

AMERICAN SOLDIERS AND POW KILLING IN THE EUROPEAN THEATER
OF WORLD WAR II

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AMERICAN SOLDIERS AND POW KILLING IN THE EUROPEAN THEATER
OF WORLD WAR II

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ABSTRACT

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This study contends that American soldiers killed large numbers of Axis POWs during the war in Europe. Although the established rules of war did not completely break down as in the Pacific theater, the killing of POWs was an integral part of the American combat ethos because the desensitizing effects of total warfare produced a mental state conducive to the abandonment of the established rules of war. Any enemy soldier who knowingly, or unknowingly, violated the American perception of proper battlefield behavior often met with a fatal response. Moreover, American soldiers whose mental state had been significantly distorted by the brutality of their combat experience often had little compunction about killing enemy prisoner who did not violate these unwritten rules.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

On the evening of 8 July 1945, PFC. Clarence Bertucci enjoyed a few beers at a local bar in downtown Salina, Utah before stopping off at a café for coffee. Chatting casually with the waitresses he promised them “something exciting” would happen that night. He then strolled out to the temporary German POW camp at the east end of Main Street. Once inside the camp, Bertucci climbed a guard tower and loaded a belt of ammunition into the tower’s .30 caliber machine gun. He lowered the muzzle of the machine gun and pressed the trigger. Methodically, he swept the 43 tents of the German POWs, from left to right and back again. In 15 seconds of firing, Bertucci managed to hit 30 of the 43 tents before another GI could stop him. He wounded 20 Germans and killed six men outright. Three POWS died later at hospitals. When questioned about his act, Bertucci offered a simple explanation: *he hated Germans, so he had killed Germans.*¹

Evidence clearly shows that the incident at Ft. Douglas was not an isolated incident. In fact, it was unusual only because it occurred *after* the war was over.² In

¹ “Midnight Massacre,” *Time*, 23 July 1945; Craig Froehlich, “Tragedy Finds Resting Place in Fort Douglas,” *The Daily Utah Chronicle*, 11 November 2002.

² For a similar example see Emiel W. Owens, *Blood on German Soil: An African American Artilleryman in World War II and Beyond* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006), 93-4. For a comprehensive examination of American post-war POW killing see James Bacque, *Other Losses: An Investigation into the Mass Deaths of German Prisoners at the Hands of the French and Americans After World War II*, (Boston: Little, Brown, & Company, 1999) and Ralph Franklin Keeling, *Gruesome Harvest: The Costly Attempt to Exterminate the People of Germany* (Libertyville, IL: Keystone Printing Service, 1947).

North Africa, Sicily, Italy, and Western Europe, American soldiers killed countless Axis POWs. Why were these acts so frequent? What were the motivations behind them? In Bertucci's case, he claimed that hatred drove him into the tower that night in July.³ His explanation, however, seems unlikely for a twice court-martialed soldier who never experienced combat. It is more likely that Bertucci suffered from a pre-existing mental disorder. After undergoing a psychiatric evaluation, military officials declared him insane and hospitalized him for an undisclosed period. Were the other POW killings the result of American soldiers suffering from a similar mental disorder? Not likely. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM III-R) explains that only three percent of American males suffer from "anti-social personality disorder."⁴ So what was the cause?

POW Killing in World War II Historiography

Much of the historiography of World War II provides little insight into the cause of POW killing in the European theater.⁵ In the post-war period, the methodology of Anglophone historians prevented them from even addressing the issue of American involvement in POW killing. They eschewed the experiences of individual combatants in favor of what John Keegan calls the "General Staff" method of writing history because of the supposed subjectivity of oral evidence and the limitations of an individual's

³ Craig Froehlich, "Tragedy Finds Resting Place in Fort Douglas," *The Daily Utah Chronicle*, 11 November 2002.

⁴ Grossman, *On Killing*, 182.

⁵ Although these areas constituted different theaters of operation for the U.S. Army, for simplicity, this study refers to them collectively as the European theater.

perspective.⁶ Without a discussion of combat behavior, there is no discussion of POW killing. Skepticism alone, however, does not explain why these early historians ignored oral evidence of POW killing. After all, despite the absence of corroborating evidence, none of them disputed the eyewitness accounts of holocaust survivors. Hence, it was not a question of validity, but a matter of acceptability. These early historians subscribed to the ideology created during the war that believed in the righteousness of the American cause in Europe. It was a necessary war between good and evil, between democracy and Nazism, for the fate of western civilization—the “Good War.” To accept the fact that Americans killed POWs would add shades of gray to a black-and-white issue.

The emergence of social history in the later part of the twentieth century removed the methodological barrier to the study of POW killing. The acceptance of oral evidence allowed historians to shift the focus of military history to the study of individual soldiers. Nevertheless, the ideological barrier remained. In fact, it got even stronger. Before the emergence of social history, the individual GI remained hidden in obscurity. Afterwards, he became an idealized agent of American virtue virtually beyond reproach. Works such as Studs Terkel’s *The Good War* and Tom Brokaw’s *The Greatest Generation* utilized oral history to create an intimate and entertaining narrative of the American war experience. Instead of glorifying the American military machine, it glorified the decency and sacrifice of the average American, both at home and on the battlefield. Questions about American involvement in POW killing did not arise; hence, they were not answered. It is possible, perhaps, to excuse these amateur historians for their idealistic bent. Their works were intended to satisfy the interest of what Paul Fussell calls the

⁶ John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), 22.

“normal patriotic reader” who had, beginning in the 1980’s, become acutely aware of the rapid disappearance of the war generation. As Michael Zezima noted, “The ‘Good War’ fable...caters to a basic need to recast our actions and the actions of those we are taught to revere in a new light in order to make it easier to live with these actions and still maintain a positive self-image.”⁷ These post-Vietnam era readers wanted a confirmation of American ideals—not controversy.

Even professional historians feel obliged to perpetuate the Good War mythos. Works such as Edwin Hoyt’s *The GI’s War*, Lee Kennett’s *GI: The American Soldier in World War II*, and the related volumes of Stephen Ambrose attempt to recreate the military experience of American soldiers from induction to discharge. Alas, the “experience of war” histories focus primarily upon acts of heroism, tales of male bonding, the physical discomforts of military life, and the ever-present fear of dying. Few discuss or analyze the soldier’s experience with violence and killing. Even fewer broach the subject of American soldiers killing of prisoners of war. Those that do often resort to some clever rhetoric avoid the moral dilemma of prisoner killing. Kennett declares only that GIs were “less inclined to accord the honors of war” to member of the SS (especially after the Malmedy massacre), snipers, those who surrendered too late, and those who attempt to surrender was perceived as a trick.⁸ In *Citizen Soldiers*, Ambrose offers a more nebulous explanation:

Both the American and the German army outlawed the shooting of unarmed prisoners. Both sides did it, frequently, but no courts-martial were ever convened

⁷ Michael Zezima, *Saving Private Power: The Hidden History of “The Good War”* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2000), 182-3.

⁸ Lee Kennett, *G.I.: The American Soldier in World War II*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1987), 161.

for men charged with shooting prisoners. It was a subject everyone agreed should not be discussed, and no records were kept. Thus all commentary on the subject is anecdotal. I've interviewed well over 1,000 combat veterans. Only one of them said he shot a prisoner...⁹

Amazingly, Ambrose claims that Americans frequently killed POWs while simultaneously discounting the very evidence to that claim. Such doublespeak is indicative of "Good War" historians who simply cannot come to terms with the results of their own research.

Even historians who are not disciples of the Good War mythos inadvertently reinforce the idealized image of the American GI in the European theater. Since the publication of John Dower's *War without Mercy*, comparing American combat in Europe with that of the Pacific and other theaters has become a popular method of demonstrating the brutality of the those theaters.¹⁰ In his article, "The Treatment of Prisoners of War in World War II," Simon Mackenzie claims the incidents of POW killing in Europe were insignificant in comparison to those committed by the SS and very limited in comparison to the fighting in the Pacific.¹¹ In *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture*, John Lynn also states that POW killings occurred more frequently in the Pacific and represented a "qualitatively different phenomenon" than those of the European theater.¹² The James Weingartner article, "War Against Subhumans" also supports the comparison with the insistence that POW killings became an integral part of combat in the Pacific, while

⁹ Stephen E. Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers: The U.S. Army from the Normandy Beaches to the Bulge to the Surrender of Germany, June 7, 1944-May 7, 1945* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 352.

¹⁰ John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).

¹¹ Simon MacKenzie, "The Treatment of Prisoners of War in World War II," *The Journal of Modern History* 66, no. 3 (1994): 487-520.

¹² John A. Lynn, *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture* (Boulder: Perseus Books, 2003), 251.

remaining mere anomalies in Europe.¹³ Such comparisons are not only misleading, they are also completely irrelevant. They mistakenly distinguish American combat behavior in Europe as the sole example of civilized conduct in an otherwise uncivilized war. Because the European and Pacific theaters were not polar opposites, the fact that Americans in the Pacific abandoned all pretext of civilized warfare does not mean that Americans in Europe generally fought by the rules. Comparing the two theaters reveals only that POW killings occurred *less* frequently in Europe—they do not reveal *how* frequently they occurred.

In order to discover why American killed POWs in Europe; one must avoid the restrictions of traditional military methodology and the seduction of Good War ideology. A relatively new genre of historians does just that. Because the “reality of war” historians emphasize the act of killing in warfare, they recognize that soldiers rarely followed the Geneva Convention in *any* theater of war. In *Acts of War: The Behavior of Men in Battle*, Richard Holmes notes that surrendering in combat is a “hazardous business” in which the survival of the surrendering soldier is dependent upon the emotional state of the captor. The captor’s emotional state depended upon racial and ideological factors, as well as “a sense of personal animus” from a particular incident. Such animosity could be aroused by soldiers surrendering too late, the fear of a false

¹³ James J. Weingartner, “War against Subhumans: Comparisons between the German War against the Soviet Union and the American War against Japan, 1941-1945,” *The Historian* 58, no. 3 (1996): 557-573.

surrender, the hatred of “bogey” weapons (such as machine guns and artillery), the organization and tactics of guerillas, or because prisoners were “simply a nuisance.”¹⁴

In his pioneering work *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, David Grossman suggests that any analysis must view “atrocities as a spectrum of occurrences rather than a precisely defined type of occurrences.” Thus, he divides them into two categories: surrender-executions and cold-blooded executions. Surrender-executions occur frequently during the heat of the battle because soldiers often fail to make the difficult “emotional turnaround” from killer to captor. Cold-blooded executions involve the close-range killing of a POW who represents “no significant or immediate military or personal threat to the killer.” They occur when soldiers give into the powerful effects of atrocity: blood lust, terrorism of the enemy, and group acceptance.¹⁵

Joanna Bourke’s *An Intimate History of Killing* claims that an underlying cultural predisposition facilitates the killing of unarmed combatants and civilians. This milieu consists of a widespread military and civilian complacency, failures in military leadership, fear of punishment, ignorance of the rules of warfare, obedience, guerilla tactics, and racism. As for the killers’ motivations, the most common are military expediency (the idea that a good soldier did not take prisoners), obedience to orders, jealousy (that a prisoner had escaped the war unharmed), martial enthusiasm, sympathy

¹⁴ Richard Holmes, *Acts of War: The Behavior of Men in Battle* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 361-392 passim.

¹⁵ David A Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (New York: Bay Back Books, 1996), 195, 199-213 passim.

(killing a mortally wounded enemy), fear of being overpowered, greed (prisoners could consume resources), and laziness.¹⁶

In *American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam*, Peter Kindsvatter, unlike the aforementioned authors, offers an explanation exclusive to American soldiers. He also identifies revenge, the fear of a false surrender, and the ‘heat of the battle’ being the most common motivating factors. He also notes that exhausted infantrymen did not relish the arduous task of escorting prisoners over rough and dangerous terrain. Consequently, fatigue, not laziness, often motivated soldiers to kill prisoners rather than escort them to POW enclosures. In addition, Americans sometimes developed a no-prisoners attitude toward machine gunners as well as snipers because they violated “American concepts of fairness.”¹⁷

The “reality of war” genre is important because it attempts to explain the motivations for POW killing and the circumstances that make them endemic to warfare. Unfortunately, the purpose of most of these works is to identify universal characteristics of individual combat behavior. As such, they do not focus on the POW killings by combatants of one specific nation in one specific war. Their explanations for POW killing are either too narrow (as Grossman’s two-category approach) or too inclusive (as with Bourke’s laundry list of reasons). In either case, they offer little insight into the American killing of POWs in the European theater.

¹⁶ Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face to Face Killing in 20th Century Warfare* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 163-175 passim.

¹⁷ Peter Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea, & Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 213-9.

There are, however, a small number of works in this genre that focus exclusively upon American combat in World War II. In *Closing with the Enemy*, Michael Doubler notes that Americans occasionally killed prisoners “in a heat of passion” and that some rifle companies developed the reputation for not taking prisoners.¹⁸ In *The Deadly Brotherhood*, John McManus agrees that incidents of prisoner killings were rare cases that happened only under unusual circumstances. As such, he only identifies only two categories of POW killings: violations of “proper etiquette” and “militarily motivated” killings. He notes that GIs perceived the German habit of surrendering only after expending all of their ammunition as a violation of the “proper etiquette” of war. If the futile resistance resulted in American casualties, GIs would sometimes kill those who attempted to surrender. The second category involves the killing of POWs because of a dangerous tactical situation. McManus illustrates this with an account of an isolated American unit who came under attack while burdened with German prisoners. In order to extricate themselves safely, and to avoid fighting the same Germans again, the Americans killed their prisoners.¹⁹

The most comprehensive examination on the subject is located in Gerald Linderman’s *The World within War: America’s Combat Experience in World War II*. Linderman traces the evolution of American soldiers’ attitudes towards POWs from the early fighting in Africa to the final days in Germany. He claims that when the U.S. joined the war in Africa in November 1942 they entered a conflict whose hate-free character had

¹⁸ Michael D. Doubler, *Closing with the Enemy: How GIs Fought the War in Europe, 1944-45* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 288-9.

¹⁹ John C. McManus, *The Deadly Brotherhood: The American Combat Soldier in World War II* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1998), 214-36 passim.

been established by earlier German and British combat. As such, rule violations remained both exceptional and unacceptable and made the treatment of prisoners in this theater was the most considerate of the war.²⁰

After the campaign in North Africa, however, rule violations began to occur with greater frequency as the fighting became more intense and German soldiers with experience on the Russian front joined the fighting in Western Europe. Linderman explains that the Americans did not always follow the rules because complying with them seldom represented the path of least resistance. Soldiers had to exert themselves to abide by the rules and often had only an instant to decide if the enemy soldier wanted to continue to fight or surrender. In addition, the week-by-week brutality of combat caused a process of numbing, toughening, coarsening, and brutalization. It was upon entering the third stage, that Linderman claims soldiers began to direct their callousness towards enemy prisoners: “To refuse to heed those hands in the air, to shoot, to determine irrevocably the fate of another was a combat soldier’s avowal that he could still control matters of utmost importance.” Consequently, the unofficial policy on taking prisoners fluctuated as individuals became engaged in a pattern of alternating enforcement and violation.²¹

Linderman recognizes that callousness alone is not a sufficient explanation for the killing of prisoners. He identifies several specific reasons including revenge, a hatred of snipers, enemy soldiers surrendering too late, jealousy, killing of wounded (out of mercy and fear), laziness, and those that occurred in the heat of the battle. German prisoners

²⁰ Gerald F. Linderman, *The World Within War: America’s Combat Experience in World War II* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 90.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 48-89 passim, 120.

that demonstrated any arrogance or “swaggering concern for distinctions of class, caste, or rank” angered and offended low-ranking GIs. The response was often brutal and sometimes deadly. A similar reaction faced those Germans who professed faith in Adolf Hitler. Captured German soldiers, especially SS men, were often asked where their loyalty resided and those that affirmed their allegiance to Hitler were killed. “At every moment of the day and night,” Linderman concludes, “the rules, major and minor, formal and informal, were violated.” Nevertheless, frequent violations and frequent retaliations never created an autocatalytic process of increasing violence towards prisoners. An element of calculation existed in which soldiers of both sides maintained an understanding that bound retaliations in rough proportion of the enemy’s offense.²²

Goals of the Study

For lack of any comparable study, it is deceptively easy to believe Linderman successfully explains the motivations for POW killing in the European theater and the frequency with which they occurred. In fact, he is only partially correct. Certainly, there is no denying that the brutalizing effects of combat created an emotional state conducive to unrestrained violence. However, this study argues that a wide range of external and internal factors, each with subtle variations, motivated the killing of POWs. Furthermore, it argues that these were not merely isolated incidents or calculated acts of retribution. The cumulative effects of combat stress, and the frequency with which soldiers encountered situations providing motive and opportunity, indicates that POW killing was

²² Ibid., 90-141 passim, 142.

systemic to American combat behavior. Officially forbidden at the highest levels, but tacitly condoned by the men at the front, it was the “open secret” of the war.

The scarcity of official documentation of POW killing means that the majority of the evidence utilized in this study comes from veterans’ memoirs, letters, interviews, and oral history projects. This is not to say that official documentation is unavailable—it is simply hard to find. A lengthy search of the National Archives in Washington, D.C. uncovered numerous after-action reports, several Inspector General investigations, two courts-martial records, and a post-war investigation into POW treatment initiated by Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower. These sources, along with the observations of some of the aforementioned historians, serve as the foundation for the discussion. Chapter 1 will be an examination of the effects of the laws of war and combat stress upon the American soldier’s willingness to kill POWs during the initial exposure to combat. Chapter 2 discusses how GIs became less resistant to prisoner killing as they adjusted to combat and encountered certain tactical situations that hindered or prohibited compliance with the rules of war. Prolonged exposure to combat, however, eventually caused soldiers to kill POWs for less utilitarian reasons. Chapter 3 explains how combat stress created a dehumanized image of the enemy and how that image facilitated the killing of prisoners who killed a GI’s close comrade or who demonstrated improper battlefield behavior. Violations of this unwritten code included, among others, false surrenders, sniping, arrogance, and allegiance to Hitler. The final chapter discusses how the exposure to enemy “atrocities” and the cumulative effects of combat stress drove many American soldiers to forgo their combat ethos and move towards sheer brutality.

CHAPTER 2: THE ADJUSTMENT STAGE

During World War II, two separate but mutually supporting international peace conventions codified the laws of war for in regards to POW treatment.²³ In 1907, the Second Peace Conference of The Hague (Hague IV) produced the body of law that outlined the proper conduct of belligerents in armed conflict. In regard to POWs, Hague IV prohibited a belligerent from declaring that no quarter will be given or killing or wounding an enemy who has “surrendered at discretion.” In addition, captors must treat POWs humanely, allow them to keep all of their personal belongings, and return captured enemy medical personnel.²⁴ Most importantly, Hague IV placed responsibility for POWs with the hostile government and not the individuals who capture them.

After World War I, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) decided to remedy the failings of Hague IV in regards to the treatment of prisoners of war. The result was the *Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, Geneva July 27, 1929* and the *Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armies in the Field, Geneva, 27 July 1929*. The first convention supplemented the Hague regulations by prohibiting reprisals against prisoners and establishing specific

²³ All of the major belligerents during World War II were signatories of The Hague and Geneva Conventions except Japan and the Soviet Union.

²⁴ *Convention (IV) respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its annex: Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land, The Hague, 18 October 1907* (hereafter cited as *Hague Convention*), International Committee for the Red Cross, <http://www.icrc.org/ihl.nsf/WebPrint/195-TRA?OpenDocument> (accessed 5 September 2009).

rules for the provision of proper food, clothing, and shelter. The second convention delineated the proper treatment of sick and wounded prisoners as well as the protection of medical personnel in the field.²⁵ Just prior to America's entry into the war, the War Department published *Field Manual 27-10: Rules of Land Warfare*.²⁶ It included the most recent articles of both conventions as well as pertinent articles of war enacted by the United States' Congress.²⁷ During the war, other attempts were made to disseminate information on the laws of war. For example, the Staff Judge Advocate, 3rd U.S. Army, prepared and distributed over 35,000 copies of a booklet entitled *Soldier's Handbook on the Rules of Land Warfare*.²⁸ Like most field manuals, these publications like these did not enjoy a large readership. Most GIs did not voluntarily read stuffy rulebooks and formal instruction on the laws of war was a low priority in an army trying to convert masses of civilians into capable soldiers.²⁹ Thus, the majority of GIs entered combat in the European theater with only a vague understanding of the laws concerning POW treatment.

²⁵ *Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, Geneva, 27 July 1929* (hereafter cited as *Geneva POW Convention*), and *Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armies in the Field, Geneva, 27 July 1929*, International Committee for the Red Cross, <http://www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/html/57JNWS> (accessed 5 September 2009).

²⁶ U.S. Department of War, *FM 27-10: Rules of Land Warfare* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1940). The War Department, which published several versions of the field manual, published an updated edition in 1944.

²⁷ For a complete list of the Articles of War, see Lee S. Tillotson, *The Articles of War: Annotated* (Harrisburg, PA: Military Service Publishing Company, 1943).

²⁸ Ted B. Borek, "Legal Services During War," *Military Law Review* 120 (Spring 1988): 39.

²⁹ Capt. William T. Brogan of the 180th Infantry, 45th Division testified under oath that no information on the rules of war had been issued to the men of his regiment prior to entering combat. Brogan testimony, Trial Proper, "Record of Trial for the General Court-Martial of United States v. CPT. John T. Compton, CM 250835 (hereafter cited as *Compton Court Martial*)," U.S. Army Judiciary, Arlington, VA., 42.

After the war, the U.S. army conducted a review of the legal issues experienced in the European theater in an attempt to identify deficiencies in the application of civil and military law. In this review, senior judge advocates recommended better training for army lawyers as well as more education of troops prior to combat to “help avoid breaches of the laws and usages of war.”³⁰ Education, however, would not have prevented American soldiers from violating the rules of POW treatment. As Robert Berens, a veteran of the European theater, Korea, and Vietnam, noted:

Seldom do warring factions of any nationality in close combat come through an engagement without violating some law, rule or convention of war, at least to a degree....many violations are unintentional, inadvertent or committed through ignorance.³¹

In his analysis of the Geneva and Hague Conventions, Simon Mackenzie observed that World War II combat made “the philosophical assumptions that underlay the conventions seem impractical or irrelevant.”³² Gerald Linderman offers a more scathing criticism, “World War II combat was not a game and its regulations were hopelessly deficient.” An example of this deficiency is evident in the rules for intercourse between belligerents:

It is advisable to have at least a trumpeter, bugler, or drummer with him [the parlementaire] in order more readily and more surely to make known his status, thereby avoiding danger as much as possible....When he arrives near enough to be recognized—that is, seen and heard—he causes his trumpet or bugle to be sounded or drum to be beaten and his flag to be waived. Marked courtesy must be observed on both sides. Conversation should be prudent and not touch upon the military operations.³³

³⁰ Borek, “Legal Services,” 39.

³¹ Robert J. Berens, “Battle Atrocities,” *Army* (April 1986): 54.

³² MacKenzie, “Treatment of Prisoners,” 519-20.

³³ U.S. Department of War, *Rules of Land Warfare*, 63.

It should therefore not come as a surprise that American soldiers failed to comply with such chivalric rules when confronted with the barbarity of total war

The American Soldier and Combat Stress

In his study of international law, Morrow stated that, “An effective agreement on POWs must operate at the individual level as well as at the state level.”³⁴ Hence, we must first understand how GIs in the European theater operated in combat before we can understand why POW policy failed at the individual level. During the war, Capt. Ralph Ingersoll wrote, “Battles are like marriages. They all have a certain fundamental experience they share in common; they differ infinitely but they are all still alike.”³⁵ All wars may exhibit the same basic elements of combat, but not all wars involve the same type of combatants. The differing political, cultural, and technological environments of each age not only affects how soldiers fight, but their concepts of proper battlefield behavior as well. For the GIs who fought in the European theater, the American sense of fair play lay at the core of their combat ethos. Because they assumed their combat ethos was not only proper, but also universally accepted, they perceived any violations of this code as both intentional and deceitful. The severity of the reaction depended upon the severity of the violation as well as the emotional state of the American soldier. Some Americans chose to curse and complain, some chose to physical abuse enemy prisoners, and some chose to kill.

³⁴ James D. Morrow, “The Institutional Features of Prisoners of War Treaties,” *International Organization* 55, no. 4 (Autumn 2001): 976.

³⁵ Ralph Ingersoll, *The Battle is the Pay-Off* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1943), 216.

The more desensitized a soldier became, and the more violations he encountered, the more likely he was to believe that enemy soldiers who committed such violations had forfeited their right to live. Although the number of encounters with enemy violations varied among individuals, the path to desensitization was the same across the board. In their 1946 study “Combat Neuroses: Development of Combat Exhaustion,” Roy Swank and Walter Marchand determined that the number days spent in continuous combat had a direct effect upon the mental stability and combat effectiveness of the GI. In the first ten days, the soldier became “battlewise” and demonstrated a marked increase in his combat effectiveness. In the next twenty days, the soldier’s mental state stabilized and he learned the skills necessary to operate effectively on the battlefield. After approximately thirty days of continuous combat, however, the soldier experienced “combat exhaustion” and his effectiveness began to wane. From thirty to forty-five, the soldier became hyper-reactive and overconfident in his abilities. During the next fifteen days, the soldier became emotionally exhausted and entered the “vegetative stage.” After only sixty days of continuous combat, the study concluded that ninety-eight percent of soldiers became psychiatric casualties. Only the “aggressive psychopaths,” those who did not experience the normal reaction to death and killing, continued to operate after this point.³⁶

The Swank and Marchand study determined that each soldier advanced toward mental collapse at a predictable rate but offered little clues to exactly why a soldier became mentally unstable. Gerald Linderman’s *The World Within War* explains that GIs attempted to cope with combat stress through a four-stage process of numbing,

³⁶ Roy L. Swank and Walter E. Marchand, “Combat Neuroses: Development of Combat Exhaustion,” *Archives of Neurology and Psychiatry* 55, (1946): 236-247.

toughening, coarsening, and brutalization.³⁷ While his basic premise is sound, Linderman erroneously concludes that this process involved conscious decisions on the part of a soldier. Of course, GIs may have made conscious decisions to pull the trigger, but these decisions were born from a decision-making process distorted by combat stress. What would have been unthinkable during the early part of soldier's combat experience could quickly become normal and routine. Nevertheless, by incorporating Linderman's behavioral model with elements of the Swank and Marchand study the correlation between combat stress and POW killing becomes clear.

The Heat of Battle

Before entering combat, GIs unknowingly harbored a host of illusions about warfare and demonstrated little animosity towards enemy soldiers. Once they entered the battlefield, however, they quickly learned that their civilian mindset did not fit the reality facing them. In this adjustment stage, soldiers became acclimated to the sound of gunfire, the sight of dead and wounded bodies, and the act of killing. Nevertheless, their attitude towards the enemy in this early period remained relatively unchanged. "It took time to get angry, to hate," John Babcock of the 78th Infantry Division remembered, "my first feelings were awe confusion, fear."³⁸ Of course, soldiers in the adjustment stage were still capable of killing POWs during the heat of battle even though Article 23 of the Hague IV Convention specifically prohibited killing an enemy soldier who "having laid

³⁷ Linderman, *World Within War*, 48-89.

³⁸ John B. Babcock, *Taught to Kill: An American Boy's War from the Ardennes to Berlin* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2005), 194.

down their arms, or having no longer means of defense, has surrendered at discretion.”³⁹

In the heat of battle, the violent and desperate nature of close-quarters combat could cause a primal desire to kill without discretion even among inexperienced soldiers.⁴⁰

While attacking the summit of Mount Belvedere, Morley Nelson of the 87th Regiment, 10th Mountain Division experienced this transformation as he fired at the fleeing Germans defenders. “I began to feel one of the great highs that one can feel in the world...an intellectual high that comes only with such a wild outlandish opportunity of being involved with life and death to such a point where your ability to shoot and to move reaches a new height of perfection.”⁴¹ Guy Charland of the 357th Regiment, 90th Infantry Division experienced a similar “high” in Normandy after surviving a shoot-out with a lone German soldier. “I became hysterical and began laughing like I had heard a good joke, like a hunter—the best shot I ever made....He was a bloody mess and I was ecstatically joyful.”⁴²

In order to abide by the rule during the heat of battle, soldiers would have to make the difficult “emotional turnaround” from killer to captor.⁴³ More often than not, the emotional state created in a desperate fight for survival precluded any such process.

³⁹ Article 23, *Hague Convention*.

⁴⁰ It must be noted that many historians cite the “heat of battle” as common cause of POW killings without bothering to define it. Consequently, the phrase often serves as a catch-all category of motivations and circumstances. In the current study, the term “heat of battle” includes only the period in which the act of fighting created a temporary, yet severe, mental disturbance in American soldiers.

⁴¹ Stephen Stuebner, *A Cool North Wind: Morley Nelson's Life with Birds of Prey* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Press, 2002), 80-81.

⁴² Guy Charland, *Remembrance of Combat in Normandy*, Tank Books, <http://www.tankbooks.com/charland/contents.htm> (accessed 4 October 2009), 31.

⁴³ Grossman, *On Killing*, 199.

William Foley of the 302nd Infantry, 94th Infantry Division was unable to make this change as his company fought its way out of a German encirclement near the Saar River:

Without ever a thought of self-control, I fired into every German I saw, wounded or not. A shape rose directly in my path—a face white with terror, gasping words that I could not or chose not to hear or understand. No adjectives can describe the alien pleasure of driving my rifle butt into that hated face under that hated helmet. Then on the ground, that face crumbled under repeated beatings of my rifle butt. I was aware of being on the edge of a red-black void that replaced my sight...⁴⁴

Such behavior was not limited to fights for survival. The adrenaline rush of a storming a defensive position also drove GIs into the “red-black void.” In Italy, Medic Charlie Keen watched the paratroopers of the 517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team wildly rush a German position and kill several Germans holding white flags. “What could you expect,” Keen lamented, “from eighteen- or nineteen-year-olds told for months they were invincible?”⁴⁵ On 3 January 1945, Kurt Gabel of the 17th Airborne Division experienced the emotional transformation of an infantry charge first-hand during an attack north of Bastogne on 3 January 1945. Crossing an open field, Gabel’s platoon came under concentrated artillery fire. Seeing no alternative, the platoon leader yelled, “Fix bayonets!” Gabel’s body jerked at the order and the “blood-freezing sound” of the bayonets sliding into place. As they charged, rifles at high port arms, the paratroopers instinctively began screaming “Geronimo!” The Germans tried to surrender, but the troopers kept yelling while they drove their bayonets home.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ William A. Foley, *Visions from a Foxhole: A Rifleman in Patton’s Ghost Corps* (New York: Presidio Press, 2003), 134-5.

⁴⁵ Gerald Astor, *Battling Buzzards: The Odyssey of the 517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team 1943-1945* (New York: Random House, 2001), 132.

⁴⁶ Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers*, 379; Linderman, *World Within War*, 111.

While the above incidents illustrate commonly held notions of close combat, they by no means represent the entire spectrum of combat situations that occurred in the heat of battle. Sometimes, the expectation of combat could create the same heightened emotional state. By the time the 90th Infantry Division landed on Utah beach, the beachhead had been secured by the 4th Division. Nevertheless, they were fully aware that their encounter with the enemy could come at any moment. Its leading elements were in such an alert state that they fired upon an approaching column of German with every weapon they had before they realized it was a group of prisoners being marched to the rear.⁴⁷

Even after a battle, soldiers could continue to kill prisoners if their emotional state remained amplified. During the Battle of the Bulge, two German armored cars slipped into the defensive perimeter of a 3rd Armored Division task force defending Marcouray, France under Lt. Col. Sam “Bill” Hogan. After their vehicles were destroyed, five Germans fled the scene and dived facedown into a nearby ditch. An American lieutenant ran up to the ditch and shot one of the unarmed Germans in the head with a .45 pistol. Hogan shouted for the man to stop, but the lieutenant shot another helpless German before another GI knocked the weapon from his hand.⁴⁸

While attacking the village of Meinbren, Raymond Gantter and several other GIs of the 16th Regiment, 1st Infantry Division fired upon a solitary German soldier until he decided to surrender. “Two of the newer men,” Gantter wrote in his journal, “trigger

⁴⁷ Max Hastings, *Overlord: D-Day and the Battle for Normandy* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 154.

⁴⁸ John Toland, *Battle: The Story of the Bulge* (New York: Random House, 1959), 207.

happy-and flushed with the triumph of having a Jerry pinned between their sights for the first time, instantly opened up on him.”⁴⁹ After the 4th Infantry Division fought its way off Utah beach on D-Day, one of the companies from the division’s 22nd Regiment ran into a heavily fortified German pillbox. After a prolonged cease of small arms fire, a group of Germans emerged only to be killed by several “trigger-happy boys” keyed up by their first taste of combat.⁵⁰ As William Foley attacked Sinz along the Siegfried Line, he witnessed another GI fire into a group of Germans emerging from a house. Only after one of the men lay dead, did the GI realize that the Germans were not combatants, but prisoners being escorted to the rear.⁵¹

Considering the fact that close combat was an indelible feature of the fighting in the European theater, it stands to reason that the preponderance of POW deaths occurred in the heat of battle. Nevertheless, they are the only type of prisoner killing that resulted from a temporary, combat-induced psychosis. Those that resulted from conscious decisions, and the paradigms that produced those decisions, are the focus of the remainder of the study.

⁴⁹ Raymond Gantter, *Roll Me Over: An Infantryman’s World War II* (New York: Ivy Books, 1997), 309.

⁵⁰ David Rothbart, *A Soldier’s Journal: With the 22nd Infantry Regiment in World War II* (New York: Ibooks, 2003), 190.

⁵¹ Foley, *Visions*, 28.

CHAPTER 3: THE TOUGHENING STAGE

Although GIs had little knowledge of the Geneva Convention prior to entering combat, they nevertheless understood that enemy soldiers, having laid down their weapons, deserved to be taken prisoner. After the initial shock of combat, however, soldiers quickly realized that the harsh realities of combat often hindered compliance with this rule. As Linderman notes:

Action in compliance with the rules was rarely advanced because it constituted the path of least resistances; far more often the momentum of combat favored inaction. The soldier had to exert himself to abide by the rules, and that was to enter upon processes that were complex, messy, hazardous, and costly.⁵²

In the toughening stage, soldiers learned to cope with killing by viewing the enemy as a depersonalized “other” rather than an individual. Naturally, the same mechanism that made the killing of enemy soldiers tolerable also made the killing of enemy prisoners tolerable—at least in certain situations. In this stage, the situations that resulted in POW deaths stemmed from what Niall Ferguson calls the “captor’s dilemma.”⁵³ If the enemy was merely feigning surrender to lure Americans into the open, or if nearby enemy units were unaware or disapproved of the surrender, the consequences could be fatal.

⁵² Linderman, *World within War*, 105.

⁵³ Niall Ferguson, “Prisoner Taking and Prisoner Killing in the Age of Total War: Towards a Political Economy of Military Defeat,” *War in History* 11, no. 2 (2004): 154. Although Ferguson’s “captor’s dilemma” serves the purposes of the current study, some historians challenge the applicability of placing the problem of surrender within a game theoretic framework. For a critical appraisal of Ferguson’s approach, see Brian Dollery and Craig P. Parsons, “Prisoner Taking and Prisoner Killing: A Comment on Ferguson’s Political Economy Approach,” *War in History* 14, no. 4 (2007): 499-512.

Conversely, if the GIs killed a surrenderer it would most likely stiffen enemy resistance and invite similar treatment to surrendering GIs. Because the immediacy of a combat situation demanded a rapid decision, GIs often chose to risk their future survival in order to secure it for the moment.

Fear of a False Surrender

Misinterpreted events aside, the American wariness of surrendering enemy soldiers would not have developed to such a degree had German not repeatedly feigned surrender in order to gain a tactical advantage. While fighting house-to-house in Honningen in mid-March 1945, a female antiaircraft gunner tried to trick T.C. Williams of the 394th Regiment, 99th Infantry Division. “That bitch come out with her hands up and then pulls out a burp gun and shot my sleeve out,” Williams related to a friend, “But I got her anyway.”⁵⁴ On 12 April 1945, elements of the 333rd Regiment, 84th Infantry Division were about to cross a bridge over the Aller Canal near Oppershausen when a German soldier appeared with a white flag. He motioned them across the bridge, but the wary Capt. James M. Bradford ordered his GIs to remain in place. Seeing that the trick did not work, the German ran away, the GIs shot and killed him, and the bridge exploded.⁵⁵

Unfortunately, some GIs learned their lessons the hard way. Pvt. Edward Weber of the 47th Regiment, 9th Infantry Division, learned his lesson from the crewman of a

⁵⁴ David P. Colley, *Blood for Dignity: The Story of the First Integrated Combat Unit in the U.S. Army* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003), 122-3.

⁵⁵ Theodore Draper, *The 84th Infantry Division in the Battle of Germany: November 1944-May 1945* (New York: Viking Press: 1946), 230.

damaged German tank. After seeing a white flag emerge from the turret, Webber and his squad moved in to capture the crew. Suddenly, the tank's machine gun opened fire as its crewman fled out of the bottom hatch. The GIs pinned the Germans down with rifle fire and rounded them up:

They were hollering '*Nicht scheissen! Nicht schiessen!*' But by this time we were in an infuriated rage. The crewmen were lined up on their knees and an angry soldier walked along behind them and shot each in the back of the head. The last to die was a young, blond-headed teenager who was rocking back and forth on his knees, crying and urinating down both trouser legs. He had pictures of his family spread on the ground before him. Nevertheless, he was shot in the back of the head and pitched forth like a sack of potatoes.⁵⁶

In February 1945, Morley Nelson experienced just such an incident during the fighting in Italy. As his men searched for a defensible position atop Mount Belvedere, two Germans emerged from a hidden bunker with their hands raised saying, "Nix boom, comrade." As Sgt. Stolen and two other GIs approached, the two Germans jumped to the side as their comrades in the bunker fired into the Americans. The Germans only managed to wound Stolen before the C Company men gunned them down, but it was no ordinary wound:

We saw one of the most horrible sights any man will ever see. Sergeant Stolen fell was trying to go down through the snow with blood coming out of his head and face, and he'd fall down and get up and go some more, and the men were so horrified by his injury that they couldn't gather up the strength to help out.⁵⁷

The entire episode was so traumatic that every man in C Company resolved to take no more chances with German trickery. "So from that day on, for the rest of the war,"

⁵⁶ Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers*, 352.

⁵⁷ Stuebner, *Cool North Wind*, 81-2.

Nelson declared, “Company C never took a prisoner.”⁵⁸

William Foley witnessed the results such a decision while his company awaited orders to attack Sinz in early 1945. Appearing out of the dark, two wounded Germans approached the American lines crying out, “*Kamerad!*” Fearing a trick, the GIs did not dare rise from their foxholes to capture the men. As the Germans drew closer, a burst from a Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR) blew both men back into the snow. “You’re an asshole Moore,” Foley’s squad yelled, “Get your tail out there and finish it!” Despite the exhortation, the GI refused to leave his foxhole thereby forcing the Germans to kill themselves with a grenade. “Apparently,” Foley noted, “it was not so much that he had shot men who were trying to give up, but that he was sloppy and failed to do a clean job of it.”⁵⁹

American soldiers learned to be even more suspicious of wounded enemy soldiers who tried to surrender. *Life* photographer Bob Capa learned this lesson during the crossing of the Roer River when he and a couple of riflemen saw a German soldier apparently dazed by the shelling with his arms raised in an attitude of surrender. As the trio approached, the German had lifted his hands a little higher and released a grenade from his armpit, killing one American, and wounding Capa. The German was wounded as well, but the one unscathed GI quickly shot him dead.⁶⁰

Even dead and mortally wounded enemy soldiers posed a threat. Grady Arrington recalled that it was common for a wounded German to feign submission, and then fire

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Foley, *Visions*, 20.

⁶⁰ Bill Mauldin, *The Brass Ring* (New York: Berkley Medallion Books, 1971), 320.

upon passing GIs. “Those men wounded worst were often the most vicious; they knew they were going to die, and vengeance was their only hope.”⁶¹ On 4 April 1945, for example, a German machine gun crew feigned death for nearly three hours before firing upon men of the 333rd Regiment, 84th Infantry Division overlooked an apparently. “A few men were hit,” Draper notes “but soon those machine gunners did not have to play at being dead.”⁶² A wounded German soldier tried to shoot Guy Charland as he attempted to give the poor man a drink. “Luckily for me, I caught the action in time and blew his brains out with one shot at point blank range,” Charland recalled. “His brains, parts of his skull and blood shot out all over me....it even got into my mouth.... needless to say it created a lot of trauma.”⁶³ In light of such danger, many GIs decided it was best to err on the safe side. In Normandy, a 101st Airborne paratrooper bayoneted four wounded Germans because he feared they were “play[ing] possum.” Near Königshofen on 31 March 1945, a recently captured German witnessed a similar reaction from a tanker of the 92nd Calvary Reconnaissance Squadron:

The turret hatch opened and an Ami called out something that Schmid didn’t understand. The seriously wounded Meier, shot in the stomach, begged Schmid, “Schmid, please unbuckle my belt!” As Schmid went to do this, he saw [Meir’s] serious wound. The Ami yelled again, as Schmid was about a step from where Meier lay, [then the Ami] raised his machine gun and deliberately shot Meier with a salvo.⁶⁴

⁶¹ The author used pseudonyms when referring to individuals. Grady P. Arrington, *Infantryman at the Front* (New York: Vantage Press, 1959), 165.

⁶² Theodore Draper, *The 84th Infantry Division in the Battle of Germany: November 1944-May 1945* (New York: The Viking Press: 1946), 202-3.

⁶³ Guy Charland, *Remembrance of Combat in Normandy*, Tank Books, <http://www.tankbooks.com/charland/contents.htm> (accessed 4 September 2009), 117.

⁶⁴ Stephen G. Fritz, *Endkampf: Soldiers, Civilians and the Death of the Third Reich* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 77-8.

Although it could have been a mercy killing, odds are the tanker had the same philosophy as Audie Murphy: “The only safe Germans are dead ones.”⁶⁵

The trepidation did not ease once enemy prisoners were securely in custody. After wounding a GI of the 103rd Infantry Division who advanced under a white flag to seek their surrender, a group of Germans incredulously started waving a white flag of their own. As they advanced, one of the Germans suddenly realized he still had a pistol and attempted to remove it gingerly with two fingers. Oblivious to the German’s exaggerated moments, a GI shouted, “Watch it! He’s got a gun!” and shot eight of the prisoners. As they lay dying, the Americans ignored their pleas for water. “I never felt bad about it,” Cpl. James Pemberton admitted, “these guys asked for it.”⁶⁶

The indifference to their mistake illustrates that Pemberton and his comrades so familiar with this tactic that they could overlook an occasional error in judgment. Experience had taught them that German soldiers did not always reveal their true intentions until the last moment. It was a lesson learned in blood time and again. Near Aachen, GIs of the 30th Infantry Division emptied their weapons into a captive German officer after he killed one of their comrades with a concealed pistol.⁶⁷ In Geilenkirchen, an 84th Infantry Division lieutenant died after a German stepped from a group of prisoners being searched and shot him in the head. The German met the same fate as his counterpart in Aachen. “I estimated,” Roscoe Blunt recalled, “that he had more than 100

⁶⁵ Audie Murphy, *To Hell and Back* (New York: Permabooks, 1955), 44.

⁶⁶ Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers*, 440.

⁶⁷ Doubler, *Closing with the Enemy*, 288-289.

bullet holes in him.”⁶⁸ Although Joe Peoples of the 9th Armored Division survived his experience with a hidden weapon the German did not. As he stood near a line of recently captured POWs, one of the Germans produced a hidden P-38 pistol, stuck it in Peoples’ face, and pulled the trigger. Incredibly, the hammer struck the firing pin but failed to fire a round. “It was a bad mistake,” Peoples explained. Although he immediately killed the gunman, Peoples rage was not satisfied. “After about three or four times, they wouldn’t let me take no more prisoners back,” he said with a grin, “they said too many of them escaped.”⁶⁹

Understandably, those Americans with direct exposure to German duplicity became wary of any German attempt to surrender. But this wariness was not always the result of direct experience. Replacements units and troops quickly learned, and applied, the lessons learned from combat veterans. One American unit, for example, passed along this advice: “If a Heinie begins to holler after his hands are raised in surrender give him the works as he is trying to warn others.”⁷⁰ Although taken for gospel, such advice was just as likely to be born from a misinterpretation of a legitimate surrender as it was from an actual encounter with German deception. By necessity, individual German soldiers and small units were usually unable to informing nearby comrades of their decision to surrender. Thus, it was not uncommon for Germans still in the fight to fire on GIs who exposed themselves to collect the German prisoners. Of course, even had they been

⁶⁸ Roscoe C. Blunt, Jr., *Foot Soldier: A Combat Infantryman’s War in Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), 73-4.

⁶⁹ Joe Peoples, “Joe Peoples, 9th Armored Division,” Witness to War Foundation, <http://www.witness-to-war.org/content/view.php?g=e&c=R&v=140> (accessed 3 October 2009).

⁷⁰ Kennett, *G.I.*, 161.

aware of the circumstances, it would have meant little to American soldiers who placed the burden of proof firmly upon the surrenderer. The response of one unidentified infantry company who had lost a popular sergeant in this manner was typical. The men quickly decided that it was an enemy trick and resolved to take no more prisoners.⁷¹ For many GIs, the expectation of a false surrender, rather than the fear of one, permanently resolved the captor's dilemma.

Utilitarian Factors

GIs in the toughening stage also found it difficult to comply with the rules of war because of the physical effort involved in caring and transporting POWs to collection points. Soldiers physically and mentally exhausted by the strains of front-line combat were reluctant to exert more energy on escort duty. Consequently, GIs had little patience with those prisoners who made their job more difficult. In Italy, Eric Sevareid questioned two GIs casually smoking cigarettes about the body of a dead German soldier lying at their feet. "Oh him? Son of a bitch kept lagging behind the others when we brought them in. We got tired of hurrying him up all the time." Sevareid observed so many similar events in the following weeks that he "ceased even to be surprised"⁷²

Even without provocation, GIs often killed prisoners en route to collection points in order to minimize the threat of revolt and to reduce the workload. Dick Peters, an armored infantryman in the 8th Armored Division, recalled one incident in which only half of a group of prisoners made it safely to a POW enclosure. "A lot of times," he

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Eric Sevareid, *Not So Wild a Dream* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), 388-9.

recalled, “you have to wonder to what extent we were guilty of some of that.”⁷³ In his wartime journal, J. Glenn Gray described an incident that demonstrates that officers as well as enlisted men approved of the culling process. Just as a soldier arrived with a solitary prisoner, he overheard an American officer complaining about soldiers delivering too many prisoners to the rear. The soldier chimed in, “I am doing my best, sir, I started with six!”⁷⁴

If the escort duty proved too daunting, many GIs simply chose to eliminate their workload altogether. Thomas Isabel, of the 1st Armored Division, remembered that it took two days of hard climbing to escort prisoners to the rear while on the Gothic line in Italy. “We had a Mexican in the outfit who on occasion took them down the mountain...[and] would return in about an hour’s time. He shot them so he would not have to make the trip.”⁷⁵ Three African-American members of the 99th Division made a similar decision in Western Europe. Exhausted from several days of fighting, they dreaded the thought of escorting their prisoners four miles to the rear. Since they could not refuse the detail, they killed the prisoners at the first opportunity. The prisoners never knew what hit them—even in death their hands remained raised over their heads.⁷⁶

GIs who killed prisoners in this manner had little reason fear punishment from other combat soldiers as long as such activity did not take place openly. Officers and rear echelon troops, however, were not always privy to this “open secret.” Nevertheless, GIs

⁷³ Dan Lynch and Paul Rutherford, *Into the Dragon’s Teeth: Warrior’s Tales of the Battle of the Bulge* (Albany: Whitson Publishing Company, 2006), 131-2.

⁷⁴ J. Glenn Gray, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 139.

⁷⁵ McManus, *Deadly Brotherhood*, 228-9.

⁷⁶ Colley, *Blood for Dignity*, 124.

easily avoided punishment from such men by providing a plausible excuse. En route to an attack on Iveldingen, Belgium, Charles B. MacDonald's G Company of the 23rd Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division company captured a lone German prisoner and ordered two men to take him to the rear. With darkness approaching, the GIs were afraid they would be unable to locate their company after delivering the prisoner. Thus, after only a brief absence, MacDonald spotted the men rejoining their platoons. "Did you get him back OK?" MacDonald asked. "To tell you the truth, Cap'n, we didn't get to A Company. The sonofabitch tried to make a run for it. Know what I mean?" As the reality struck home, he muttered, "Oh, I see."⁷⁷

Transporting prisoners to the rear was more than an inconvenience. Moving to the rear and then back to the front line exposed GIs to a host of dangers. During the vicious fighting in the Hürtgen Forest, antipersonnel mines and tree bursts made any movement outside of a foxhole a hazardous affair. As a result, GIs often killed the entire lot of prisoners en route to POW collection points and quickly returned to their units. A Hürtgen veteran of the 22nd Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Division explained, "If you try to take them back you're taking your life in your hand twice. So a lot of them never reached the rear that way."⁷⁸ During the Battle of the Bulge, the fighting proved equally inhospitable to prisoner taking. When tankers from Douglas Vink's unit of the 6th Armored Division captured prisoners near Bastogne, it was up to the accompanying infantrymen to escort them to the rear. "They'd get back in the woods a little bit, and

⁷⁷ Charles B. MacDonald, *Company Commander* (Short Hills, NJ: Burford Books, 1999), 125-6.

⁷⁸ The 22nd Infantry Regiment suffered an 87 percent casualty rate (3,210 men) on its first day of fighting in the Hürtgen Forest. Lynn, *Battle*, 251-2.

you'd hear some gunfire, and all of a sudden the infantry guy is back, and you'd know that they didn't make it to the command post."⁷⁹

Tactical Limitations

In addition to fatigue and inhospitable terrain, GIs in the toughening stage often found themselves in tactical situations that prevented them from complying with the rules of war. In regard to caring for enemy wounded, supply and manpower shortages often made it nearly impossible to observe the Geneva Convention requirements. On occasion, the only care a GI could provide was a *coup de grace*. After entering Schomerich, Germany, William Foley's unit became surrounded by the 6th SS Mountain Division. After a failed attempt to dislodge the Americans, many wounded and dead Germans littered the streets. Surrounded and running low on supplies, the Americans were unable to care or guard their wounded prisoners. One Foley's comrades took the initiative and walked among the bodies, killing the wounded SS men where they lay.⁸⁰

As a paratrooper in the 101st Airborne Division, Donald Burgett experienced several similar situations. During the dark days of fighting around Bastogne, Burgett came across a gray-haired German soldier sitting in the snow with a wounded leg. Before he could disarm the man, another trooper shot the German in the stomach and said, "We've got no choice. Actually, I've done him a favor. At least he won't freeze to

⁷⁹ Lynch, *Dragon's Teeth*, 131-2.

⁸⁰ Foley, *Visions*, 195.

death.”⁸¹ Later, he and another trooper discovered a group of seriously wounded Germans hiding behind a cluster of tree stumps. Nothing could be done. The troopers had neither the supplies to help them nor the men to guard them. But rather than kill them personally, the troopers destroyed all of the Germans’ weapons except one. As the troopers walked back to their lines, Burgett heard several bursts of fire and “hoped the wounded Germans had enough ammo to go around.”⁸²

Americans also delivered a *coup de grace* when the tactical situation made medical treatment a possibility. If the wound appeared to be fatal, or the enemy soldier was in a great deal of pain, nearly every GIs felt compelled to end the misery. Shortly after D-Day, Burgett and another paratrooper killed two Germans badly burned and mangled from an artillery shell. German soldiers. “We both took aim and fired at the same time, it was the least we could do for them.”⁸³ Near the Saar River in Belgium, Lt. James Magellas and his 82nd Airborne Division men heard a wounded German cry for help. “I’ll help him,” said a GI as he delivered a head shot. “Now he’s not in pain.”⁸⁴ After witnessing an American kill a similarly wounded soldier, Frank Irgang of the 29th

⁸¹ Donald R. Burgett, *Seven Roads to Hell: A Screaming Eagle at Bastogne* (New York: Dell Publishing, 2000), 162-3.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 171-3.

⁸³ Donald R. Burgett, *Currahee!: A Screaming Eagle at Normandy* (New York: Dell Publishing, 2000), 148-9.

⁸⁴ James Magellas, *All the Way to Berlin: A Paratrooper at War in Europe* (New York: Presidio Press, 2003), 254.

Infantry Division opined, “It was better, for there would have been no hope for him. He would have merely suffered on a few more hours.”⁸⁵

Many GIs who found it difficult to pull the trigger were nevertheless thankful that someone else did. In Belgium, Harold Leinbaugh, a company commander in the 333rd Regiment, 84th Infantry Division, came across a German soldier whose leg had been cut off mid-thigh. In English, the German quietly said, “Please shoot me.” Although Leinbaugh knew the man suffered from a mortal wound, he could not bring himself to shoot an unarmed man. One of the company’s veteran sergeants has no such qualms. “Hell,” the sergeant explained, “you know I couldn’t walk off and leave the poor son of a bitch to die like that.”⁸⁶ In Normandy, Pvt. Arthur Schultz of the 82nd Airborne Division watched his close friend place the muzzle of his rifle between the crying eyes of wounded German and pull the trigger. “There was no change in my friend’s facial expression,” Schultz recalled, “I don’t believe he even blinked an eye.”⁸⁷ SSgt. Grady Arrington of the 395th Infantry Regiment, 99th Infantry Division was just as reluctant as Schultz and Leinbaugh when he found a wounded German begging for mercy near the Weid River. “Shoot him,” his companion snapped, “Hell, he’s about to die; he needs to get outa [sic] the misery. I already killed two to your none!” The German understood the argument and started pleading for his life with all the strength he could muster. In order to gather

⁸⁵ Frank J. Irgang, *Etched in Purple: One Soldier’s War in Europe* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2008), 222.

⁸⁶ Harold P. Leinbaugh and John D. Campbell, *The Men of Company K: The Autobiography of a World War II Rifle Company* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 187.

⁸⁷ Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers*, 47.

the strength to pull the trigger, Arrington conjured up images of his dead comrades. With one shot, he crying German writhed to silence.⁸⁸

GIs encountered tactical situations that prevented them from caring for healthy prisoners as well. “Taking prisoners,” John Irwin of the 3rd Armored Division lamented, “always involved delays until headquarters could send men to bring the prisoners to the nearest cages.”⁸⁹ While such delays represented a mere inconvenience to troops in the defense, they could be both detrimental and deadly to small patrols and units engaged in an attack. In the latter scenarios, a soldier who resolved the first captor’s dilemma without bloodshed faced yet another dilemma: keep, release, or kill. Detaching troops to care for prisoners could reduce the combat efficiency of units already operating well under strength. Releasing prisoners was even more dangerous because it would compromise the Americans’ mission and survivability. Even if GIs would have been willing to risk such a thing, the dislike the idea releasing prisoners only to fight them again another day. With so many risks attached to the first two options, many Americans chose the last one.

On one such occasion, Raymond Smith of the 10th Armored Division witnessed a GI put a .45 pistol to a German prisoner’s head and pulled the trigger. “A lot of times...I don’t know if it’s an excuse or a reason, you don’t have anything to do with ‘em. You don’t have the men to take care of ‘em, to guard ‘em, you know?”⁹⁰ In September 1944,

⁸⁸ Arrington, *Infantryman*, 165-6.

⁸⁹ John P. Irwin, *Another River, Another Town: A Teenage Tank Gunner Comes of Age in Combat, 1945* (New York: Random House, 2002), 74.

⁹⁰ Raymond Smith, “Raymond Smith, 10th Armored,” Witness to War Foundation, <http://www.witness-to-war.org/content/view.php?g=e&c=R&v=46> (accessed 3 October 2009).

Frank Irgang operated as a medic for his company as they conducted a fighting retreat from a French town. He need litter bearers for six wounded GIs, so he decided to commandeer some German POWs. One soldier pointed to a blasted building where they were being kept. “Haven’t taken many lately,” the GI mused sardonically, “We’re not fighting that kind of war right now.”⁹¹

During a firefight, the difficulty of caring for prisoners increased dramatically. Men assigned to guard prisoners could severely compromise the Americans’ ability to defend themselves. Facing the real prospect of death, not just its possibility, made the decision kill prisoners instinctual. Al Cohen of the 359th Regiment, 90th Infantry Division, came under fire while questioning prisoner captured in a German town. “I got rid of that Kraut,” Cohen said plainly, “and we ran into the building.”⁹² During the attack on Sinz, German mortar fire caught William Foley’s squad in the open with two German POWs. From the relative safety of a nearby house, a sergeant yelled, “Shoot the prisoners and get over here!” Foley automatically relayed the message through the deafening explosions. “As several rifle shots sounded,” Foley recalled, “I realized numbly that my voice had carried the death sentence...to the POWs.”⁹³

At times, the decision-making process was more methodical than instinctual. Trapped inside a house in no-man’s-land, Irwin Shapiro and several other members of the 8th Armored Division came under a sudden, concentrated attack. The men realized that a fast retreat, their only chance for survival, would be impossible to conduct with several

⁹¹ Irgang, *Etched in Purple*, 86.

⁹² Lynch, *Dragon’s Teeth*, 150.

⁹³ Foley, *Visions*, 30.

German prisoners in tow. Shapiro's sergeant solved the issue as he calmly went up to each German, put a pistol between his eyes, and pulled the trigger.⁹⁴

Just as Charles MacDonald's company attacked the German town of Bendorf-Sayn, orders came down to shift the attack to another town. "We've got three prisoners in the basement of a house," one platoon leader radioed, "and we have to cross a hundred yards of open field to get back out. We'll never make it with the prisoners." MacDonald, like many officers in such situations, gave an order without *giving* an order. "Roger, do what you can," When the platoon arrived without any prisoners, MacDonald deflected the responsibility for the illegal act upon his men. "They are going to win the war," he thought, "so I don't suppose it really matters."⁹⁵

In March 1945, Foley's unit became surrounded in Schomerich by the 6th SS Mountain Division. The SS repeatedly attacked in such force that the Americans' began to doubt their ability to survive the night. With every man needed in the defense, Foley's first sergeant ordered him to kill two SS prisoners held in a church serving as the company command post. Foley hesitated, but the first sergeant's scream motivated him to herd the prisoners behind the church and shoot both men in the head. He quickly scavenged some food from the dead men's pocket before trotting off to rejoin his platoon. Wasting food was a crime.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ McManus, *Deadly Brotherhood*, 230.

⁹⁵ MacDonald, *Company Commander*, 155-7.

⁹⁶ Foley, *Visions*, 193-4.

CHAPTER 4: THE COARSENING STAGE

If soldiers experienced prolonged combat or their particular experience with intermittent combat was sufficiently brutal, depersonalization of the enemy eventually transformed into dehumanization. In the coarsening stage, the lines between combatant and noncombatant began to blur as they directed their callousness towards civilians and enemy prisoners. For those GIs, the desire for revenge served as a primary motivation for prisoner killings. Before continuing, it must be noted that historians often use revenge as an explanation for POW killing despite evidence suggesting the contrary. To be fair, it is deceptively easy to accept the revenge explanation from eyewitnesses even though such statements are mere conjecture. For example, in *Citizen Soldiers*, Stephen Ambrose includes an account from Sgt. Otis Sampson who witnessed another NCO kill several POWs in Normandy. In the absence of any contextual information, the reader is left with Sampson's explanation, "There must have been some hate in his heart."⁹⁷ It is even easier to accept explanations provided by those who *actually* participated in POW killings. In a televised oral history interview about his D-Day experience, Harold Baumgarten of the 116th Regiment, 29th Infantry Division, provided an apparent example of revenge killing, "We didn't take any prisoners. We were really upset, you know, from the beach."⁹⁸ Information provided in his memoir, however, paints a different picture:

⁹⁷ Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers*, 32.

⁹⁸ Harold Baumgarten interview, "Western Front: The Longest Day," *Hitler's War*, History International, 5 May 2005.

We worked our way up the bluff and headed for the west side of Vierville....Soon we came under automatic gunfire from a nest of five German soldiers. One of our fighters got hit in the neck and died quickly. *After about one hour* [emphasis mine], the skirmish was over and we had prevailed. I know I nailed one of the enemy....Three of the enemy tried to surrender, but my guys were in no mood to take prisoners....our Ranger comrade, in a fit of anger, had emptied his submachine gun into them.⁹⁹

While the documentary presented evidence to suggest revenge as a motivation, the autobiography revealed that the heat of battle is a more likely explanation.

So what is the point? What does it matter whether or not revenge motivated a POW killing? At some level, are they not all acts of revenge? According to David Grossman, revenge, like all other post-surrender motives for killing prisoners, is simply an excuse proffered by soldiers to rationalize their involvement in atrocity. Therefore, “we can better understand the nature of this phenomenon” only by “examin[ing] atrocity as a spectrum of occurrences rather than a precisely defined type of occurrences.”¹⁰⁰ Apparently, Grossman is of the belief that such moral platitudes and vague generalizations can expose truths about POW killing inaccessible to objective research and meticulous investigation.

Grossman is not the only historian to perpetuate misconceptions about revenge as a motive. Many Good War historians demonstrate an inclination bordering upon eagerness to settle for any evidence, however vague, that may suggest revenge as a motivating factor. The reason, quite simply, is acceptability. Nearly everyone can empathize with the GI who killed a prisoner in a fit of grief and rage at the loss of a comrade. Empathy leads to understanding, understanding leads to rationalization, and

⁹⁹ Harold Baumgarten, *D-Day Survivor: An Autobiography* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 2006), 82-3.

¹⁰⁰ Grossman, *On Killing*, 195.

rationalization leads to validation. If American involvement in POW killings cannot be denied, validating the behavior is the next best thing. The unacceptable becomes the acceptable and the Good War mythos survives.

Revenge for the Death or Wounding of a Comrade

Considering that the alternatives are wholesale condemnation or glorification, it is makes sense to define revenge killings. For those GIs in the coarsening stage, the only acts motivated purely by revenge were those committed in response to the death or wounding of a comrade. Contrary to popular belief, only occasionally did GIs have the opportunity to punish the actual German soldier responsible for inflicting wounds or death. After an attack on a German town near the autobahn, Frank Irgang wrote, “I watched one enemy machine gunner beaten to death with his own weapon because he was known to have inflicted casualties upon us.”¹⁰¹ Ed Laughlin of the 82nd Airborne witnessed a similar reaction to a German forward observer responsible for directing mortar and artillery fire upon American troops. “He had tried to surrender but instead had been hung by his own belt for the killing and maiming of our troops.”¹⁰²

More often than not, however, GIs found it impossible to identify the individuals whose actions had created the desire for revenge. In such cases, GIs felt no qualms about holding an entire enemy responsible. While escorting a dozen prisoners captured in an attack near Würm, Germany, an 84th Division soldier claimed he killed four of the prisoners because they had “jumped him and tried to escape.” Apparently, the fact that

¹⁰¹ Irgang, *Etched in Purple*, 219-20.

¹⁰² McManus, *Deadly Brotherhood*, 223-4.

he had just lost his best friend in the attack was not lost on his superiors. Although never questioned about the incident, he never again received escort duty.¹⁰³ On Christmas Eve 1944, just outside of the town of Bourdon, an attack by K Company, 333rd Regiment, 84th Infantry Division to dislodge a sizable German force faltered because the destruction of the lead tank blocked the only avenue of advance. Distraught over the loss of his comrades, a GI from a surviving tank drew his pistol and killed two prisoners marching to the rear.¹⁰⁴ The experience of 17 year-old Friedrich Schmidthausen of the 116th Panzer Division provides a rare account of American revenge from the German perspective. After capturing Budberg, members of the 95th Infantry Division forced Schmidthausen and thirteen other German prisoners to view the bodies of American soldiers killed in the assault.

We were informed at 1030 hours that we would be shot toward 1830 hours in the evening. In the course of the afternoon, the seven youngest of us were picked out to be shot ahead of the others. However, this plan was dropped after the insistence of [our] infantry lieutenant and our protests. Toward 1800 hours, the Americans took us to their command post....During the march through Budberg, the commanding officer gave orders to line us up and fire.¹⁰⁵

Schmidthausen was hit seven times, but managed escape and find his way to a German field hospital. Despite his wounds, Schmidthausen was lucky, only two other prisoners survived—the rest died in the street.

The death of a friend could also drive Americans to exact their revenge upon German soldiers who obviously had no responsibility for the act. This was especially

¹⁰³ Leinbaugh and Campbell, *Company K*, 53-4.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁰⁵ Heinz Günther Guderian, *From Normandy to the Ruhr: With the 116th Panzer Division in World War II* (Bedford, PA: Aberjona Press, 2001), 452-3.

true in cases which American soldiers learned if a GI did not witness the event. Such a soldier, J. Glenn Gray observed:

has commonly made a vast extension of his personal hatred to all who speak the language and wear the uniform of the enemy. To him, they become all alike and to kill one is as good as to kill any other. Hence, he is not fighting men but embodiments of undifferentiated evil....Instead of *the* enemy, they have become *my* enemies.¹⁰⁶

In his memoir, *Dirt and Doughfeet*, 2nd Lt. Howard Randall of the 76th Infantry Division recalled just such a reaction from a rifle company commander who learned that shell fragments had blinded his brother. Weeping, the captain ordered his driver to take him to a nearby wooded area. Once there, he shouted for any Germans hiding in the woods to come out and surrender. After searching the seven soldiers who emerged, the captain

backed up several paces, calmly raised his pistol higher and shot each German in the head in rapid succession....The next two registered horror....The last three...were hit in the back of the head as they turned and started to run.¹⁰⁷

The driver doubled over and vomited as the captain “drove like a wild man” from the scene.¹⁰⁸

Personal losses could also inspire other GIs to assist an individual with his act of revenge. On 27 January 1945, Lt. Richard (Rivers) G. LaRiviere of the 82nd Airborne learned of his brother’s death in combat through a Red Cross message “Maggie,” he whispered to his friend Lt. James Magellas, “we will make them pay for it tomorrow. There will be no prisoners taken.” In the attack on Herresbach the next day, the two platoons led by LaRiviere and Magellas stumbled upon an entire battalion of German

¹⁰⁶ Gray, *Warriors*, 140.

¹⁰⁷ Linderman, *World Within War*, 125.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

troops. In the midst of the ensuing battle, Magellas found the opportunity to help his friend exact vengeance. As Pfc. Julian Romero attempted to disarm a German soldier, Magellas yelled, "Get out of the way," and shot the German with his Thompson sub-machine gun. Spotting LaRiviere, he cried out, "Rivers, there's one more for Roland." Magellas was not satisfied with just one act of revenge. Within minutes, Sgt. Crowder him call out, "here are two more for your brother."¹⁰⁹

Magellas' actions near Herresbach were indicative of acts of vengeance exacted upon random enemy prisoners. Punishing "guiltless" German soldiers in lieu of the actual perpetrators yielded only a limited amount of satisfaction. Thus, revenge in quantity, rather than the quality of revenge, became the goal. For a 19-year-old soldier in the 1st Infantry Division, nicknamed Junior, the loss of two brothers in Normandy had made the war an extremely personal affair. "It had become a court-martial offense to send a prisoner back with Junior," Capt. Charles Stockell said jokingly. During the Battle of the Bulge, Junior's commanding officer ordered him to run a message to another company. As he trotted off down the street, a German who had been hiding in a nearby house revealed himself in an attempt to surrender. "*Kamerad! Kamerad!*," the German exclaimed as he bowed and smiled. Junior never broke stride as he pulled his pistol and shot the man in the face. "The CO swore and dashed his helmet to the ground," Stockwell recalled, "Junior had struck again."¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Magellas, *All the Way*, 270.

¹¹⁰ Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers*, 353-4.

Violations of the American Combat Ethos

Revenge was not the only motivation for POW killing experienced by American soldiers in the coarsening stage of combat stress. As mentioned previously, GIs in the European theater developed their beliefs about proper combat behavior around the traditional American sense of fair play and justice. Responses to violations by the enemy depended largely upon the emotional state of the soldier. Some GIs chose to curse and complain, while others chose to physically abuse enemy prisoners. Soldiers who had entered the coarsening stage and created a dehumanized image of the enemy chose a different response. They chose to kill.

Because of the ad hoc nature of the American combat ethos, the differentiation between proper and improper enemy behavior depended largely upon how GIs perceived that behavior. In some cases, international law served as the foundation for the perception of improper behavior. What the law *actually* prohibited, however, was not as important as what GIs *thought* it prohibited. If they believed a particular behavior was illegal, as well as underhanded, GIs felt even more justified in responding with violence.

Americans believed international law justified the summary execution of spies even though The Hague Convention of 1907 did not prohibit spying and condemned summary executions. Although the American eighth article of war denounced spying, it prohibited field expedient justice. The death penalty required a court-martial conviction, "Spies are punished, not as violators of the laws of war, but to render that method of obtaining information as dangerous, difficult, and ineffective as possible for

the enemy.”¹¹¹ Of course, GIs were in no position to concern themselves with ambiguous legal definitions, when, on rare occasions, they managed to capture a spy. In North Africa, Steven Sally and some comrades from the 1st Infantry Division caught a group of Arabs spying for the Germans. “We lined them up...made them dig their graves...and shot them.”¹¹² In Alsace-Lorraine, Lawrence Nickell’s outfit of the 5th Infantry Division was baffled by relatively accurate artillery fire in an area not observable by the Germans. “A few nights later a civilian was detected signaling the Germans with a flashlight and...summarily executed.”¹¹³

Americans also believed that the laws of war prohibited medics from enemy fire. Although, the Geneva Convention stated that medical personnel “shall be respected and protected under all circumstances” the *Rules of Land Warfare* warned soldiers that the accidental wounding or death of such personnel “affords no just cause for complaint.” Certainly, there were instances in which Germans intentionally fired upon American medics. At Brest, for instance, a German shot an American medic in the center of the Red Cross emblem on his helmet. In response, the GIs refused to take prisoners for the next several hours.¹¹⁴ It only took one such experience for American units to forgo the

¹¹¹ According to Article 29 of the *Hague Convention*, “A person can only be considered a spy when, acting clandestinely or on false pretences, he obtains or endeavors to obtain information in the zone of operations of a belligerent, with the intention of communicating it to the hostile party.” Article 30 states “a spy taken in the act shall not be punished without previous trial.” Article 30 states “a spy taken in the act shall not be punished without previous trial.” On page 58 of *Rules of Land Warfare* it states, “Any person who in time of war shall be found lurking or acting as a spy in or about any of the fortifications, posts, quarters, or encampments of any of the armies of the United States, or elsewhere, shall be tried by a general court martial or by military commission, and shall, on conviction thereof, suffer death.”

¹¹² McManus, *Deadly Brotherhood*, 78.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Doubler, *Closing*, 288.

possibility that such acts were unintentional. As Charlie Keen, a medic in the 517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team, recalled, “We [the medics] were all shot at one time or another. When that happened, no German dared stick his head or hand up with a white flag.”¹¹⁵

The misconception that international law prohibited medics from carrying weapons created a deadly response as well.¹¹⁶ Americans assumed that armed German medics were not only violating the Geneva Convention but also trying to take advantage of their noncombatant status. During the early fighting in Normandy, 101st Airborne Division paratrooper David Webster’s unit captured a German Red Cross vehicle that accidentally drove into the American lines. They took the vehicle, shot the medic for carrying a pistol, and left the two wounded German soldiers to die by the road.”¹¹⁷ Little did they know that German medics often carried pistols because they offered the best medicine to men wounded beyond hope.¹¹⁸

The influence of logic and international law (or misconception of it) upon the American combat ethos should not be over-emphasized. In most cases, enemy behavior motivated a deadly response because it was feared and despised. Such was the case with

¹¹⁵ Astor, *Battling Buzzards*, 183.

¹¹⁶ “The following conditions are not considered to be of such a nature as to deprive a medical formation or establishment of the protection guaranteed by Article 6: 1. That the personnel of the formation or establishment is armed, and that they use the arms in their own defense or in that of the sick and wounded in charge; 2. That in the absence of armed orderlies the formation or establishment is protected by a piquet or by sentries; 3. That small arms and ammunition taken from the wounded and sick, which have not yet been transferred to the proper service, are found in the formation or establishment.” Article 8, *Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armies in the Field*. Geneva, 27 July 1929, International Committee of the Red Cross, <http://www.icrc.org/ihl.nsf/FULL/300?OpenDocument> (accessed 5 September 2009).

¹¹⁷ Webster, *Parachute Infantry*, 56.

¹¹⁸ Irgang, *Etched in Purple*, 37.

snipers. Interestingly, GIs demonstrated little animosity towards snipers during the North African, Sicilian, and Italian campaigns. Things changed, however, after the Germans began employing snipers on a large scale in Normandy. The hedgerow country of Northwestern France provided ideal ground for snipers to inflict a large number of casualties and severely hamper troop movement. Constantly hiding and ducking from an unseen enemy conflicted with the American concept of a fair fight. As war correspondent Ernie Pyle noted, “Sniping, as far as I know, is recognized as a legitimate means of warfare. And yet there is something sneaking about it that outrages the American sense of fairness”¹¹⁹

Beginning in Normandy, a consensus developed among American troops that enemy snipers did not deserve the treatment as legitimate combatants. Such hypocrisy was not lost on Lester Atwell of the 345th Regiment, 87th Infantry Division, “The reaction to snipers was both understandable and a puzzle. We had snipers of our own, skilled soldiers, picked for their intelligence and keen eyesight....It always struck me as odd: the enemy snipers were unspeakable villains; our own were heroes.”¹²⁰ Double standard or not, very few German snipers survived attempts to surrender. Just after crossing the Saar River, William Foley managed to wound a sniper dug into a rocky cliff. As soon as the German rose up shouting “Kamerad!” one of Foley’s comrades shot and killed him. “After the initial shock at Salazar’s action,” Foley recalled, “I realized he was right because of the situation we were in. Later, when I learned that a grenade fragment had cut Salazar’s neck and removed his dog tags. I could even better understand his reaction.

¹¹⁹ Ernie Pyle, *Brave Men*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1944), 373.

¹²⁰ Lester Atwell, *Private*, (New York: Popular Library, 1958), 326-7.

We hated snipers.”¹²¹ While advancing towards Suggesterath, Germany, a sniper managed to kill a member of Roscoe Blunt’s unit of the 333 Infantry Regiment, 84th Infantry Division before he flushed out of a building. “We surrounded him and then, in a spontaneous outburst of hatred, every man in the squad fired at once and then spat on the lifeless German. It was one for one. From many such instances later, I later learned that snipers were seldom taken alive unless they were needed by G-2 for information.”¹²²

Even the American high command understood that snipers did not deserve the privileges afforded to legitimate combatants. Lt. Col. Chester B. Hansen, Gen. Omar Bradley’s First Army Assistant Division Commander, wrote, “Brad says that he will not take any action against anyone who decides to treat snipers a little more roughly than they are being treated at present....A sniper cannot sit around and shoot and then capture when you close in on him. That’s not the way to play the game.”¹²³ After taking heavy casualties on Omaha Beach, 1st Infantry Division commander Gen. Huebner supported his men’s refusal to accept a sniper’s surrender. In his report to Gen. Hodges he noted, “Could have taken four yesterday easily, but preferred to kill them.”¹²⁴ In March 1945, Lester Atwell witnessed Gen. Purvis order a lieutenant to beat a recently captured sniper in Lissendorf, Germany. After the lieutenant administered a “sound beating with large, solid fists,” the general ordered the prisoner to dig his own grave and had him shot. As

¹²¹ Foley, *Visions*, 107.

¹²² Blunt, *Foot Soldier*, 75.

¹²³ Hastings, *Overlord*, 210.

¹²⁴ Charles Whiting, *44: In Combat from Normandy to the Ardennes* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2001), 66.

he stared at the corpse the general remarked, “That’s the way to treat these sons of bitches.”¹²⁵

Although many high-ranking Americans approved of such behavior, they could not always openly endorse it. One month after the Lissendorf incident, Atwell’s unit forced the surrender of a group of German teenagers from a nearby military school who were manning a roadblock outside Tambach. As the defenders approached, snipers killed two Americans and wounded several others, threw down their weapons, and put their hands in the air. As with all such late surrenders, the snipers did not survive the encounter. Over the next half-hour, the Americans rounded up more prisoners and sent them to the rear. A replacement officer, Lieutenant Morse, surveyed the stream of prisoners and said, “Let’s kill some of these sonsofbitches. Do I get any volunteers?” Many enlisted men raised their hands, but the officers remained silent. The commanding officer of C Company, Lieutenant MacKenzie shook his head but said nothing. A captain and his staff, within hearing distance, looked the other way and likewise remained silent. Morse and seven volunteers halted a passing line of prisoners, marched ten of them out of sight, and shot them. The GIs returned for the remaining eight Germans and marched them to the same spot. Seeing their dead comrades, the Germans screamed and began to run. All were shot down.¹²⁶

Later that month, a fellow officer chided General Purvis for the incident, forcing him to order an investigation to save face. The division’s Inspector General made a tour of Atwell’s battalion and asked each man the same two questions. “Did you see any

¹²⁵ The author used pseudonyms when referring to individuals. Lester Atwell, *Private* (New York: Popular Library, 1958), 326-327, 534.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 427-30.

German prisoners killed at Tambach? Do you know any man who killed any German prisoners at Tambach?" The questions puzzled Atwell, "Didn't the Inspector general realize that the prisoners killed at Tambach were not the only ones who had been killed? Time and time again in combat we heard, 'The boys aren't taking any prisoners today,' and that always meant the prisoners were being shot." Every battalion headquarters man, including Atwell, gave the same answer. "No sir."¹²⁷

Ten minutes prior to the Inspector General's arrival at C Company, someone from the battalion headquarters phoned Lt. Mackenzie to warn him. MacKenzie and Morse had previously agreed to deny any involvement in the killings. But what to do about the rest of the company? MacKenzie hurriedly called a company formation to remind them, "They saw nothing, they knew nothing. Not a damn thing." The plan worked initially, but the Inspector General's repeated visits eventually broke the young Lt. Morse. In a cunning move, he convinced Morse to confess by proffering the lie that MacKenzie had recently confessed himself. Not content with just one confession, the Inspector General placed Mackenzie on trial.¹²⁸

During the trial, MacKenzie repeatedly denied any knowledge of the event but the court was not satisfied. Midway through the proceedings, a bout of appendicitis bought MacKenzie a temporary reprieve in a field hospital. As he lay in bed, he had an epiphany. Through a secret courier, Mackenzie asked the First Sergeant of another company to sign an affidavit that he witnessed Gen. Purvis' POW killing in Lissendorf. The First Sergeant severely disliked the general and returned an affidavit signed by him

¹²⁷ Ibid., 466-7.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 533.

and fifteen other men. When the trial resumed, the affidavit was handed to General Purvis with the suggestion that his action in Lissendorf “had been taken as an example and dutifully copied” by his men in Tambach. In consternation, the general quickly dropped the charges.¹²⁹

The Biscari Incident

Although Mackenzie’s court-martial ended in a Hollywood-like manner, it does not represent the only time a GI faced the consequences of a high-ranking officer’s hypocritical attitude towards snipers. During the invasion of Sicily, Captain John T. Compton and members of the 180th Infantry Regiment, 45th Infantry Division captured 36 Italian soldiers who had been sniping at them throughout the assault on the Biscari airport. Within ten minutes of their capture, all 36 men would be dead. Knowledge of the event soon spread to those outside the combat brotherhood, which in turn, forced Gen. Omar Bradley to initiate a face-saving investigation. In the subsequent court-martial, Compton also relied upon a *respondeat superior* plea to avoid conviction. But Compton had something MacKenzie did not—a friendly court.

On 10 July 1943, the U.S. Seventh Army under Lt. General George Patton and the British Eighth Army under Gen. Sir Bernard Montgomery invaded the southeast corner of Sicily. As part of Lieutenant General Omar H. Bradley’s II Corps, the 45th Division was given a difficult task despite the fact that it was the only “green” Division participating in the invasion. The 45th Division’s 157th and 179th Infantry Regiments were tasked with capturing several coastal towns and the Comiso airfield before linking

¹²⁹ Ibid., 533-5.

up with the Canadian 1st Division. The 180th Infantry Regiment was tasked with capturing the Biscari airfield and linking up the American 1st Infantry Division. It was an ambitious task for any division, much more so for a completely green one like the 45th.¹³⁰

As commander of C Company, 1st Battalion, 180th Infantry Regiment, Captain John T. Compton landed south of the Acate River amidst sporadic mortar and small arms fire. Pursuing his first objective, he pushed his company towards Highway 115, joined with some 82nd Airborne paratroopers, and attacked several German positions. Amazingly, Compton did not sleep during the first three days of the invasion. He was simply “too excited to sleep.” On the fourth day, he managed to grab about an hour and a half of sleep before the attack on the Biscari airfield. Around 11:00 P.M., C Company set off and reached the airfield around 11:00 A.M. the next day. Immediately they began to receive artillery, mortar, and sniper fire. The sniper fire was especially deadly. From a concealed position in a nearby draw, the snipers targeted wounded GIs as well as the medics attempting to aid them. Out of 34 men in Compton’s 2nd Platoon, 12 were either wounded or killed.¹³¹

In an attempt to locate the snipers’ firing position, Pvt. Raymond C. Marlow crept down into a nearby draw. He had only gone about 25 yards into the draw before he spotted an Italian soldier with rifle. Marlow raised his rifle and shouted at the Italian. The Italian ran away and entered a dugout that was located further in the draw. After a minute or two, the Italian soldier emerged with thirty-five others, several of which were in civilian clothing. Marlow walked them up the hill to his outpost and reported to his

¹³⁰ Flint Whitlock, *The Rock of Anzio: from Sicily to Dachau, a History of the U.S. 45th Infantry Division* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2005), 37-8.

¹³¹ Compton testimony, Trial Proper, *Compton Court Martial*, 60-62.

squad leader, Sgt. Hair. “I told him that I had gotten those fellows that were shooting at us while we were getting out from under that artillery fire,” Marlow reported. Acting as an interpreter, Pvt. John Gazzetti asked the prisoners if they had been acting as snipers. He got no response. Hair herded the prisoners out of the draw and asked 1st Lieutenant Blanks what he should do with them. Blanks, in turn, asked Compton for instructions. Compton asked Blanks if he was sure that they were the same snipers that had been shooting at them all day. When Blanks answered in the affirmative, Compton said bluntly, “Get them shot.” Without hesitation, Blanks ordered hair to assemble a firing squad and shoot the prisoners.¹³²

Compton accompanied the firing squad of about 11 men to the ridge overlooking the draw.¹³³ He told the GIs to line up and they positioned themselves about six feet away from the prisoners. The prisoners started pleading for them not to shoot. Gazzetti, the interpreter, asked Compton if he had anything to say to the prisoners. Compton did not have anything he wanted to ask them. Compton told the men to commence firing on his order and that he “didn’t want a man left standing when the firing was done.” Seeing that their fate was sealed, a few of the prisoners began to run. The firing squad opened fire and killed all of the prisoners.¹³⁴

¹³² Marlow, Hair, Gazzetti, and Blanks testimony, Trial Proper, *Compton Court-Martial*, 27-34, 15-6, 35, 7-9.

¹³³ The exact number of men who participated in the firing squad is unclear, but evidence suggests the involvement of Lt. Blanks, Sgt. Jim Hair, Sgt. Kern Jones, Sgt. Freeland Douglas, Sgt. Jack Wilson, Sgt. Julius Thompson, Pvt. John Carroll, Pvt. Raymond Marlow, Pvt. John Gazzetti, Pvt. Earl Barnett, and Pvt. Salcidu. “Statement made by Pvt John Gazzetti, 32204829, Co. C, 180th Infantry,” and “Statement made by Sgt Jim Hair, 20828237, Co C, 180th Infantry,” Inspector General’s Report, *Compton Court-Martial*.

¹³⁴ Gazzetti and Compton testimony, Trial Proper, *Compton Court-Martial*.

The shooting of the Italian prisoners at the Biscari airport did not go unnoticed. The commanding general of the 45th Division directed the division's Inspector General, Lt. Col. William O. Perry, to conduct an investigation into the event. During 15 July to 31 July 1943, Perry conducted an investigation in the field by interviewing Lt. Blanks, Capt. Compton, Pvt. Gazzetti, Pvt. Marlow, and Sgt. Hair. When asked about his reasons for killing the prisoners, Compton said:

Many wounded and the aid man with those wounded were sniped and picked at all the way down the ridge after the first bunch of snipers had inflicted the casualties I had just mentioned. I didn't have a doubt in my mind that those were the snipers....The past day's actions, several prisoners had been turned in to me and I sent the prisoners to the rear. These people aren't prisoners to me, they were snipers, so I had them shot.¹³⁵

The investigation determined that the killings were "neither justifiable nor excusable" and that "there is no competent evidence of any acts on their part that would warrant their execution." As the commanding officer, Compton was solely responsible. The other men simply thought they were carrying out legal orders. The investigation noted that the Compton's recent prolonged initial combat experience might have caused him to be "so mentally disturbed as to be legally insane." The investigation, therefore, recommended that a board of medical officers determine Compton's sanity before preferring any charges.¹³⁶

The medical board found Compton sane both at the time of the shooting and during the investigation. As a result, on the morning of 23 October 1943, Compton was

¹³⁵ "Statement made by Captain John T. Compton, 0-406922, Co C, 180th Infantry," Inspector General's Report, *Compton Court-Martial*.

¹³⁶ Inspector General's Report, *Compton Court-Martial*.

tried in the field by a general court-martial for violating the 92nd Article of War.¹³⁷ The charge sheet specified that Compton:

with malice aforethought, willfully, deliberately, feloniously, and with premeditation kill thirty-six prisoners of war, whose true names are unknown, each of them a human being by ordering them and each of them shot with Browning Automatic Rifles and Thompson Sub-Machine Guns.¹³⁸

Compton pled not guilty and, after several hours of testimony, was acquitted by secret ballot of two-thirds of the members of the court late in the afternoon.¹³⁹

The investigation, trial, and acquittal of Capt. John T. Compton reveals several key elements of the GIs' combat ethos. First, it reveals the reluctance of American officers to convict one of their own. All of the members of the court were members of the 45th Division, and most were members of its infantry regiments.¹⁴⁰ The prosecution was not aggressive. In its opening statement, it read aloud the definition of murder according to the Manual for Courts-martial 1928, "Murder is the unlawful killing of a human being with malice aforethought. 'Unlawful' means without legal justification or

¹³⁷ Since their creation in 1775, the Articles of War served as the basis for the military justice system until replaced by the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) on 31 May 1951. Article 92 states, "Any person subject to military law who commits murder or rape shall suffer death or imprisonment for life, as a court-martial may direct; but no person shall be tried by court-martial for murder or rape committed within the geographical limits of the States of the Union and the District of Columbia in time of peace." U.S. Department of War, *The Articles of War* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1920), 34. For a detailed explanation of the articles, see Lee S. Tillotson, *The Articles of War: Annotated* (Harrisburg, PA: Military Service Publishing Company, 1943). For a complete history of the American military legal system see, *Military Legal Resources*, Library of Congress, http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/military-legal-resources-home.html (accessed 9 September 2009).

¹³⁸ Staff Judge Advocate's Review, *Compton Court-Martial*.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.* Compton did not enjoy his freedom for long—he was killed in action sixteen days later.

¹⁴⁰ The members of the court included Lt. Col. Preston J.C. Murphy CO 1st Battalion, 157th Inf. (president), Maj. John G. Boyd 157th Inf., Maj. Wayne L. Johnson 179th Inf., Maj. Charles W. Thomas 180th Inf., Maj. Otwa T. Autry 189th FA Bn., Maj. Gerald H. Hines 120th Engr. Bn., Maj. Paul H. Hemphill 120th Med. Bn., and Capt. John W. Johnson 157th Inf. (law member). The prosecution consisted of 1st Lt. George H. Williams, 179th Inf. (trial judge advocate), and 1st Lt. George A. Fisher, 180th Inf. (assistant trial judge advocate). The defense consisted of Capt. George A. Fisher, 180th Inf. (defense council) and 1st Lt. Thomas B. Finan, 180th Inf. (assistant defense council). Trial Proper, *Compton Court-Martial*, 1.

excuse.”¹⁴¹ To that end, the prosecution presented the eyewitness testimony of Compton’s involvement as proof of his guilt. After the opening statements, the prosecution examined several witnesses to the shooting (Blanks, Hair, Marlow, and Gazzetti). These men, however, did not provide any substantial information that had not already been discovered during the initial investigation. At the conclusion of the day’s testimonies, the prosecution waived its right to a closing argument.

The way the defense attempted to prove Compton’s innocence reveal another insight into the GIs’ combat ethos. The crux of its argument rested on the legitimacy of the doctrine of *respondeat superior*. In June, during Operation Camberwell in North Africa, Patton addressed the officers of the 45th Division in an attempt to instill an aggressive fighting spirit amongst the inexperienced men. The defense argued that this speech was more than a mere pep talk—it was an order to take no prisoners. Although there was no written record of the speech, Compton testified that he remembered it verbatim:

When the American forces have landed against the enemy [in Sicily]; when we land against the enemy, don’t forget to hit him and hit him hard. We will bring the fight home to him. When we meet the enemy, we will kill him. We will show no mercy. He has killed thousands of your comrades and he must die. If you Company Officers in leading your men against the enemy, find him shooting at you and when you get within two hundred yards of him he wishes to surrender, oh no! That bastard will die. You will kill him. Stick him between the third and fourth ribs. You will tell your men that. They must have the killer instinct. Tell them to stick him. He can do no good then. We will get the names of killers and killers are immortal. When word reaches him that he is being faced with a killer battalion, a killer outfit, he will fight less. Particularly, we must

¹⁴¹ George H. Williams, Trial Proper, *Compton Court-Martial*, 3. For more information on military legal procedure during World War II see, U.S. Department of War, *A Manual for Courts-Martial, U.S. Army, 1928 (Corrected to April 20, 1943)*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1943.

build up that name as killers and you will get that down to your troops in time for this invasion.¹⁴²

Compton stated that this speech authorized his actions at the Biscari airport. “I ordered them shot,” Compton said, “because I thought it came directly under the General’s instructions. Right or wrong a three star general’s advice, who has had combat experience, is good enough for me and I took him at his word.”¹⁴³

The defense argued that Compton’s *respondeat superior* explanation was legal according to the Manual for Courts-Martial’s definition of justifiable homicide. The defense read the following passage aloud to the court:

A homicide done in the proper performance of a legal duty is justifiable....The general rule is that the acts of a subordinate officer or soldier, done in good faith and without malice aforethought in compliance with his supposed duty, or of superior orders, are justifiable, unless such acts are manifestly beyond the scope of his authority, and such that a man of ordinary sense and understanding would know to be illegal.¹⁴⁴

In order to eliminate the possibility that Compton should have known the order was illegal, the defense introduced the testimony of five officers of the 45th Division who had also heard Patton’s speech in Africa. Brogan testified that as adjutant for the 180th Infantry Regiment did not see any memorandum on the Rules of Land Warfare and that the regiment did not receive any training on it before departure for overseas duty. “General Patton,” Captain William T. Brogan (later Major), the Regimental Supply Officer recalled, “stated that anyone who sits behind his gun and kills your men until you get within two hundred yards of him and then decide that he wants to surrender, that son

¹⁴² Compton testimony, Trial Proper, *Compton Court-Martial*, 58-59.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁴⁴ George H. Williams, Trial Proper, *Compton Court-Martial*, 4.

of a bitch has to die.” Pressing further, the defense asked, “Did you gather from that speech of the General’s that you were bound to accept the surrender of a man in that status?” Brogan replied, “No sir, I did not.” Captain Howard Crye, the executive officer of 2nd Battalion, 180th Infantry said, “General Patton made it very plain over there that we were to kill the enemy wherever we found him....the more prisoners we took, the more men we’d have to feed and not to fool with prisoners. He said that there was only one good German and that was a dead one.”

When asked if Patton’s speech authorized the Biscari killings, each man agreed without hesitation. “We were not to consider snipers,” Captain Richard C. Dean G-2 section, Headquarters Company testified, “They were to be killed.” When asked what Patton said about snipers, Crye said, “only the regular routine. Kill them. He added, “If I had been shot at by snipers in civilian clothes, I’d have left them where I found them.” Commander of the Headquarters Company, Capt. James O. Smith said, “I know that I wouldn’t have fooled with them longer than it took me to have them shot.” Capt. Jean R. Reed, who had been wounded in action nine days earlier, agreed. “I’d have killed every damn one of them.”¹⁴⁵

The defense also intimated that Compton’s actions were justifiable because the Italians engaged in two activities that precluded their treatment as POWs: wearing civilian clothes and acting as snipers. In its opening argument, the defense claimed that a passage from *Military Aid to the Civil Power* authorized the harsh treatment of non-uniformed combatants:

¹⁴⁵ Brogan, Crye, Dean, Smith, and Reed testimony, Trial Proper, *Compton Court-Martial*, 43, 48, 41, 45, 47.

Guerillas or other irregular armed bodies or persons, not forming part of the organized forces of a belligerent or operating under the orders of its established commanders, are not in general recognized as legitimate troops, or entitled, when captured, to be treated as prisoners of war, but may be summarily punished, even with death.

Should one belligerent organize and include within its forces contingents of uncivilized combatants who would be likely to respect the laws of war, the other belligerents would be justified in refusing to recognize them as legitimate forces.¹⁴⁶

The defense did not attempt to justify the summary execution of snipers—it simply was not necessary. Everyone, including the members of the court, understood that snipers did not deserve the same treatment as other POWs. During the pre-trial investigation, Compton explains the thought process behind this belief:

I had been raised as fair and square as anybody else and I don't believe in shooting down a man who has put up a fair fight on either side. The evidence furnished by the squad leader and my own deductions, I concluded at the time in my own mind that these were the same men who had used pretty low sniping tactics against my men and I didn't consider them as prisoners.¹⁴⁷

The defense's cross-examination of Sgt. Hair illustrates pervasiveness of this attitude. "Now, Sergeant Hair, from what you heard and what you had been told... would you consider a prisoner like these ordinary prisoners *or did you consider those as snipers?*" "I considered them snipers, sir," Hair answered.¹⁴⁸ Pvt. Gazzetti's testimony revealed just how loosely GIs could define sniping activity. Law member Capt. John W. Johnson asked, "What do you understand by sniper?" Gazzetti replied, "He's one who continues to fire on you until you get up close to him and then when he sees he's caught, he tries to

¹⁴⁶ George H. Williams, Trial Proper, *Compton Court-Martial*, 4. Dowell wrote the work while serving as a member of the U.S. Army Judge Advocate General's Department. For more information, see Cassius M. Dowell, *Military Aid to the Civil Power* (Ft. Leavenworth: General Service Schools Press, 1925).

¹⁴⁷ "Statement made by Captain John T. Compton, 0-406922, Co C, 180th Infantry," Inspector General's Report, *Compton Court-Martial*.

¹⁴⁸ Hair testimony, Trial Proper, *Compton Court-Martial*, 22.

give up.” “And you don’t think,” Johnson asked, “that that man, even if he’s in uniform should live?” “No sir.”¹⁴⁹

The acquittal of Compton demonstrates that the members of the court were of the opinion that Patton’s instructions amounted to a legal order and that Compton had made a reasonable interpretation of that order. In other words, *respondeat superior* was a legitimate defense, captured guerillas and snipers did not qualify as POWs, and summary executions were permissible. The 45th Division’s Staff Judge Advocate, Lt. Col. William R. Cook, disagreed. Cook also took issue with belief that *Military Aid to the Civil Power* allowed for the summary execution of enemy combatants dressed in civilian clothes. As evidence to the contrary, Cook cited paragraph 13 of *FM 27-10*:

The determination of the status of captured troops is to be left to higher military authority or to military tribunals. Summary executions are no longer contemplated under the laws of war. The officer’s duty is to hold the persons of those captured and leave the question of their being regulars, irregulars, deserters, etc., to the determination of competent authority.¹⁵⁰

Even if Compton had been ignorant of the rules contained in FM 27-10, Cook believed that the killing of unarmed individuals “is so foreign to the American sense of justice, that an order of that nature would be illegal on its face, and...could not be complied with under a claim of good faith.” Even though he faults Compton’s judgment, he excuses the enlisted men who carried out his orders. Since soldiers could be legally detailed as members of firing squads, the enlisted men had no reason to believe that Compton’s order was illegal. Despite his disagreement from a legal standpoint, Cook did not fault the members of the court for its acquitting one of its own officers. “I am of the opinion,”

¹⁴⁹ Gazzetti testimony, Trial Proper, *Compton Court-Martial*, 38.

¹⁵⁰ Staff Judge Advocate’s Review, *Compton Court-Martial*.

he wrote, “that their findings were the only ones that they could have reached and been satisfied with their own conscience.”¹⁵¹

While Lt. Col. Cook blames the Biscari incident upon Compton’s misguided interpretation of Patton’s order, historian James Weingartner places the blame solely upon Patton himself.¹⁵² Weingartner contends that Patton probably intended his speech to serve as an enticement to deny quarter to enemies who resisted at close range *before* capture. Nevertheless, he contends, it is to be expected that some GIs interpreted his speech as an order to kill prisoners *after* capture. Both arguments base their conclusions upon the assumption that Patton’s “order” was the driving factor behind the killing of the Italian prisoners. This is not so. On several occasions, members of C Company captured enemy POWs without incident.¹⁵³ The testimony of Compton, Blanks, Hair, Gazzetti, and Marlow indicate that the sniping activity of the Italian prisoners was the reason they were killed. The claim that they were simply following orders *respondeat superior* plea was a defense argument contrived *ex post facto* to escape criminal liability.

Inappropriate Enemy Behavior

The way enemy soldiers surrendered was just as important to the Americans as the way they fought. Pvt. Norman Adolph of the 397th Infantry, 100th Division expressed a comment complaint, “The bastards shoot and kill as long as they can and then they

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² James J. Weingartner, “Massacre at Biscari: Patton and an American War Crime,” *The Historian* 50, no. 1 (1989): 34.

¹⁵³ Blanks and Compton testimony, Trial Proper, *Compton Court-Martial*, 14, 59.

bring out the white flags and surrender.”¹⁵⁴ “Even in hopeless situations,” Maj. Joseph Shomon reported, “the Germans would usually fight to the last, refusing to surrender. [Then] when their ammunition was gone, they were ready to give up and ask for mercy.”¹⁵⁵ Unbeknownst to the Americans, the origin of this behavior lay not with individual German soldiers, but with German military doctrine. Traditionally, Western military doctrine has condoned surrender in the absence of effective means of resistance. During World War II, however, German military doctrine redefined “effective means of resistance” as the availability of ammunition. Consequently, in order to retain their honor and dignity most German troops surrendered only after expending all of their ammunition.

As a matter of principle, Americans despised this behavior because it seemed to take advantage of the American propensity for mercy by hiding behind the rules of the Geneva Convention. In a letter to his aunt and uncle, a GI known only as “Josef” described his response to one such situation:

I’ve seen a German soldier in a foxhole fire two panzerfaust[s] point-blank at a tank loaded with our infantrymen, empty a ‘burp gun’ at the men scrambling off – then throw down his empty weapons, raise his arms and step out of his hole yelling, ‘Komerade!’ That Kraut died with his gut full of M-1 ammunition, his hands still half raised. I clenched my teeth so hard that little pieces of enamel broke off the edges, and wished he could have died a slower, more painful death.¹⁵⁶

As a matter of survival, Americans despised this behavior because it caused them unnecessary casualties. The response was inevitable. In his history of the 88th Division,

¹⁵⁴ Edwin P. Hoyt, *The GI’s War: American Soldiers in Europe During World War II* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1988), 500.

¹⁵⁵ Joseph James Shomon, *Crosses in the Wind* (New York: Stratford House, 1947), 41.

¹⁵⁶ McManus, *Deadly Brotherhood*, 227.

John Brown noted, “American troops acting on their own initiative frequently elected not to accept the surrender of men who used their guns to the last second and then threw up their hands.”¹⁵⁷ During an attack through a wooded area near Gundershoffen in Alsace, Lt. Paul Fussell of the 410th Infantry, 103rd Division personally witnessed his men punish German soldiers for their sudden change in demeanor:

In shock as we all were—this was by far the worst combat we’d faced so far—we moved forward in the woods, encountering trenches and dugouts the Germans had been preparing for months. Most of them now wanted to surrender, and as we shouted, “Kommen Sie heraus, Hände hoch!” they dragged themselves out, weeping and hoping not to be killed in anger. Many were. Now and then one of our men, annoyed at too much German delay in vacating a position, would throw in a live grenade, saying things like “Here. Divide that among you.”¹⁵⁸

Radford Carroll of the 99th Division explained that such behavior was typical, “There was a recognized rule, surrender without fighting and all is well, but you don’t fight and kill some of our people and then surrender.”¹⁵⁹

Despite the fact that this “rule” became a part of every GIs combat behavior, German soldiers rarely demonstrated an awareness of it. Why did German soldiers continue this behavior in the face of such a deadly American response? One possibility is that Germans were largely ignorant of the consequences of their behavior because so few of their comrades survived or escaped to tell the tale. Although likely, there is evidence to suggest otherwise. Col. James C. Fry, commander of the 350th Infantry, 88th Division, recalled two incidents of German compliance during the final days of the Italian campaign:

¹⁵⁷ John Sloan Brown, *Draftee Division: The 88th Infantry Division in World War II*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986), 337-8.

¹⁵⁸ Paul Fussell, *Doing Battle: The Making of a Skeptic* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1998), 7.

¹⁵⁹ McManus, *Deadly Brotherhood*, 226.

Twice the enemy left lone pieces of artillery with instructions that the crews should use them to fire at point blank range; to stop us at any cost. The crews realized that compliance with the orders meant death. Both of the groups had learned during the past few days that American troops acting on their own initiative frequently elected not to accept the surrender of men who used their guns to the last second and then threw up their hands. To be sure of receiving the privileges of surrendered prisoners of war they knew the surrender had to be made in good faith. All this was explained to me through interrogators....Their remarks confirmed the justification for certain violence which necessity had determined.¹⁶⁰

These incidents demonstrate that obstinate devotion to duty, not ignorance of American retaliation, perpetuated the habit of surrendering too late. They did not surrender simply because they were forewarned or because they sensed the imminent collapse of their army. They surrendered because they were unsupervised, late-war conscripts whose lack of training and discipline allowed them to surrender without disgrace.

The danger to German prisoners did not end once they were in Americans hands. As John B. Babcock wrote, "For sure, if we had found American souvenirs on a Kraut prisoner, he would have been long gone before he ever made it to our POW cage."¹⁶¹ To most GIs, however, only one American type of souvenir could cause a fatal reaction—combat boots. To Germans, superiority of the rubber-soled American boot represented life. The hobnailed, leather sole German variant could not withstand the rigors of infantry life very long. To Americans, those same boots on German feet represented death. In order to obtain them, Germans had to scavenge them from a dead GI or steal them from a living one. An hour or so after marching past the Malmedy Massacre site, Pvt. J. Frank Brumbaugh and some comrades of the 82nd Airborne captured a group of soldiers wearing regular American combat boots as well as American "jump boots" used

¹⁶⁰ James C. Fry, *Combat Soldier* (Washington, D.C.: National Press, 1968), 337-8.

¹⁶¹ Babcock, *Taught to Kill*, 188.

by paratroopers. The troopers immediately shot those wearing combat boots. They forced those wearing jump boots to walk bare-footed in the snow until their feet completely froze. By the time the prisoners reached American field hospitals, they had to have both feet amputated. "I suppose it might be called an atrocity," Brumbaugh explained "but I felt at the time it was a brutal but effective means of teaching the Germans a valuable and necessary lesson, which was, you don't fuck with paratroopers!"¹⁶²

How Germans prisoners behaved was just as important as what they wore. According to the Geneva Convention, prisoners were not required to give any information other than their rank and serial number. Americans, like their counterparts, often demanded information regarding the disposition of nearby enemy forces. If a prisoner complied, he survived. If a prisoner chose to refuse, he risked a beating. If a prisoner chose to deceive his captors with faulty information, he forfeited his life. In September 1944, David Rothbart of the 22nd Infantry, 4th Division witnessed an SS trooper choose the latter option after being captured near the Siegfried line. A lieutenant colonel ordered the German to dig a hole and said, "I want information from you; if you don't give it to me I am going to shoot you. And if you give me the wrong information I am going to shoot you." The SS trooper complied, but the Americans tested the information and discovered it to be false. The hole did not go to waste.¹⁶³

In the Belgium town of Odeigne, during the Battle of the Bulge, Roscoe Blunt interrogated a captured SS trooper in order to learn about the German defenses. The

¹⁶² Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers*, 356.

¹⁶³ Rothbart, *A Soldier's Journal*, 250.

German told Blunt that the Americans faced only six hungry German soldiers who wanted to surrender. However, the squad dispatched to capture the six Germans found an entire battalion of Germans and several tanks instead. Only the squad leader survived. Enraged, Blunt and the sole survivor found the SS prisoner in a POW enclosure and delivered a vicious beating in front of the other German prisoners:

The SS soldier never changed his expression of arrogance and he never said a word throughout the beating. “I’ll show you, you son-of-a-bitch. Die, you bastard,” the sergeant yelled and with that he emptied a whole clip of .45 slugs into the German. Then, he casually slammed another 20-round clip into his Thompson and emptied that one too....Only then did we turn, glare defiantly at the other prisoners in the pen, and walk away....They stood silently watching us, apparently aware that in war, this was an act of justifiable retaliation.¹⁶⁴

In addition to complying with demands, Americans expected their prisoners to be self-effacing and unpretentious. They had absolutely no tolerance for displays of pride or arrogance. During an advance upon a German town, well-entrenched Germans pinned down Frank Irgang’s company with automatic weapons and 20mm antiaircraft guns. American artillery routed the defenders but not before one of the antiaircraft guns killed Irgang’s good friend. The group of German prisoners taken after the battle included one of the antiaircraft gunners. As Irgang searched the gunner, he discovered that the German was wearing American jump boots and a U.S. Ordinance Department watch. Irgang pushed the German gunner to the ground, pointed his weapon at his face and asked him where he had gotten the boots and watch. “Some of my comrades gave them to me,” the German replied. Irgang accused him of lying, but the German said nothing as he flashed a haughty grin and rose up on his elbows. The smile provided what the boots, the watch, and the death of his friend could not—motivation to kill. “I shot him through

¹⁶⁴ Blunt, *Foot Soldier*, 144-6.

the forehead, and his head thumped back against the ground. With the butt of my rifle, I proceeded to crush it. I would make sure that this criminal paid for his misdeeds.”¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁵ Irgang, *Etched in Purple*, 235-6.

CHAPTER 5: THE BRUTALIZATION STAGE

Soldiers did not operate in the coarsening stage indefinitely. Evidence suggests that as long as they remained in combat, they either entered the brutalization stage or became psychiatric casualties. Swank and Marchand concluded that soldiers entered an emotional exhaustion stage after approximately forty-five days of continuous combat. Hopelessness and despair became the dominant attitude in men who had demonstrated hyperactivity and overconfidence just a few days prior:

They saw no means of overcoming or getting beyond the state of things, only that it was meant for them to "sweat it out." The thought and hope of surviving combat were now foreign; one thing to them was certain, they would be killed. Should they be lucky, they would be merely wounded.¹⁶⁶

After operating for only fifteen days in this state, 98 percent of GIs became psychiatric casualties.¹⁶⁷ In another article published the same year, "The Combat Neuroses," S. Kirson Weinberg concluded that a soldier's duration in combat was just as important as a soldier's perception of it:

Varied combinations of factors, such as the ferocity of the campaign, the rigors of terrain and climate, the number of buddies killed and maimed, the triumph or defeat of the unit, and the soldier's singular configuration of ordeals were also responsible for his eventual breakdown.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ Swank and Marchand, "Combat Neuroses," 236-47.

¹⁶⁷ Nine out of ten diagnosed with "battle fatigue" or "combat exhaustion" in the European theater were returned to some sort of duty—usually on the line. Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers*, 330.

¹⁶⁸ S. Kirson Weinberg, "The Combat Neuroses," *The American Journal of Sociology* 51, no. 5, *Human Behavior in Military Society* (March 1946): 465, 467, 471.

Although 70 percent of psychiatric casualties reached their breaking point gradually, nearly 30 percent broke down immediately after fierce encounters or the death of friends. Moreover, soldiers who were predisposed to mental health problems became psychiatric casualties sooner and more frequently than others did.¹⁶⁹

If by chance or personal fortitude a soldier avoided becoming a physical or psychiatric casualty, he could not avoid the cumulative effects of the combat environment. As long as he stayed in a combat zone, a soldier continued to experience the stress of daily existence. Ernie Pyle observed this process while embedded with combat troops in Sicily:

The outstanding trait in any campaign is the terrible weariness that gradually comes over everybody. Soldiers become exhausted in mind and in soul as well as physically. They acquire a weariness that is mixed up with boredom and lack of all gaiety. To sum it all up: A man just gets damned sick of it all...It's the perpetual, choking dust, the muscle-racking hard ground, the snatched food sitting ill on the stomach, the heat and the flies and dirty feet and the constant roar of engines and the perpetual moving and the never settling down and the go, go, go, night and day, and on through the night again.¹⁷⁰

In addition to the stress of daily existence, soldiers had to contend with the stress of actual combat. As John Babcock recalled:

Prolonged battle had changed us profoundly.... For some among the battle-hardened...relentless pressure had permanently eroded or erased norms of behavior and respectability....The brutal shock of what we endured on the opening day of our incredible, grisly adventure gradually merged with even more barbaric experiences, piled up week after week.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. The subjects of Weinberg's study were 276 enlisted men of the U.S. Army ground forces and service personnel transported stateside because of service mental instability.

¹⁷⁰ Pyle, *Brave Men*, 84-5.

¹⁷¹ Babcock, *Taught to Kill*, 66-7, 191-2.

Guy Charland recalled, “Combat is an existence of anxiety, fear and suspense...It's bound to have an adverse effect on you if you have any sensitivity at all. Even the strongest flipped their senses.”¹⁷² Eventually, these stressors compromised a soldier's ability to resist the brutalization stage. Some soldiers became candidates during their first encounter with combat. Others became candidates only after months of fighting.

Revenge for Enemy “Atrocities”

Soldiers entered the brutalization stage at different rates, but the defining moment was most often an encounter with an enemy “atrocious.” Howard Ruppel of the 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment recalled that the discovery of some hideous acts against American prisoners prompted a fellow paratrooper to respond in kind. “We were spellbound and shocked as these prisoners revealed atrocities [committed against] American prisoners. Then by surprise a guy grabbed one of the prisoners, spun him around, shoved him into a closet while drawing his revolver; and...bam, bam, bam, three shots rang out.”¹⁷³ Near Falaise, France SS troopers captured five members of the 103rd Tank Destroyer Battalion. One escaped, but the other four were found shot through the head with their hands tied behind their backs. In response, GIs in that sector refused to take prisoners for the rest of the day.¹⁷⁴

Guy Charland's defining moment came in Normandy with the discovery of four 82nd Airborne Division men shot in the head with their hands tied behind their backs.

¹⁷² Charland, “Remembrance of Combat,” 136.

¹⁷³ McManus, *Deadly Brotherhood*, 230-1.

¹⁷⁴ Linderman, *World Within War*, 137.

“When I saw this, it tore me apart and I cried like hell,” he recalled, “This scene burned in my mind, and I vowed then and there I would kill all of the bastards I could and if that is not the Christian way, then so be it.”¹⁷⁵ During the 9th Division’s campaign in Northern France and Lorraine, he saw another group of Americans who had been lined up against a wall and shot. As he made another vow to avenge these deaths, Charland realized that he had turned a corner, “I am, by nature, a decent soldier, but no more.”

Although these “atrocities” may have propelled Charland into the brutalization stage, atrocities of another kind kept him there. And these were not the actions of SS men, but regular German soldiers. In village after village, rearguard Wehrmacht troops shot civilians of all ages. In one French village, Charland saw the bodies of “a large number of old men, women, young boys and little children” that Wehrmacht soldiers had shot against a church wall and in the street. “These troops were the most cruel and vile beasts that they had in their ranks,” Charland recalled. “We had official orders not to take any prisoners of these bastards. If captured by us, they were to simply be done away with, no pity offered”¹⁷⁶

The critical moment for many Americans came when the Germans began their Ardennes offensive on 16 December 1944. The next day, soldiers from 1st SS Panzer Division shot eleven African American prisoners from the 33rd Field Artillery Battalion near Wereth, Belgium.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁵ Charland, “Remembrance of Combat,” 81.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁷⁷ Colley, *Blood for Dignity*, 128.

Of course, this was not an isolated act. After the war, two SS guards testified to hearing instructions that ‘negroes are not to be taken prisoner.’ They also testified that they saw ‘negro American soldiers being executed after they were ordered to dig their own graves’ in September 1944 near Merzig, Germany.¹⁷⁸ Nevertheless, the Wereth incident solidified the brutalization of African-Americans. Because they expected no quarter, they gave none. “There’s no question,” William Windley of the 1st Division recalled, “we were very aggressive.”¹⁷⁹

On 19 December, after overrunning an American field hospital in Sprimont, just outside of Bastogne, German troops cut the throats of many wounded 101st Airborne Division troopers as they lay helpless on their cots. A patrol from the 327th Glider Infantry Regiment sent to destroy a German roadblock near the town learned of the event as the survivors fled back to Bastogne. The glidermen located and ambushed the German unit responsible—they took no prisoners.¹⁸⁰ In early January 1945, James Graff and his comrades of the 35th Division had just learned that the some Germans had killed six American prisoners, three Germans, one with his arm in a sling, appeared on a ridgeline in front of them. “Somebody hollered, ‘Kill the bastards!’ Everyone opened fire. Gerstbauer...jumped up and...emptied his rifle in the kraut and all the time the German was screaming, ‘Kamerad!’”¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁸ David Killingray, “Africans and African Americans in Enemy Hands,” in *Prisoners of War and their Captors in World War II*, ed. Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich (Washington, D.C.: Berg, 1996), 197.

¹⁷⁹ Colley, *Blood for Dignity*, 130.

¹⁸⁰ Burgett, *Seven Roads*, 115.

¹⁸¹ McManus, *Deadly Brotherhood*, 227-8.

Later in the month, after the Americans recaptured Trois-Ponts, they discovered that on 19 December men of Kampfgruppe Peiper, a detachment of the 1st SS Panzer Division, had massacred numerous civilians for befriending the Americans in the Germans' absence. T/4 Jeff Elliot of the 291st Engineer Combat Battalion discovered three female victims near the American motor pool. "The one that was pregnant," he recalled, "had been disemboweled." Cpl. A.C. Schommer recalled a particular disturbing scene in a cellar. "Two small children actually had their heads smashed in. Men were dismembered and shot. One pregnant woman had been cut open and left to die." After capturing a group of German soldiers in a nearby skirmish, GIs of the 30th Division forced the men to view the scene before taking them into the woods and shooting them.¹⁸²

The actions of Kampfgruppe Peiper on 17 December, however, provided the most incentive for Americans to enter the brutalization stage. On that day, Peiper's men killed approximately ninety American prisoners, mostly from Battery B, 285th Field Artillery Observation Battalion, 7th Armored Division, near the Baugnez crossroads in Belgium. Although the official investigation came weeks later, news of the Malmedy Massacre, as it became known, quickly spread among American units. SHAEF learned of the incident from a brief message sent by the U.S. 1st Army the next day.

SS troops vicinity L8199 captured U.S. soldier, traffic M.P. with about two hundred other U.S. soldiers. American prisoners searched. When finished, Germans lined up Americans and shot them with machine pistols and machine guns. Wounded informant who escaped and more details to follow¹⁸³

¹⁸² Janice Holt Giles, ed., *The G.I. Journal of Sergeant Giles*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 199-200.

¹⁸³ James J. Weingartner, *Crossroads of Death: The Story of the Malmedy Massacre and Trial* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 65.

The news reached combat units by word of mouth and initiated a chain reaction of violent responses. “If it was to be ‘no prisoners’ that was OK with us,” Dick Robb of the 517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team recalled. While clearing Manhay, Belgium Robb killed an SS man as he tried to raise his hands to surrender. “I [have] no remorse and only one regret, that I had not been given...the opportunity to kill 50,000 more of those less than God’s creatures.”¹⁸⁴ “If K Company’s reaction to the atrocity was typical,” Leinbaugh and Campbell noted of their 84th Division men, “the Germans had committed their worst mistake of the war on the Western Front...this was mass murder, and the SS was going to have to pay and pay heavily.”¹⁸⁵

Official and unofficial Orders to take no SS prisoners began to spread through the ranks. As Willis Irvin, an armored infantryman of the 2nd Armored Division, explained, “We treated them well until the Battle of the Bulge. Then for a while we had no prisoners.”¹⁸⁶ On 21 December, the 328th Infantry, 26th Division issued Fragmentary Order 27 that stated, “No SS troops or paratroopers will be taken prisoners but will be shot on sight.”¹⁸⁷ Sometimes these orders were interpreted as an opportunity to retaliate against *any* German soldier. As Eduardo Peniche of the 101st Airborne noted, “Several times...I observed a German come out of a bunker or foxhole, hands over head, only to be shot through the head at close range.”¹⁸⁸ Sometimes, these orders did not need any

¹⁸⁴ Astor, *Battling Buzzards*, 299, 303.

¹⁸⁵ Leinbaugh and Campbell, *Company K*, 134.

¹⁸⁶ McManus, *Deadly Brotherhood*, 228.

¹⁸⁷ Hugh M. Cole, *The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1965), 263-4.

¹⁸⁸ McManus, *Deadly Brotherhood*, 228.

interpretation. Prior to the attack on Chegnogne, Belgium on 31 December, the 11th Armored Division commander ordered the men of Company B of the 21st Armored Infantry Battalion to “take no prisoners.” Unaware of the Malmedy Massacre, John Fague thought little of the order until after the battle when he saw machine guns being set up in front of several groups of twenty-five to thirty prisoners:

After the killing and confusion of that morning the idea of killing some more Krauts didn't particularly bother me. I [simply] didn't want any share in the killing. My chief worry was that Germans hiding in the woods would see this massacre and we would receive similar treatment if we were captured. I turned my back on the scene and walked away.¹⁸⁹

Fague did not witness the killings, but later, as he passed by the scene. “I looked into the fields where the German boys had been shot. Dark lifeless forms lay in the snow.”¹⁹⁰

Wholesale Condemnation of the SS

Much has been made of the transformative effect of the Malmedy Massacre upon the American view of this SS. Nevertheless, the publicity of the event affected the American public to a much larger degree than the American fighting man. Experience had already taught him that the SS were capable of “atrocities.” During combat from June to November 1944, Guy Charland recalled “We always had orders from our C.O. and Company Officers ... No SS prisoners! And we didn't take any if we could help it!” General Eisenhower expressed his view of the SS in a private meeting with Secretary Morgenthau in early 1944:

¹⁸⁹ John B. Fague, *B Company 21st AIB*, The 11th Armored Division Association, http://www.11tharmoreddivision.com/history/21st_aib_b_company.htm (accessed 21 October 2009).

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

There must be no room for doubt as to who won the war. Germany must be occupied. More than this, the German people must not be allowed to escape a sense of guilt, of complicity in the tragedy that has engulfed the world. Prominent Nazis, along with certain industrialists, must be tried and punished. *Membership in the Gestapo and in the SS should be taken as prima facie evidence of guilt.*¹⁹¹

Thus, the Malmedy Massacre served not as a proof of SS brutality, but as justification for brutal retaliation.

This alteration of the American combat ethos, along with their fanatical refusal to surrender, explains why so few SS men found their way to POW cages during the rest of the war.¹⁹² On 7 March 1945, for example, men from 9th Armored Division killed railway worker Wilhe Feldens as he tried to surrender his civilian trustees. “The Americans...told me they thought he was SS.” Luftwaffe Auxiliary Karl Busch said. German railway workers also wore had black uniforms, too. Harold Smith of the 1st Division recalled that his commanding officer did his best to make sure only a few SS prisoners reached the rear. The officer would nonchalantly point his finger and say, “Well, we’ll keep you and we’ll shoot you. We’ll keep you, we’ll shoot you. We’ll keep you, we’ll shoot you. Any volunteers?” There was never any hesitation. “There’d always be somebody volunteer to... take ‘em down the road and shoot ‘em.”¹⁹³

Although the surrenders involving individuals and small groups presented the most danger, mass surrenders were no guarantee of safety. In his meticulously researched work *Iron Fist*, Antonio Munoz explains the disappearance of about two

¹⁹¹ Emphasis mine. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade In Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 287.

¹⁹² Hastings, *Overlord*, 211.

¹⁹³ Harold Smith, “Harold Smith, 1st Infantry,” Witness to War Foundation, <http://www.witness-to-war.org/content/view.php?g=e&c=R&v=55> (accessed 3 October 2009).

hundred men of the I Battalion, 38th SS Regiment captured by the 42nd Division in Nuremberg in late April:

The fate of these men had been shrouded in mystery for many years...[S]hortly after the war, some citizens of that city directed Red Cross officials to what turned out to be a mass grave which yielded two hundred bodies, all in Waffen-SS uniforms. The grave was located just west of the city. Nothing was done to identify these men or how they came to be there until 1976, when the remains of one of the corpses was positively identified as that of SS-Hauptsturmführer Kukula, the commander of I Battalion, 38th SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment. Further autopsies on the other bodies soon followed, showing that many of the men in that grave had been beaten to death with blunt instruments (possibly rifle butts). Most had been shot at very close range, suggesting that a massacre had taken place.¹⁹⁴

As a “guru” of romanticized history on the Waffen-SS, it would be easy to dismiss Munoz’s claim.¹⁹⁵ However, evidence exists that these SS prisoners did indeed die at the hands of Americans—but not the Americans of the 42nd Division. The assault on Nuremberg and its suburbs was part of the 7th Army’s drive to capture Munich and included the 3rd and 45th Divisions as well as the 42nd Division.¹⁹⁶ The 45th Division’s official after-action report for 20 April summarized the last day of fighting in Nuremberg:

The enemy within the walled area of the “old city” determined to resist until the end...Small isolated groups of 3-4 men fought fanatically until completely overrun but mopping-up was completed at 2215B when *200 enemy who had taken refuge in a tunnel...were liquidated.*¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ The author further explains, “Even armed with these pieces of incriminating evidence, the relatives and former comrades were never able to open an inquiry into who on the American side had been responsible for this dastardly act. In any case, the autopsy reports and their findings can be verified by checking with the West German Government, squelching any attempt by “interested” outside parties from covering up the facts” Antonio J. Munoz, *Iron Fist: A Combat History of the 17.SS Panzergrenadier Division ‘Götz von Berlichingen,’ 1943-1945* (n.p.: Axis Europa Books, 1999), 59-60.

¹⁹⁵ Ronald Smelser and Edward J. Davies, II, *The Myth of the Eastern Front: The Nazi-Soviet War in American Popular Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 181.

¹⁹⁶ Whitlock, *Rock of Anzio*, 349.

¹⁹⁷ Kenneth G. Wickham, *Operations of the 45th Infantry Division: Germany, 1-30 April 1945*, file 345-0.3, RG 94, National Archives, Washington, D.C., 21.

Obviously, the word “liquidated” means “killed.” What is not so obvious, however, is the fact that GIs killed these men after capturing them.. On the next page, the report states, “Some enemy were driven into a terminal which E Company [2nd Battalion, 180th Infantry] cleared at 2215B and captured 200 prisoners.”¹⁹⁸

The 45th Division and the Liberation of Dachau

If there were any GIs who remained hesitant about the harsh treatment of SS prisoners, the discovery of the concentration camps dispelled any doubts. The sheer criminality of the camps drove many GIs to seek not revenge, but justice. When his unit liberated Nordhausen, tanker John Irwin recalled,

The first thing that greeted us were hundreds of semi-living men wearing filthy, ragged, striped prison uniforms.... And then we saw the dead and dying, lying naked in rows and heaps that reeked of human putrefaction.... This incredible stench made breathing a chore and brought us all to the point of nausea...¹⁹⁹

The experience was beyond the pale for some GIs who killed two SS guards as they stood nearby with their hands on the heads.²⁰⁰ Edward Laughlin, who helped liberate a camp in southern Germany, stood by while inmates killed the commandant and his wife with multiple stab wounds. Laughlin and the other troopers rationalized their inaction thus, “These inmates had many terrible things inflicted upon them...they had to do what they had to do.”²⁰¹

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 22.

¹⁹⁹ Irwin, *Another River*, 94.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ McManus, *Deadly Brotherhood*, 223-4.

The justice meted out SS guards at the aforementioned camps pales in comparison the events that occurred on 29 April 1945. That morning, the inmates of *KZ Dachau* awoke to find white flags in place of the swastikas on the camp's flagpoles.²⁰² The inmates also discovered that the regular SS guards had been replaced by a detachment of around 200 combat troops from the 5th SS Panzer Division.²⁰³ Around 11 a.m., troops from the 45th and 42nd Divisions of the U.S. 7th Army began to arrive at the concentration camp.²⁰⁴ The 45th Division men that first entered KZ Dachau were almost exclusively

²⁰² The Dachau camp, officially known as *Konzentrationslager Dachau*, was Germany's first concentration camp. Opened on 22 March 1933, the camp's original purpose was to house the political enemies of National Socialism, but soon began to house criminal prisoners as well. By the end of the war, the SS had expanded the initial camp into a vast complex of sub-camps covering several square miles. KZ Dachau itself consisted of two different camps: one for the SS and one for the prisoners. The enormous SS installation comprised most of the camp and included a hospital, guard barracks, officers' quarters, workshops, administration buildings, and a railroad track siding that transported prisoners to the camp.

The *Schutzhaftlager*, or protective custody camp, occupied only the southeast corner of the installation. Inside the main gate, lay the parade ground where ceaseless roll calls and punishment details took place. To the left of the parade ground, lay thirty-four overcrowded wooden prisoner barracks. Beyond the barracks lay the gas chamber and a four-oven crematorium for disposing of dead bodies. To the right of the parade ground lay the camp's administration offices, isolation cells, execution sites, and quarters for "privileged" inmates (such as the Kapos and high-profile individuals like Reverend Martin Niemöller). Seven guard towers, a high-voltage electric fence, and water-filled canal, surrounded the entire camp to deter escape. Paul Berben, *Dachau: The Official History 1933-1945* (Munich: Lipp GmbH, 1986), 3-9, 179-189, 194-5; Michael W. Perry, ed., *Dachau Liberated: The Official Report of the U.S. Seventh Army* (Seattle: Inkling Books, 2000), 13; Gordon A. Craig, *The Germans* (New York: Meridian, 1991), 96-7.

²⁰³ The 5th SS Panzer Division consisted mostly of recruits from Scandinavia, The Netherlands, and Belgium operating under German officers. Berben, *Dachau*, 191.

²⁰⁴ There is a disagreement among veterans and historians as to which division officially liberated the Dachau concentration camp. The confusion stems from the fact that the elements of the 45th Infantry division and the 42nd Infantry division entered the enormous camp at two different locations. The former entered the camp from the southwest along the railroad track entrance, while the latter entered from the main gate at the south of the camp. The U.S. Army Center for Military History and *The Seventh U.S. Army Report of Operations*, published in 1946, credits the assistant commander of the 42nd Division, Brigadier General Henning Linden, with being the first to enter the camp. Other sources also give sole credit to the 42nd Division, such as *Surrender of the Dachau Concentration Camp, 29 Apr 45* by John H. Linden (son of Henning Linden) and Sam Dann's *Dachau 29 April 1945: The Rainbow Liberation Memoirs*. Conversely, many credible sources give the 45th Division credit for the liberation of Dachau. In *Dachau and its Liberation*, former Lt. Col. Felix L. Sparks claims that he led elements of the 157th Infantry Regiment, 45th Infantry Division into the camp before the General Linden and the 42nd Division arrived. Col. Howard A. Buechner, in his book *Dachau: The Hour of the Avenger* reiterates Sparks' claim. Most convincing of all,

from Lt. William Walsh's I Company of the 157th Infantry Regiment. Third Battalion commander Lt. Col. Felix Sparks accompanied Lt. Walsh and his men as they set out from the town of Dachau towards the camp along a set of railroad tracks. Their mission was to take the concentration camp, and "upon capture, post an airtight guard, and allow no one to enter or leave."²⁰⁵

En route to the camp, Sparks and his men came across thirty-nine boxcars, riddled with machine gun fire, sitting idly on the siding leading into the camp. Upon closer inspection, the GIs noticed that the boxcars held over 2,300 emaciated corpses. "We had never seen anything like that before," Walsh remembered, "I'll be honest with you, I broke down. I started crying." Those who had managed to fall out of the cars onto the pavement, Sparks recalled, had their heads bashed in with rifle butts and "their brains were scattered around on the pavement." The sight of 2300 emaciated corpses and the horrid stench that hung over the area stunned every soldier. Peter Galary, an I Company medic, recalled that, "All my men were throwing up like mad." Ralph Fink remembered that, "Some of our men cursed, some wept, and most of us went into a state of total shock."²⁰⁶

Shock and disgust quickly turned into anger. A desire for justice spread amongst the I Company men. PFC John Lee remembered that soldiers screaming, "Let's kill

The Rock of Anzio by Flint Whitlock utilizes the time lines submitted in after-action reports in favor of the 45th Division.

²⁰⁵ Felix Sparks, *Dachau and its Liberation*, (Lakewood, CO: 157th Infantry Association, 1984), 8.

²⁰⁶ Felix Sparks and William Walsh interview, *The Liberation of KZ Dachau*, prod. and dir. James Kent Strong, 94 min., Strong Communications, 1990, DVD; Whitlock, *Rock of Anzio*, 358.

every one of these bastards,” and “Don’t take any SS alive!”²⁰⁷ “It was whispered from man to man,” PFC. John S. “Jack” Edwards of the 3rd platoon recalled, “take no prisoners here.”²⁰⁸ Platoon commander 2nd Lt. Harold T. Moyer (the first officer to enter the camp), recollected similar exhortations. “I heard every man, or a lot of men, who said we should take no prisoners. I felt the same way myself.”²⁰⁹ As they milled amongst the boxcars, four Hungarian soldiers in German uniforms approached the GIs. They exclaimed that they were on the Americans’ side and wanted to surrender. Believing that they were prison guards, Moyer told PFC. L.J. Leath to shoot them. Leath hesitated. “There was another guy, I think his name was Pitt, he grabbed my rifle and started shooting the guys”²¹⁰ As Walsh and his men approached the main gate to the camp, a German soldier appeared wearing several Red Cross emblems and carrying a white flag. The sight of the well-dressed, well-fed German took in stark contrast the emaciated corpses in the boxcars. “They started harming him,” Walsh recalled, “and eventually he jumped up into...an empty boxcar and they shot him.”²¹¹

Fearing that the SS would defend the main gate from within, Sparks ordered his men to scale the camp’s outer wall. The GIs rushed through the camp and engaged the SS men in a few brief firefights before they began to surrender en masse. As they did so,

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 360.

²⁰⁸ Howard A. Buechner, *Dachau: Hour of the Avenger* (Metairie, La: Thunderbird Press, 1986), xxix.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., xxviii; Whitlock, *Rock of Anzio*, 361.

²¹⁰ L.J. Leath, “Oral History Memoirs of L.J. Leath: A Texas Veteran of World War II,” interview by William A. McWhorter, transcript, 1 August 2006, Texas in World War II Collection, Texas Historical Commission, Austin, TX, 27.

²¹¹ Walsh interview, *Liberation of KZ Dachau*.

some of the camp's recently freed inmates began to take their revenge. Captain Leland Loy, a chaplain with the 157th Infantry, recalled seeing an SS guard "pulled to pieces" by the inmates.²¹² John Edwards saw of a group of Russian inmates who tore an SS guard limb from limb.²¹³ During the process of interrogating the wounded and sick patients of the SS hospital, PFC. John Lee and two other GIs noticed a commotion around the side of the building. Investigating the noise, they found two inmates beating a guard's head with a shovel. They were about to try and stop the beating when they learned that the SS had castrated of the attackers during his imprisonment. "I have to admit," Lee said, "the three of us turned around and walked away."²¹⁴ Lt. George A. Jackson of the 42nd Division observed a circle of about two hundred inmates surrounding a German soldier. Within the circle, two emaciated inmates were trying to apprehend the hapless guard. Finally, one of the inmates managed to grab the German's coattails, while another inmate grabbed the soldier's rifle. The inmates then began to beat the soldier on the head with the rifle's butt stock. "I turned and walked away," Jackson said, "when I came back, his head had been battered away."²¹⁵ Paul Gumz, a medic in the 3rd Division sent to aid the inmates, witnessed GIs turn four SS officers over to the inmates. "They just beat them, kicked them, and beat them," Gumz recalled, "We didn't stop them." After the inmates had used

²¹²Buechner, *Avenger*, 74.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, xxx.

²¹⁴ John Lee interview, *Liberation of KZ Dachau*.

²¹⁵ Sam Dann, ed., *Dachau 29 April 1945: The Rainbow Liberation Memoirs* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1998), 91-2.

their fists and feet to their satisfaction, the Americans finished them off with their rifles.²¹⁶

The SS guards were not the only individuals that the Americans allowed the inmates to kill. During a tour of the *Schutzhaftlager*, Lt. Walsh witnessed two or three *Kapos* being hammered to death with shovels.²¹⁷ Later, when Lt. Col. Sparks arrived at the main gate, he witnessed a similar affair. Amid the roaring crowd of ecstatic inmates, he saw bodies being passed through the crowd and flying through the air. Hundreds of inmates were tearing these bodies apart with their bare hands. Confused, Sparks asked an inmate what the crowd was doing. “Colonel,” the inmate replied, “they’re killing the informers.”²¹⁸

GIs not only watched the prisoners but also helped them exact their revenge. Jack Hallett claimed that GIs intentionally shot numerous SS guards in the leg and then turned them over to the inmates. “One of the soldiers,” he recalled, “gave one of the inmates a bayonet and watched him behead the [SS] man. It was a pretty gory mess.”²¹⁹ John Edwards witnessed a Polish inmate, who had obtained an M-1 rifle from a GI, drive the rifle sight through the eye of his former tormentor.²²⁰ After entering the camp, PFC. Peter J. De Marzo and Joseph Ondik from L Company of the 157th Infantry Regiment

²¹⁶ Paul A. Gumz, interview by Herbert Jenkins, 8 December 1978, audio recording transcript, Fred Roberts Crawford Witness to the Holocaust Project (Emory University) files, Special Collections Department, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA (hereafter cited as *Witness to the Holocaust Project*), 5.

²¹⁷ Walsh interview, *Liberation of KZ Dachau*.

²¹⁸ Sparks interview, *Liberation of KZ Dachau*.

²¹⁹ Robert H. Abzug, *Inside the Vicious Heart: Americans and the Liberation of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 94.

²²⁰ Buechner, *Avenger*, xxx.

noticed a mob forming by the main gate. As they approached, several Russian inmates accosted De Marzo and stole his rifle. “Before I know it,” De Marzo recalled, “I heard two shots fired.” The Russians had killed two SS men with the rifle and fled. A sympathetic American officer returned the weapon to De Marzo and walked away.²²¹

The incidents just mentioned were ones in which American soldiers passively participated in the killing of prisoners. Many GIs, however, took a more active role in exacting revenge upon the SS. Capt. A. Lewis Greene, a supply and maintenance officer for the 370th Combat Engineer Battalion, witnessed an enlisted man crush an SS officer against a wall with his jeep. “Whether he just went cuckoo at the time or was carried away, we don’t know,” Greene explained, “but...he was never punished for it.”²²²

After a roundup of some thirty POWs, Cpl. Hank Mills saw an American aim his light machine gun at the men. “I wasn’t standing ten feet from him,” Mills recalled, “When he turned it loose and killed damn near all of them.”²²³ Herbert Stoplmann, a German soldier who survived the liberation, wrote after the war that

When American troops ‘liberated’ Camp Dachau proper, they forced all the SS-families, including the woman and children, out of the so-called villas [officers quarters], put their fathers against the wall and shot them. Most of the mothers had cyanide capsules; they gave them to their children and told them, put them into their mouths, bite onto them as soon as Daddy is shot. The American ‘liberators’ stopped the shooting after about twenty-four children were dead.²²⁴

²²¹ Joseph M. Whitaker, “Investigation of Alleged Mistreatment of German Guards at Dachau” (hereafter cited as *Dachau Investigation*), RG 338, National Archives, Washington, D.C., 8.

²²² A. Lewis Greene, interview by Fred Roberts Crawford, 6 April 1979, audio recording transcript, *Witness to the Holocaust Project*.

²²³ Mills maintained that he knows the name of the soldier who committed the execution, but, understandably, refused to divulge his name. Hank Mills interview, *The Liberation of KZ Dachau*.

²²⁴ “Dachau Concentration Camp,” Scrapbook Pages, <http://www.scrapbookpages.com/DachauScrapbook/DachauLiberation/SoldiersKilled2.html> (accessed 1 October 2009).

While standing next to his jeep, Capt. Loy and his assistant grabbed a German soldier who came running around a corner. A 42nd Division soldier ran up behind the German, grabbed him, and whirled him around. “Here you are you S.O.B.,” he yelled and machine-gunned the German within three feet of Loy and his assistant. “Look fella,” Loy told the GI, “you’re crazy, this guy was a prisoner.” The GI looked at Loy and screamed, “Gotta kill ‘em, gotta kill ‘em, gotta kill ‘em!”²²⁵

As Lt. Walsh and an I Company detachment advanced through the camp, they came under fire from some Germans. After a brief firefight, four SS men surrendered to the Americans. After the SS men emerged from their hiding places, Walsh herded the men into a nearby boxcar and shot them with his .45 caliber pistol. Pvt. Pruitt remembered that the wounded SS were, “all hollering and taking on.” Without waiting for an order, Pruitt showed mercy to the wounded men and killed them with his rifle. “I never like to see anybody suffer,” he explained.²²⁶

As the Americans neared the gate to the *Schutzhaftlager*, they became aware that several SS guards remained at their post in a nearby tower. Several GIs quickly rushed the tower in order to evict the guards. Marion Okrutnik, Polish inmate No. 39455, witnessed the events at the tower from inside the prison compound. Okrutnik claims that as the Americans got close to the tower, they began shooting at the guards who, incidentally, did not shoot back. Upon reaching the tower, they ordered the Germans out and lined them up near the canal. As one GI started to search the last German from the tower, the German jerked his hand as if going for a weapon. “As he did that,” Okrutnik

²²⁵ Leland Loy interview, *The Liberation of KZ Dachau*.

²²⁶ Whitaker, *Dachau Investigation*, 120.

said, “the other soldier who had been guarding the soldiers with his gun went, ‘B-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-t,’ and it was finished.”²²⁷ A driver for Gen. Linden’s aide, T/5 John G. Bauerlein, recalled a less innocuous version of events. Bauerlein claims that after removing the guards, a GI pushed one of the SS men into the nearby canal. When the German soldier fell in, he pulled another German soldier in with him. After they fell, GIs on both sides of the canal began to fire upon the Germans, killing them all.²²⁸ PFC. John Veitch of the 42nd Division believes that there were at least a dozen SS men in the canal when the shooting started. “The moat turned the color of port wine,” Veitch recalled, “I saw that, and frankly, I went over and laid down behind a rock, scared to death.”²²⁹

The previously mentioned acts of revenge only resulted in a relatively small number of POW deaths. The majority of the POW deaths resulted from two incidents that occurred near the SS hospital. In his testimony to the German Red Cross (DRK), SS-*Oberscharführer* Hans Linberger claimed that American extended their acts of revenge to the wounded and sick residents of the SS hospital. As the Americans approached the building, he stood in the entrance holding a small Red Cross flag and declared that it was an unarmed hospital. One American placed his weapon against Linberger’s chest, hit him in the face, and then proceeded into the hospital. Immediately the American shot a wounded German soldier who fell to the ground motionless. As Dr. Schröder, one of the hospital physicians, tried to surrender, the Americans beat him so badly that he received a

²²⁷Ibid., 50.

²²⁸Ibid., 60.

²²⁹Whitlock, *Rock of Anzio*, 376.

skull fracture. The Americans then drove everyone outside and sorted out anyone who appeared to belong to the SS.²³⁰

According to Sparks, who arrived at the hospital shortly after the eviction of the German patients, the I Company men had collected nearly fifty SS prisoners from the hospital. They positioned the SS men along a masonry wall in the nearby coal yard and placed a machine gun squad to guard them. Sparks watched the scene for several minutes before setting off to inspect the *Schutzhaftlager*. After walking a short distance, he heard the machine gun open fire. He ran back, kicked the gunner with his boot, and said, “What the hell are you doing?” The unnamed private, who was crying hysterically, replied, “Colonel, they were trying to get away.” Sparks claimed that that the private had killed about twelve Germans and wounded several more.²³¹ Although Sparks did not believe the Germans were attempting to escape, PFC Lee claimed otherwise. Lee said that the Germans, thinking that they were to be executed by the machine gun, panicked and started towards the GIs. “That’s when someone yelled to fire and the machine gun opened up a short burst of fire,” Lee remembered, “and three riflemen and myself responded.”²³² As the shooting started, medic Peter Galary said that one of the Germans yelled for the others to drop to the ground, which they did. Galary tried to grab another

²³⁰ T. Pauli, “Dachau,” *Berkenkruis*, (October 1988), 20.

²³¹ Sparks, *Dachau and It’s Liberation*, 9-10.

²³² Whitlock, *Rock of Anzio*, 364.

soldier's rifle to shoot the German who called out, but was unsuccessful. "I wanted to kill that one SS [man]," Galary said, "[be]cause he seemed to be the leader."²³³

Sparks' intervention, however, did not put an end to the killing at the coal yard. Nearly three hours later, Lt. Buechner heard several bursts of machine gun fire followed by the sounds of automatic pistol fire coming from the area. He arrived to find Lt. Jack Bushyhead standing next to several GIs manning a .30 caliber machine gun. Opposite the machine gun, against the masonry wall, lay nearly 350 German soldiers, most of whom were dead. Those that were still alive pointed to their heads begged for mercy by repeating the word "*pistola*" and pointing to their head. In order to accommodate them, the GIs gave pistols to several camp inmates who went down the line shooting the wounded Germans in the head. Buechner approached Bushyhead and asked, "Jack, why did you do this?" Bushyhead replied in a low voice, "Doc, have you been to the crematorium? Have you seen the box cars?"²³⁴

By late afternoon on 29 April, the killing of SS POWs ceased as the American forces secured the camp and restored order. Nevertheless, news of the executions had reached high-ranking American army officials. On 2 May, Gen. Wade Haislip, the commanding general of the U.S. 7th Army, authorized the Assistant Inspector General, Lt. Col. Joseph M. Whitaker, to conduct an investigation into the alleged mistreatment of the German guards. Whitaker interviewed thirty-eight soldiers from the 45th and 42nd Infantry Divisions, compiling over one hundred pages of testimony. After reviewing all of the testimony, Whitaker recommended that Walsh, Bushyhead, Wells, and Pruitt be

²³³ Ibid., 365. Galary, whose brother had died at Anzio, subsequently refused to treat the wounded Germans.

²³⁴ Buechner, *Avenger*, 86-87; Howard Buechner interview, *The Liberation of KZ Dachau*.

tried by general court-martial for the murder of seventeen POWs. He also recommended that Buechner be tried by for failing to render aid to the wounded German soldiers at the coal yard.²³⁵

Whitaker forwarded the report to the Haislip who concluded that the results of the report, “indicate[d] an apparent lack of comprehension on the part of the investigating officer [Whitaker] of the...unbalancing effects of the horrors and shock of Dachau on combat troops already fatigued with more than thirty days of continuous combat.” Furthermore, he considered the investigation, “an apparent attempt to accentuate testimony unfavorable to the participants,” and recommended a re-investigation of the circumstances surrounding the executions.²³⁶

The recommendations of both Whitaker and Haislip became moot when Gen. George S. Patton’s 3rd Army replaced the 7th Army in Bavaria. After the transition, Patton ordered Sparks to his headquarters in Augsburg. “Colonel,” Patton said to Sparks, “I have some serious court-martial charges against you and some of your men here on my desk.” Sparks attempted to explain, but Patton refused to listen. “There is no point in an explanation,” Patton replied, “I have already had these charges investigated, and they’re a bunch of crap. I’m going to tear up these goddamn papers on you and your men.”²³⁷ Kenneth Wickham, the 45th Division chief of staff, corroborates Sparks’ story. “General

²³⁵ Although Whitaker only uncovered evidence of seventeen deaths, Buechner claims that American soldiers killed 520 POWs. U.S. 7th Army Headquarters, Inspector General Section, “Report of Investigation June-Aug 1945,” RG 338, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

²³⁶ Whitaker, *Dachau Investigation*. 4.

²³⁷ Sparks, *Dachau and It’s Liberation*, 19.

Patton kind of said, ‘To hell with it’ and that was that.’²³⁸ The report disappeared and remained buried in the National Archives until the U.S. government declassified it in 1991.

The American soldiers who liberated the Dachau concentration camp were wholly unprepared for the atrocities that they encountered. The visage of thousands of emaciated corpses, and their living counterparts within the camp, shocked and disturbed the battle-hardened veterans. They quickly concluded that such atrocities fell outside of the normal conduct of war. As a result, they took it upon themselves ignore the rules of war and exact revenge upon all the SS men inside the camp. Decades later, many of the men who liberated KZ Dachau maintained that the killings were justified. William Walsh echoed this belief in James Strong’s 1990 documentary, *The Liberation of KZ Dachau*. With a conviction unhampered by age, he said, “I don’t think there was any SS guy who was shot or killed in the defense of Dachau that wondered why he was killed.”

The feelings of hatred and the desire to exact justice upon the guards of Dachau did not dissipate once the GIs left the camp. The experience convinced many GIs that the German nation as a whole was guilty. In a letter to his parents the next day, Greene wrote:

This is not the nation we all believed to be lovers of art, beauty, and culture. Quite the contrary. It is a nation of gangsters, no better than Dillinger.....We should never show them any mercy, for these atrocities. All Germans can never be forgiven.²³⁹

²³⁸ Whitlock, *Rock of Anzio*, 389.

²³⁹ A. Lewis Greene, “Colonel A. Lewis Greene letter to his parents (excerpt),” *Witness to the Holocaust Project*.

Just prior to entering Dachau, Walsh and his men had rendered aid to a German soldier. “Twenty minutes later, forget it! We never treated a wounded soldier that nice. Never.”²⁴⁰ Maj. Miguel J. Montesinos, an intelligence officer with the 7th Army, said bluntly, “Those of us that went in were not disposed to taking any prisoners from then on out. This is the way everybody felt.”²⁴¹ While accompanying the 42nd Division into Munich, combat photographer Walter Rosenblum witnessed several SS troopers surrender after a fierce shootout on a courtyard. “The Americans...were battle-hardened, had lost a lot of guys, and were not to be trifled with...They killed all the Germans. Shot ‘em all. I filmed the whole sequence.”²⁴² An additional seventeen members of the ‘Götz von Berlichingen’ Division were shot at Eberstettin after they surrendered. “The presences of the Dachau camp in the vicinity might have had something to do with this massacre,” Antonio Munoz conclude, “Allies made no differentiation between combat troops of the Waffen-SS and security guards of the *SS-Totenkopfverband*.”²⁴³

Killing POWs for Amusement, Prestige, and Group Bonding

As mentioned previously, experience with enemy “atrocities” was not the only path to brutalization. The gradual accumulation of combat stress could also warp a soldier’s mental state. John Babcock recalled:

²⁴⁰ Walsh interview, *Liberation of KZ Dachau*.

²⁴¹ Miguel J. Montesinos, interview by Elizabeth Jacobs, 25 January 1980, oral history transcript, *Witness to the Holocaust Project*.

²⁴² Terkel, *Good War*, 381.

²⁴³ Antonio J. Munoz, *Iron Fist: A Combat History of the 17.SS Panzergrenadier Division ‘Götz von Berlichingen,’ 1943-1945* (n.p.: Axis Europa Books, 1999), 62.

[T]he war that engulfed us GIs grew to be grotesquely devoid of humans rules and customary amenities. Perspectives narrowed. The obsession was to kill or be killed. No place for Mr. Good Guy. No scoring markers, as in Stateside maneuvers, to designate make-believe casualties. We played for keeps.... Incessant violence and the specter of our own imminent deaths blunted compassion. Some formerly clean, upright, and thoroughly ethical American soldiers occasionally took a shot at an enemy medic; our guys beat up or shot prisoners once in a while; enemy wounded were occasionally left unattended for long periods, sometimes out of spite.²⁴⁴

Of course, they still operated by the American combat ethos. They were simply less likely to forgive a violation, more likely to perceive that a violation occurred, and more willing to respond with violence out of proportion to the offense.

Increased violence to improper post-surrender behavior became indicative of brutalization stage American soldiers. In contrast to the coarsening stage, these soldiers punished German misbehavior that posed no threat to their captors. A German soldier inadvertently discovered this fact shortly after becoming a prisoner of the 9th Division. When a GI demanded that he relinquish his watch, the German replied that the Geneva Convention did not require him to do so. Unimpressed, the American continued his demands until the German took his watch off and stomped on it. He won the argument, but lost his life.²⁴⁵ Ralph Treadup of the 394th Infantry, 99th Division, remembered how Lester “Blitz” Boudreau dealt with German deception. On 16 March 1945, Blitz wandered into a German hospital in Honningen to discover six wounded German soldiers. Upon closer examination of one of the patients, Blitz discovered that he was

²⁴⁴ Babcock, *Taught to Kill*, 138-9.

²⁴⁵ Linderman, *World within War*, 113-4.

faking—his bandages covered a perfectly good leg. Without hesitation, Blitz killed the German in his bed.²⁴⁶

A great many German officers mistakenly assumed that the Geneva Convention permitted an officer to refuse to surrender to someone of a lower rank. Such displays of formality and class-distinction did not sit well with GIs who prided themselves on being “average Joes.”²⁴⁷ In Normandy, Sgt. William Ogden and several soldiers of the 29th Infantry Division discovered a German field grade officer hiding in a hayloft. The German demanded that an American officer be present because he would not surrender to a “simple soldier.” Ogden agreed but insisted that must disarm the German before proceeding. The German officer surrendered his pistol and an eighteen-inch knife. Ogden took the knife, reversed its direction, and stabbed the German officer in the chest. “He had a very startled look on his face,” Ogden recalled.²⁴⁸ A downed German pilot refused to surrender to Frank Irgang and another scout with the exclamation, “I am a colonel, and I demand that I be taken prisoner by someone of at least the same rank.” After the two scouts produced their lieutenant, the pilot refused again—so the lieutenant shot him. Irgang took the dead man’s gloves, the other scout removed his watch, and the officer cut a finger off to remove a large gold ring.²⁴⁹ In Dorstewitz, a German major’s capture by the aforementioned “Junior” was so humiliating that he insisted he be shot or allowed to shoot himself. Aware of his reputation, an American colonel intervened. It

²⁴⁶ Colley, *Blood for Dignity*, 123-4.

²⁴⁷ In fact, it states only that “officers and persons of equivalent status who are prisoners of war shall be treated with due regard to their rank and age.” Article 6, *Geneva POW Convention*.

²⁴⁸ Hoyt, *The GI’s War*, 408.

²⁴⁹ Irgang, *Etched in Purple*, 211-2.

was only a temporary reprieve. As MacDonald's company prepared for the next attack, the colonel radioed some last-minute instruction. "By the way," he added, "you can tell Junior that we finally had to dispense with his German major. He tried to make a run for it."²⁵⁰

Of course, members of the Hitler Youth, SS men, and die-hard Nazis ranked among the most arrogant German prisoners. Maj. Orval Faubus, an intelligence officer in Patton's 3rd Army, remembered a particular supercilious group of ten SS prisoners captured on 4 December 1944. Because four said, "Heil Hitler," only six made it to a POW collection point.²⁵¹ During his interrogation, a German first sergeant captured by Frank Irgang's refused to offer information and exclaimed, "I love my country, and I love my leader!" Goaded the German, the interrogator asked, "Who is your leader?" The first sergeant replied, "Adolf Hitler—yet." With a nod from the lieutenant, a GI shuffled the German into the nearby brush, killed him with a burst of automatic fire, and reemerged with the standard explanation that he tried to escape. Nobody believed him, but nobody cared. "It was better to get rid of the fanatics," Irgang concluded, "than to have our sons over here in another twenty-five years."²⁵²

After interrogating a captured teenage parachutist captured in the Battle of the Bulge, one American wrote:

I wondered why the MP had not fulfilled his wish [to die in battle], particularly after he had killed one of their comrades. They had merely knocked him out cold. Hard-eyed and rigid of face, he was arrogant with an inner, unbending arrogance.

²⁵⁰ MacDonald, *Company Commander*, 211-2.

²⁵¹ Orval Eugene Faubus, *In this Faraway Land* (Conway, AR: River Road Press, 1971), 433.

²⁵² Irgang, *Etched in Purple*, 233-4.

He aroused in me an urge which I hope never to experience again, an urge to kill. I could have killed him in cold blood, without any doubt or second thought, as I would a cockroach. It was a terrible feeling to have, because it was without passion. I could not think of him as a human being.²⁵³

The young parachutist was lucky; Americans in the brutalization stage felt no sympathy for children if they openly acknowledged their allegiance to Hitler. Paul Fussell admitted, “We were very hard on snotty Nazi adolescents.”²⁵⁴ Al Cohen witnessed just how hard Americans could be. Outside a village in Germany, two very young German soldiers approached an American lieutenant, clicked their heels, and shouted, “Heil Hitler!” One of them proclaimed that he wanted to die for the Fuhrer and the lieutenant shot him on the spot. The other started crying and the lieutenant took him over his knee and paddled him. “That’s what you got,” Cohen noted laconically, “Some of them didn’t want to die. Some of them were real little bastards.”²⁵⁵

Eventually, however, the American combat ethos became so distorted and truncated that it disappeared altogether. In its place, emerged a primal mindset devoid of civilized restraint. As former World War II officer J. Glenn Gray observed:

When soldiers are driven to battle by this image [of the non-human enemy], they are freed from the possibility of remorse for their deeds. The hunting impulses are released to seek the most dangerous of all beasts and the one most deserving of death. In this sense, war does become a desperate kind of game. The enemy is sought out to be exterminated, not subdued. There is no satisfaction in capturing him and exacting obedience and respect. There is also, of course, no safety in it, since he is held to be incapable of grasping civilized rules of warfare. Therefore the enemy when disarmed and helpless tends to become the object of target practice for the opposing soldiers.²⁵⁶

²⁵³ Ferguson, “Prisoner Taking,” 184.

²⁵⁴ Fussell, *Doing Battle*, 124.

²⁵⁵ Lynch, *Dragon’s Teeth*, 120-1.

²⁵⁶ Gray, *Warriors*, 149-50.

As American forces re-entered Germany in the spring of 1945, many GIs realized that the end of the war was near. Consequently, they viewed the continued resistance of German forces as both futile and suicidal. This attitude created a nearly ubiquitous hatred of all things German and a perfect opportunity for many GIs to kill POWs without fear of reprisal. During the last stage of the battle for the Rhine, two battle-weary German soldiers approached an American roadblock in order to surrender. An American glider pilot attempted to accept their surrender. However, the NCO in charge of the position, a sergeant of the 194th Infantry Regiment, said, “We aren’t taking prisoners.” The Germans were told to walk away down the road toward the American rear. As they did, the sergeant shot and killed the Germans.²⁵⁷ PFC Robert Perelman of the 232nd Infantry, 42nd Division, said, “I loved when I saw a dead German....I don’t apologize for it...I hated them with a passion.”²⁵⁸

The citizens of Budberg were not the only Germans civilians to witness the wrath of GIs. The people of Grossenritte, Germany buried the bodies of two German artillerymen captured by the Americans. The GIs made the POWs ride on the front of jeeps as they drove to nearby Hertingshausen. Before they arrived at the village, the GIs shot the Germans and left their dead bodies on the side of the road.²⁵⁹ Roscoe Blunt witnessed a strikingly similar act in Grandemil. As he walked to a field kitchen for

²⁵⁷ Linderman, *World Within War*, 123.

²⁵⁸ Robert Perelman, interview by Sarah Hoffman, 10 December 1980, audio recording transcript, *Witness to the Holocaust Project*.

²⁵⁹ Terry D. Janes, *Eyewitness to a Battle*, The Troubleshooters, <http://www.thetroubleshooters.com/702nd/grossenritte001.html> (accessed 10 October 2009).

breakfast, a passing jeep offered him a ride. On the front of the jeep sat two German POWs with their hands clasped behind their heads:

As we bounced and swerved along the rutted, mud slicked road, the driver nodded casually to his front seat passenger and, without a word, they each pulled out their Colt .45s and simultaneously fired single shots into the back of each prisoner's head. The impact of the slugs made the Germans jerk upright convulsively in spasms as chunks of flesh, bone, and blood spewed from their skulls. The two lifeless forms slumped off the fenders, hitting the road bouncing and sliding in the mud into gutters along the road. I glanced back at them – the POWs' legs were still twitching. Other GIs walking the area hardly glanced at the two dead Germans. Still without a word being spoken, the GIs in the jeep holstered their side arms...²⁶⁰

Those GIs who had moved beyond callousness into brutalization did not always kill German POWs in the unemotional and straightforward manner illustrated above. For some, killing POWs offered special rewards beyond the mere satisfaction of killing an unarmed enemy. Raymond Gantter, a 1st Division veteran of the Battle of the Bulge, observed how GIs could be strangely empowered by such acts:

[T]here is a heady intoxication in the giving over of one's self to that black torrent, a blind and animal exultation that sings dangerously in the blood. It is the death wish manifest, and I have seen men bow to it, seen them voluntarily and eagerly forswear their responsibility of their morality to wallow, dazed and raptured [sic], in that bloody bath.²⁶¹

This was this case with the incident witnessed by Bradford Perkins. "I saw two wounded Germans killed," he wrote, "simply because their moans bothered a sergeant in a foxhole nearby."²⁶² Souvenir hunting could also be a motivation. During the defense of Somerich, William Foley chatted with a machine gunner who displayed a cache of pistols

²⁶⁰ Blunt, *Foot Soldier*, 138.

²⁶¹ Gantter, *Roll Me Over*, 131.

²⁶² Bradford Perkins, "Impressions of Wartime," *The Journal of American History* 77, no. 2, (1990): 565.

and German canned goods. The gunner had collected his prize items by crawling around in the dark, and killing wounded Germans with his trench knife.”²⁶³

Sgt Robert Jamison’s unit of the 90th Infantry Division stopped a German tank with a bazooka and captured two of the tank crew. An American lieutenant promptly shot one German with a very bad leg wound.²⁶⁴ After an American artillery barrage, Roscoe Blunt saw a teenage German soldier crawl out of the rubble and limp towards the American lines. The boy held one arm held feebly in the air, while the stump of the other arm hung limp at his side. Blunt started in his direction, but the commander of a tank waved him away. Then, without hesitation, the tanker ran over the German with his tank treads.²⁶⁵

Sgt. Nat Frankel of the 4th Armored Division encountered one such individual who went out of his way to fulfill his bloodlust. At one point during the war, Frankel found himself slowly herding four German POWs in front of his tank. Another sergeant from an infantry unit pulled up in a jeep and asked if he could relieve Frankel of his prisoners. Frankel eagerly agreed to rid himself of the burden and the prisoners were loaded into the jeep. After the jeep disappeared around an embankment, the sound of gunfire erupted. Moments later the infantry sergeant drove his empty jeep past Frankel’s tank. “He smiled as he drove past,” Frankel recalled, “smiled and waved.”²⁶⁶

²⁶³ Foley, *Visions*, 198.

²⁶⁴ Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers*, 353.

²⁶⁵ Blunt, *Foot Soldier*, 207.

²⁶⁶ Nat Frankel and Larry Smith, *Patton’s Best: An Informal History of the 4th Armored Division* (New York: Jove, 1984), 5.

Killing POWs in front of an audience provided benefits not available to isolated killers. An audience allowed a GI to enhance his reputation as a cold-blooded killer and provided a measure of vindication for the killer's act. In Holland, David Webster witnessed a fellow paratrooper flush several German soldiers from hiding. "He delighted the English tank crews," Webster recalled, "by chasing the Germans in front of their tanks and killing them, frontier style."²⁶⁷ Participating in a killing of POWs with other GIs provided also provided benefits unavailable to individual killers. The group's powerful social and psychological forces surmount any individual reservations about killing unarmed men. Like the individual killer, the participants in a group killing of POWs enhance their reputations as cold-blooded killer. Unlike the individual killer, group participants receive complete vindication and absolution for the act. Furthermore, the individuals enhance their bond with the other members of the group. Such an event-driven bond as this allows the participants to recount the story among them, thereby reinforcing the bond over time.

Incidents in which a group of GIs killed German POWs often occurred spontaneously and without direction from an authority figure. In late March 1945, William Foley's unit captured seven German prisoners after their convoy accidentally drove into an enemy-held town. With no spare room inside their vehicles, the GIs placed the POWs on the hoods of their trucks. As the convoy sped out of the town, and back to friendly lines, two violent turns threw the prisoners on Foley's truck into nearby walls. Each time a German flew from the fender, Foley could hear the sickening sound of the

²⁶⁷ Webster, *Parachute Infantry*, 104.

impact and a cowboy-like “Yahoo!” from the GIs in the cab.²⁶⁸ The men of Paul Fussell’s rifle company participated in another spontaneous group killing that came to be known as the “Great Turkey Shoot”:

In a deep crater in a forest, someone had come upon a squad or two of Germans, perhaps fifteen or twenty in all. Their visible wish to surrender—most were in tears of terror and despair—was ignored by our men lining the rim....Laughing and howling, hoo-ha-ing and cowboy and good-old-boy yelling, our men exultantly shot into the crater until every single man down there was dead. A few tried to scale the sides, but there was no escape. If a body twitched or moved at all, it was shot again. The result was deep satisfaction, and the event transformed into amusing narrative, told and retold over campfires all that winter. If it made you sick, you were not supposed to indicate.”²⁶⁹

Eventually, however, GIs who reached the brutalization stage became a hazard to themselves as well as the enemy. In his book, *The Brass Ring*, Bill Mauldin relates a similar story about a Native American friend from the 45th Division. During the fighting in Sicily, a soldier known affectionately as the “Medicine Man” flushed a German out of his foxhole with his bayonet. Laughing and prodding his victim in the rear, the Medicine Man chased the hapless German back and forth between the American and German lines. Finally, having grown tired of the chase, the GI “skewered” the German with his bayonet. “I suspect,” Mauldin wrote, “it was the Medicine Man’s way of having a fit of combat fatigue”²⁷⁰

²⁶⁸ Foley, *Visions*, 259-60.

²⁶⁹ Fussell, *Doing Battle*, 124.

²⁷⁰ Mauldin, *Brass Ring*, 200-1.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

On 18 July 1945, more than two months after V-E Day, General Eisenhower issued an order to all officers exercising general court-martial jurisdiction within the European Theater of Operations:

You will forthwith cause a thorough investigation to be made into whether enemy prisoners of war have been killed or otherwise mistreated by members of your command and whether instructions have been given leading to such treatment or such practices having been condoned, and to take disciplinary action where appropriate.²⁷¹

As motivation for the order, Eisenhower cited the “shameful fiasco” of the German government to investigate and prosecute its soldiers after World War I. “America’s moral position,” he concluded, “will be undermined...if criminal conduct of a like character by her own armed forces is condoned and unpunished...”²⁷²

Five months later, acting Theater Judge Advocate Col. C.B. Mickelwait forwarded a summary of investigations conducted by seventy-five different commands to Eisenhower and Chief of Staff Gen. George Marshall. Only three investigations (those of the 5th Armored, 99th Infantry, and 101st Airborne Divisions) discovered verifiable evidence to support claims of unwarranted POW killings. Thus, Mickelwait concluded

²⁷¹ Dwight D. Eisenhower, “Directive of Theater Commander, 18 July 1945,” Modern Military Records Division, File 383.6, Record Group 94, National Archives, Washington, D.C

²⁷² Ibid.

that, “The number of major violations was small considering the enormous scope of operations.”²⁷³ He dismissed the reports of POW killings since they lacked corroborating evidence. “It is probable,” acting Deputy Theater Judge Advocate Colonel Charles L. Decker concluded, “that the rumors of shooting PWs were grossly exaggerated, part of the folklore of the war—isolated incidents having been enormously magnified and multiplied in the retailing [sic].”²⁷⁴

Obviously, Mickelwait and Decker were wrong to assume that such incidents were rare.²⁷⁵ The deficiencies of the rules of war, the cumulative effects of combat stress, and the actions of unrestrained enemy soldiers frequently combined to motivate American soldiers to kill prisoners. Was Eisenhower was also wrong? Is America’s “moral position” undermined by the knowledge that Americans frequently and systematically killed POWs in the European war? For those historians and laypersons who equate legality with morality it is quite easy to believe that it does. Simon Mackenzie reminds us, however, that such moral judgments “are based on assumptions, fundamental beliefs, which have varied between societies and over time.”²⁷⁶ Tom Gibson

²⁷³ C.B. Mickelwait, “Investigation of Treatment of Prisoners of War by United States Forces, 31 December 1945,” File 383.6, Record Group 498, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

²⁷⁴ The War Department conducted no further investigations and the file was classified “secret” until 1980. Charles L. Decker, “Memorandum for General Betts, 31 December 1945,” file 383.6, RG 498, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

²⁷⁵ From a strictly legal standpoint, the refusal to equate rumor with evidence is logical. After all, courts-martial cannot convene, much less convict, without corroborating evidence. The efforts of 5th Armored Division’s Investigator General illustrate just how difficult obtaining such evidence could be. His investigation into numerous incidents of POW killing resulted in only one conviction. Despite eyewitness testimony, investigation into the others incidents failed to uncover evidence “definitely establishing that an offense had been committed.” Eyewitness statements meant nothing if they could not name the offender. C.B. Mickelwait, “Investigation of Treatment of Prisoners of War by United States Forces,” file 383.6, RG 498, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

²⁷⁶ Mackenzie, “Treatment of Prisoners,” 489.

of the 101st Airborne Division believes “that only a combat soldier has the right to judge another combat soldier. Only he knows how hard it is to retain his sanity, to do his duty and to survive with some semblance of honor.”²⁷⁷ Grady Arrington demonstrated his belief when he wrote:

It is in no way conceivable to the layman how such a thing could be done....Before you judge...it might be well to ask yourself, “Have I ever experienced the slaughter of friends or watched the number of my comrades diminish hourly while the living tramped about in their gore?” If you answer is “No,” then there is no explaining the terrible feeling in the heart and mind of the man whose existence, for unnumbered days, weeks, and months, has been based on the theme of kill or be killed. *If your answer is “No,” fall on your knees to the Almighty God and pray that you may never understand such burning hate as that which sears the combat soldier’s soul.*²⁷⁸

It makes sense then to conclude that Eisenhower was wrong as well. Knowledge of this particular behavior does not condemn America or its cherished image of its citizen soldiers. Only by understanding the realities of European combat can we truly appreciate the sacrifices of the greatest generation. As historian Richard Holmes declared, “Societies which ask men to fight on their behalf should be aware of what the consequences of their action may so easily be.”²⁷⁹

²⁷⁷ Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers*, 352-3.

²⁷⁸ Emphasis mine. Arrington, *Infantryman*, 226-7.

²⁷⁹ Holmes, *Acts of War*, 392.

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