EISENHOWER’S DEATH CAMPS
The last dirty secret of World War Two
page 31
THE LAST DIRTY SECRET OF WORLD WAR TWO

Call it callousness, call it reprisal, call it a policy of hostile neglect: a million Germans taken prisoner by Eisenhower’s armies died in captivity after the surrender.

In the spring of 1945, Adolf Hitler’s Third Reich was on the brink of collapse, ground between the Red Army, advancing westward towards Berlin, and the American, British, and Canadian armies, under the overall command of General Dwight Eisenhower, moving eastward over the Rhine. Since the D-Day landings in Normandy the previous June, the western Allies had won back France and the Low Countries, and some Wehrmacht commanders were already trying to negotiate local surrenders. Other units, though, continued to obey Hitler’s orders to fight to the last man. Most systems, including transport, had broken down, and civilians in panic flight from the advancing Russians roamed at large.

Hungry and frightened, lying in fields within fifty feet of us, awaiting the appropriate time to jump up with their hands in the air,” that’s how Captain H. F. McCullogh of the 2nd Anti-Tank Regiment of the 2nd Canadian Division described the chaos of the German surrender at the end of the Second World War. In a day and a half, according to Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, 300,000 Germans surrendered to his 21st Army Group in northern Germany. Soon after V-E Day — May 8, 1945 — the British-Canadian catch totalled more than 2 million. Virtually nothing about their treatment survives in the archives of Ottawa or London, but some skimpy evidence from the International Committee of the Red Cross, the armies concerned, and the prisoners themselves indicates that almost all continued in fair health. In any case, most were quickly released and sent home, or else transferred to the French to help in the postwar work of reconstruction. (The French army had itself taken fewer than 200,000 prisoners.)

BY JAMES BACQUE
Like the British and Canadians, the Americans suddenly faced astounding numbers of surrendering German troops: the final tally of prisoners taken by the U.S. army in Europe (excluding Italy and North Africa) was 5.25 million. But the Americans responded very differently.

Among the early U.S. captives was one Corporal Helmut Liebich, who had been working in an anti-aircraft experimental group at Peenemünde on the Baltic. Liebich was captured by the Americans on April 17, near Gomlar in central Germany. Forty-two years later, he recalled vividly that there were no tents in the Gomlar camp, just barbed wire fences around a field soon churned to mud. The prisoners received a small ration of food on the first day but it was then cut in half. In order to get it, they were forced to run a gauntlet. Hunched over, they ran between lines of American guards who hit them with sticks as they scurried towards their food. On April 27, they were transferred to the U.S. camp at Heidehof farther west, where there was no food at all for days, then very little. Exposed, starved, and thirsty, the men started to die. Liebich saw between ten and thirty bodies a day being dragged out of his sector, B, which at first held around 5,200 men. He saw one prisoner beat another to death to get his little piece of bread. One night, when it rained, Liebich saw the sides of the holes in which they were sheltered, dug in soft sandy earth, collapse on men who were too weak to struggle out. They...
smothered before anyone could get to them. Liebich sat down and wept. "I could hardly believe men could be so cruel to each other."

Typhus broke out in Heidenheim about the beginning of May. Five days after V-E Day, on May 13, Liebich was transferred to another U.S. POW camp, at Bingen-Rüdesheim in the Rhineland near Bad Kreuznach, where he was told that the prisoners numbered somewhere between 200,000 and 400,000, all without shelter, food, water, medicine, or sufficient space. Soon he fell sick with dysentry and typhus. He was rescued again, semi-conscious and delirious, in an open-topped railway car with about sixty other prisoners, northwest down the Rhine, with a detour through Holland, where the Dutch stood on bridges to smash stones down on the heads of the prisoners. Sometimes the American guards fired warning shots near the Dutch to keep them off. Sometimes not. After three nights, his fellow prisoners helped him stagger into the huge camp at Rheinberg, near the border with the Netherlands, again without shelter or food.

When a little food finally did arrive, it was rotten. In one of the four camps he had Liebich seen any shelter for the prisoners. The death rate in the U.S. Rhineland camps at this point, according to surviving data, A German newspaper, Rhöa-Zeitung, has identified this uncaptioned U.S. Army photograph of German POWs at camp at Simzig-Ramagen, spring, 1945.
from a medical survey, was about thirty per cent per year. A normal death rate for a civilian population in 1945 was between one and two per cent.

One day in June, through the hallucinations of his fever, Liebich saw “the Tonnies” coming into the camp. The British had taken over Rheinberg, and that probably saved his life. At this point, Liebich, who is five-fourteen, weighed 96.8 pounds.

According to stories told to this day by others present at Rheinberg, the last act of the Americans before the British took over the camp was to bulldoze one section and the commanding general of the U.S. forces in the European theatre. He was subject to the Combined Chiefs of Staff (CCS) of Britain and the U.S., to the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), and to the policy of the U.S. government, but, in the absence of explicit directives — to the contrary or otherwise — ultimate responsibility for the treatment of the German prisoners in American hands lies with him.

“God, I hate the Germans,” Eisenhower wrote to his wife, Mamie, in September, 1944. Earlier, in front of the British ambassador to Washington, he had said that all the 3,500 or so officers of the German General Staff should be “exterminated.”

In March, 1943, a message to the Combined Chiefs of Staff signed and initiated by Eisenhower recommended creating a new class of prisoners — Deemed Enemy Forces, or DEFs — who, unlike German-defined prisoners of war, would not be fed by the army after the surrender of Germany. This would be a direct breach of the Geneva Convention. The message, dated March 10, argues in part: “The additional maintenance commitment entailed by declaring the German Armed Forces prisoners [sic] of war which would necessitate the provision of rations on a scale equal to that of base troops would prove beyond the capacity of the Allies even if all German sources were tapped.” It ends: “Your approval is requested. Existing plans have been prepared upon this basis.”

On April 26, 1945, the Combined Chiefs approved the DEF status for prisoners of war in American hands only; the British had refused to adopt the American plan for their own prisoners. The Combined Chiefs stipulated that the status of disarmed German troops be kept secret.

By that time, Eisenhower’s quartermaster general at SHAPE, General Robert Littlejohn, had already twice reduced rations to prisoners and the SHAPE message said: “Eisenhower reported to General George Marshall, the U.S. Army chief of staff, that the prisoner pans would provide “no shelter or other comforts.”

The problem was not supply. There was more than enough material stockpiled in Europe to construct prison-camp facilities. Eisenhower’s special assistant, General Everett Hughes, had visited the huge supply dumps at Naples and Marseille and reported: “More stocks than we can ever use. Stretch as far as eye can see.” Food should not have been a problem, either. In the U.S., wheat and corn surpluses were higher than they had ever been, and there was a record crop of potatoes. The army itself had had so much food in reserve that when a whole warehouseful was dropped from the supply lists by accident in England it was not noticed for three months. In addition, the International Committee of the Red Cross had over 100,000 tons of food in storage in Switzerland. When it tried to send aid packages to the American sector of Germany, U.S. Army officers turned the trains back, saying their warehouses were already overflowing with ICR food which they had never distributed.

Nonetheless it was through the supply side that the policy of deprivation was carried out. Water, food, tents, space, medicine — everything necessary for the prisoners was kept fatality scarce. Camp Rheinberg, where Corporal Liebich lived in mid-May, shaving with dysentery and typhus, had no food at all when it was opened on April 17. As in the other big “Rhineland” camps, opened by the Americans in May, there were no guard towers, tents, buildings, excelling facilities, water, latrines, or food.

George Weiss, a tank repairman who now lives in Toronto, recalls of his camp on the Rhine: “All night we had to sit up on watch against each other. But the lack of water was the worst thing of all. For three and a half days, we had no water at all. We would drink our urine.”

Private Haim T. (his surname is withheld at his request) had just turned eighteen in hospital when the Americans walked into his ward on April 18. He and all his fellow patients were taken out to the camp at Bad Kreuznach in the Rheinland, which already held several hundred thousand prisoners. Haim was wearing only a pair of shorts, shoes, and a shirt.

Haim was far from the youngest in the camp, which also held thousands of displaced German civilians. There were children as young as six among the prisoners, as well as pregnant women, and men over sixty. At the beginning, when there were still guards in the camp, some men managed to cut off hands to build sores. The guards ordered the fire cut out. In many of the cellars, it was forbidden to dig holes in the ground for shelter. “All we had to eat was moss,” Haim remembers.

Charles von Lutichau was convalescing at home when he decided to surrender voluntarily to U.S. troops about to occupy his house. He was taken to Camp Kripp, on the Rhine near Remagen.

“We were kept in crowded barred-wire cages in the open with scarcely any food,” Haim remembers.

The POW camps clustered all along the Rhine and the final successful Allied thrust into Germany. The U.S. Army officially took 5,258,000 prisoners
Work crews removed dog tags, stripped the bodies, and stacked them in layers interbedded with quicklime.

Clothing was infected, and so was the mud where we had to walk and sit and lie down. In these conditions, the men very soon started to die. Within a few days, some of the men who had gone healthy into the camp were dead. I saw our men dragging many bodies to the gates of the camp, where they were taken and washed by a few other men, who took them away.

Yas Lutkis's mother was American, and he later emigrated to Washington, D.C., where he became a historian and wrote a military history for the U.S. Army. He was in the Krippe camp for about three months.

Wolfgang Hf, who was imprisoned at Rheinberg, still lives in Germany, reports that, in his subjection in perhaps 10,000 prisoners, thirty to forty bodies were dragged out every day. A member of the burial work party, Hf says he helped load the dead from barge to truck to the cemetery where they were buried in wheelbarrows to several big steel garbage cans.

As he recited his role, the men stripped the corpses of clothing, stripped off half of each aluminum dog tag, spread the bodies in layers of fifteen to twenty, with ten shovelfuls of quicklime over each layer so that they were stacked at a rate of 100 bodies a day. The personal effects in a bag for the Americans, left.

Some of the corpses were dead of gangrene following frostbite. (It was unusually late, cold spring.) A dozen or more bodies had grown too weak to walk and died from exposure. The German Division Commander, General Eisenhower and Prime Minister Churchill talked about reducing prisoner rations.

Churchill asked for an agreement on the scale of rations for prisoners, because he would soon have to announce cuts in the British war ration. He wanted to make sure that the prisoners "had as possible ... should be fed on those supplies which we could best spare." Eisenhower replied that he had already "given the matter considerable attention." The question was to reconsider the whole thing to be sure "whether or not a further reduction was possible." He told Churchill that POWs had been getting 2,200 calories a day. (The U.S. Army Medical Corps considered 2,500 an absolute minimum subsistence level for sedentary adults living under shelter. U.S. troops were issued 4,000 calories a day.) What he did not tell Churchill was that the army was not providing the DEFE as all, or was feeding them far less than those who still enjoyed prisoners of war status.

Rations were reduced again soon after this; a direct order was recorded in the Quartermaster Reports. But little was being taken place as well. One was the effect of extraordinary gaps between prisoner strength at given on the ration lists and official "on hand" counts, and during the weekend counts and the usual number of prisoners in the camp.

The future of General Lee grew as worry about the discrepancies that he found. He called on a challenge from his headquarters Paris to SHAPE headquarters in Frankfurt:

"This headquarters is having considerable difficulty in establishing adequate based requisitioning for prisoners of war currently held in France. . . in response to inquiries from this headquarters, several varying statements of num-
bar of prisoners held in Theater have been published by SHAEF."

Herbert cites the latest SHAEF statement: "Cable . . . dated 31 May states 1,890,000 prisoners of war and 1,200,000 disarmed German forces on hand. Best available figures at the Front show prisoners of war in Italy 390,000, in France 2,872,537, and in a total of 2,872,537 and an additional 1,000,000 disarmed German forces Germany and Austria."

The situation was astounding: Lee was reporting 11,000,000 men in the U.S. Army camps in Europe than SHAEF said it had on its books. But in the trench, the issue of food on the number of prisoners on hand supplied to him by SHAEF G-3 (Operations).

Given the general turmoil, fluctuating and inaccurate tallies were probably inevitable, but more than 1 million captives can actually be seen disappearing between two reports on the Theater Front, Martial, issued on the same day, June 2. The last in a series of daily reports from the TPM logs 2,870,537 POWs on hand on June 2. The first report of the new weekly series, dated the same day, says that there are only 2,870,537 on hand. At one point in the middle of June, the prisoner strength on the ration list was shown as 1,421,559, while on Lee's and other evidence there were probably almost three times that number. Spreading the rations thinner was one way to guarantee starvation. Another way was accomplished by some strung-out army book.

It was U.S. Army policy to provide "no shelter or other comforts" in the prisoner enclosures: the men lived in holes in the earth which they dug themselves keeping during June and July. A million prisoners who had been receiving at least some food because of their nominal POW status lost their rights and their food when they were secretly transferred to the DEF status. The shift was made deliberately over many weeks, with careful attention paid to maintaining plausible balances in SHAEF's weekly POW and DEF reports. The discrepancy between those "shifted" from POW status during the period from June 2 to July 28 and those "received" in the DEF status is only 0.43 per cent. The reclassification to DEF did not require any transfer.
of men to new camps, or involve any new organization to get German civilian supplies to them. The men stayed where they were. All that happened was that, by the closure of a typewriter, their skimpy bit of U.S. Army food was stopped.

The effect of a policy arranged through accountancy, and conveyed by signs, and orders — without written orders — was first to slyly, then to frustrate, then to crush the middle-rank officers who were responsible for POWs. A colonel in the Quartermaster Section of the advance U.S. Army Group wrote a personal plea to Quartermaster General Robert Lilleyman as early as April 27. "Aside from the 75,000 received from Feltro's Army, no subsistence has been received nor do I expect any. What desirable Class II and IV (ration) has been received has been entirely in the subsistence of the armies, upon personal appeal and has been insignificant in relation to the demands which are being put upon us by the influx of prisoners of war."

Rumours of conditions in the camps ran through the U.S. Army. "My, those camps were bad news," said Benedict K. Zehnle, a medical technician in the Medical Corps. "We were warned to stay as far away as we could." In May and early June of 1945, a team of U.S. Army Medical Corps doctors did survey some of the hovels and shanties, building just over 50,000 German POWs. Its report is raising from the appropriate section of the National Archives in Washington, but two secondary sources reproduce some of the findings. The three main killers were diarrhea and dysentery (treated as one category), cardiac disease, and pneumonia. But, clearing medical terminology, the doctors also recorded deaths from "encephalitis" and "convulsion." And their data varied death rates eighty-eight times as high as any peace-time norm.

Only 9 percent of the POWs had any of the diseases caused by lack of food, such as scurvy and malnutrition, and "death rates. But the other diseases, directly attributable to exposure, overcrowding, filth, and lack of sanitation, were undoubtedly exaggerated by starvation. As the report noted, "Exposure, overcrowding of camps, and lack of food and sanitary facilities all contributed to the excesses and death rates." The data, it must be remembered, were taken from the POWs, not from the DUF camps.

By the end of May, 1945, four people had already died in the U.S. camps that would die in the atomic blast at Hiroshima.

On June 4, 1945, a cable signed "Eisenhower" told Washington that it was "urgently necessary to reduce the number of prisoners at earliest opportunity by discharging all cases of prisoners most likely to be required by Germany. It is hard to understand what prompted this cable. No reason for it is evident in the massive cable traffic that survives the period in the archives in London, Washington, and Abilene, Kansas. And, far from ordering Eisenhower to release or hold onto prisoners, the Combined Chiefs' message of April 26 had urged him not to take in any more after V-E Day, even for labor. Nonetheless more than 2 million DUFs were impounded after May 8.

During June, Germany was partitioned into zones of occupation and in July, 1945, Sixth Army disbanded. Eisenhower, reverting to his role as U.S. commanding general in Europe, became military governor of the U.S. zone. He continued to keep out Red Cross representatives, and the U.S. Army also informed American relief teams that the zone was closed to them. It was closed to all relief shipments as well — until December, 1945, when a slight relaxation came into effect.

Also starting in July, the Americans turned over between 600,000 and 700,000 German captives to the French to help repair damages done to their country during the war. Many of the transfers were in five U.S. camps clustered around Dötzenheim, near Munich, in the section of Germany that had just come under French control. (Most of the rest were in U.S. camps in France.)

On July 10, a French army unit took over Dötzenheim and seventeen days later a Captain Julien arrived to assume command. His report serves as part of an army inquiry into a dispute between Julien and his predecessor. In the first camp he entered, he testified to finding muddy ground, "walled in with living skeletons," some of whom he had killed. Others huddled under boards or logs, in which they hid, although the July clay was hot. Women laying in holes in the ground stood up to him with long knives, bullying their belles in gross nudity of pregnancy; old men with long grey hair watched him feebly; children of six or seven with the rasping rigmarole of scarlet and look out from blither eyes. Two German doctors in the "hospital" were trying to care for the dying on the ground under the hot sky, between the marks of the tent that the Americans had taken with them. Julien, who had fought against the Germans with his regiment, the 170th Regiment de Tirailleurs Algeriens, found himself thinking in horror: "This is just like the photographs of Babi Yar and Buchenwald..."

There were 119,500 people in the five camps around Dötzenheim and among them Julien's officers counted 3,640 who could do no work at all. These were released immediately. In all, more than the prisoners taken over by the French that summer from American camps in Germany and in France were useless for reparations labour. In the camp at Saintes-Maries, 615 of 700 captives were reported to be unable to work. At Erstfeld near Mons, Belgium, according to a written complaint, twenty-five percent of the men released by the French were "idiots," "monsters.

In July and August, as U.S. Quartermaster Lieutenant Colonel Elliston related in due course, the Army food reserves in Europe grew by thirty-nine percent.

On August 4, a one-sentence order signed "Eisenhower" condemned all prisoners of war still on hand in the U.S. camps to DUF status: "Effective immediately all members of the German forces held in U.S. custody in the American zone of occupation in GERMANY will be considered as DUFs of enemy forces and not as having the status of prisoners of war." No reason was given. Surviving weekly tallies suggest the dual classification was preserved, but, for the POWs now being treated as DUFs, the death rate quadrupled within a few weeks, from 2 per cent per week to 8 per cent.

Longtime DUFs were dying at nearly five times that rate. The official "Weekly POW & DUF Report" for the week ending September 8, 1945, still exists in the U.S. National Archives in Washington. It shows an aggregate of 1,866,482 prisoners being held by the U.S. Army in the European theatre, of whom about two-thirds are identified as POWs. The other third — 363,857 men — are DUFs. During that one week, 15,051 of them died.

In November, 1945, General Eisenhower succeeded General Marshall as U.S. Army Chief of Staff and returned to the U.S. In January, 1946, the camps still held significant numbers of captives but the U.S. had wound down its prisoner holdings almost to zero by the end of 1946. The French continued holding hundreds of thousands through 1946, but gradually reduced the number to nothing by about 1949. During the 1950s, most news accounts relating to the U.S. prison camps were destroyed by the Army.

Eisenhower had deplored the Germans' useless defence of the Reich in the last months of the war because of the waste of life. At least ten times as many Germans — undoubtedly 500,000, almost certainly more than 500,000, and quite probably over 1 million — died in the French and American camps as were killed in all the combat on the Western Front in northwest Europe from America's entry into the war in 1941 through to April, 1945.