisoner compounds and the hospital. For committing real crimes, PWs could be sentenced to a Federal prison and at the end of the war there were still 162 PWs in those establishments, but it is unknown if any of them came from the Alva PW Camp. Some crimes warranted execution and some PWs were executed including five from the Tonkawa PW Camp, but, on the other hand, PWs who were not recaptured until after the war was over and the other PWs repatriated could only look forward to being deported as undocumented aliens.

There were escapes from almost all the PW camps in the U.S. and the Alva PW Camp was no exception. Oklahoma newspapers carried accounts of twenty-one escapes from the Alva camp and there were probably more. None of the PWs were free long, but some got as far away as New Mexico and Kansas City and there is one report that a PW was recaptured by the U.S. Border Patrol at the Rio Grande.

The first escape from the Alva PW Camp that seems to have been reported in the newspapers was that of Karl Heinz Zigann and Heinz Aulenbacher in April 1944. They were recaptured three days later in Emporia, Kansas. Max Wolff and Franz Holm escaped that spring and were recaptured in New Mexico. Three more PWs escaped a week later and were caught in Wellington, Kansas. Werner Wulf and Heinz Roth slipped away on May 20, 1944, and were recaptured in Kansas City. Five PWs escaped on July 4, 1944. They were Burgmann von Schwinicher, Heinz Homme, Eberhard Wilms, Karl Heinz Zigann (second time), and Max Wolff (second time). Later that summer Paul Jahn and Heinz Schultz were reported to be loose. Five more PWs escaped on January 20, 1945. They were Georg Hornauf, Otto Kanich, Anton Sheffer, Fritz Puschel, and Erich Wulf.

It is likely that these escapes were simple affairs with none of the theatrics seen in the movies and on television. Usually a fence was cut, climbed over, or the PW just walked away from a work detail. A long tunnel that led under the fence was discovered before it could be used. The PWs scurried out when a guard threatened to flood it with water. Jack Martin recalls an escape that was not really an escape. A PW dug a hole under a building and equipped it with all the comforts of home, including a supply of home-brewed apple jack. He would mingle with the other PWs during the day and hide in the hole at night. When he missed roll call, a search was made. No sign of him could be found outside of the camp and it was decided that he was hiding somewhere in the compound. The guards found a PW who agreed to point him out to them, if he could do it from a guard tower while wearing an American uniform and would be transferred away immediately.

With as many PWs in the camp as there

were, it was reasonable to expect some deaths from natural and other causes. Klaus Eberhard Bork died from peritonitis on August 24, 1944, and Englebert Mayr died from a heart attack on April 23, 1945. There were two questionable suicides. Erwin Grams was found hanged on November 17, 1944, and Erich Schindler was found in the same condition on September 17, 1945, as the camp was being closed. One prisoner, Emil Minotti, was shot and killed during an escape attempt on July 6, 1944. He was the only PW killed in an escape attempt in Oklahoma. The two guards who shot him were tried, acquitted, and transferred to another camp.

There was a small cemetery at the camp for dead PWs. It was located on the west side of Washington Avenue, just south of the last fence of the compounds. After the war the dead were permanently buried in the Post Cemetery at Ft. Reno. This cemetery holds sixty-six PWs, both German and Italian, as well as two German aliens who died in one of the Oklahoma alien internment camps. Not all of the men who are buried at Ft. Reno died in Oklahoma camps, but were moved from PW camps in nearby states.

After VE Day the PWs started to be shipped home, but there were still 2,192 of them at the Alva PW Camp on September 16, 1945. The bulk of them were shipped out before October 1 when there were only forty-five remaining. On September 20, Col. H.S. Richardson, the Camp Commander, had announced that the camp would soon be closed. By October 15 all the PWs were gone. On November 15 Capt. Pat Arnim, the final Camp Commander, officially closed the camp.

A surprisingly large number of guards at the Alva PW Camp have connections with Alva even now. Some were from Alva before the war and others married women from Alva and settled down there.

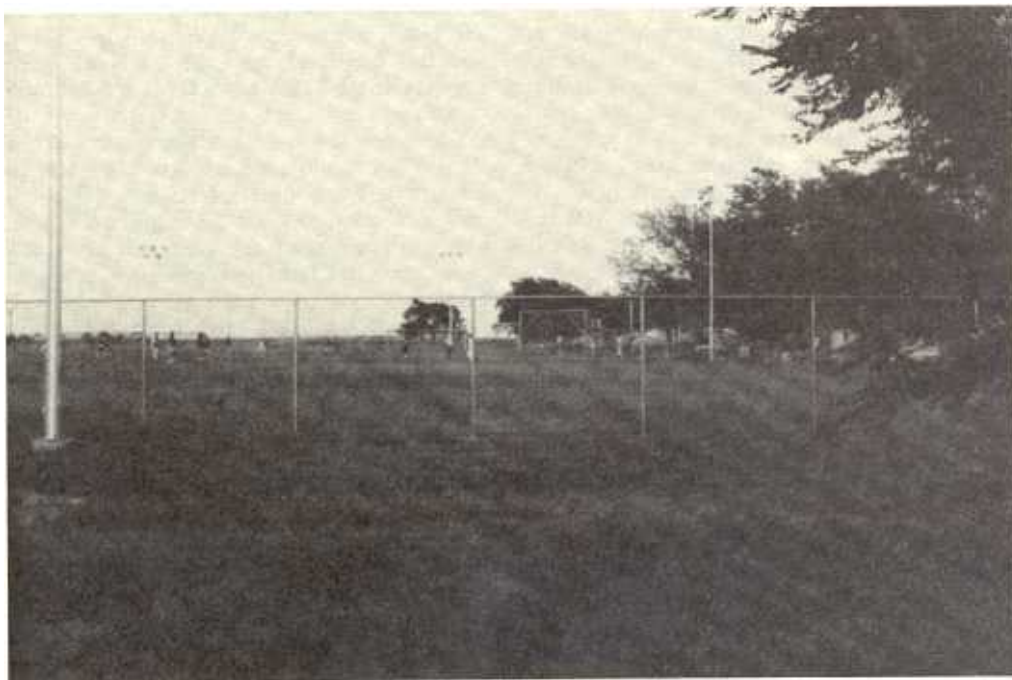
by Richard S. Warner

THE VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES - BLACK WING POST 2847 ALVA, OK

T122



Alva Black-Wing Post No. 2847 - Flag



Softball ball field north of VFW Building Co-Sponsored with the City of Alva.



Veteran of Foreign Wars of the United States Flag.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States was founded in the year of our Lord, 1899.

The Black Wing Post 2847, Alva, OK. of Veterans of Foreign Wars, was mustered in and became a chartered post on August 21, 1933. James D. Beem was the first commander of 57 comrades whose names appear on the original charter.

There have been 38 Commanders of the Post from 1933 to 1986, some serving more than 1 years. The most recent Commander is Henry D. Evans whose tenure expires April 30, 1987.

The Post became inactive at the beginning of World War II, December 7, 1941. Throughout the war years, one man, Floyd E. Moore, maintained Post continuity by serving as