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Jessica N. Greenman
Gettysburg College

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"I Am Not A Prisoner of War": Agency, Adaptability, and Fulfillment of Expectations Among American Prisoners of War Held in Nazi Germany

Abstract

In war memory, the typical prisoner of war narrative is one of either passive survival or heroic resistance. However, captured service members did not necessarily lose their agency when they lost their freedom. This study of Americans held in Germany during the Second World War shows that prisoners generally grounded themselves in their personal and national identities, while compromising ideas of heroism, sometimes passing up opportunities for resistance in order to survive.

Keywords

Prisoners of war, WW2, Germany, World War 2, military

Disciplines

European History | History | United States History

Comments

Written as a senior capstone for HIST 421: The Second World War.

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“I Am Not A Prisoner of War”: Agency, Adaptability, and Fulfillment of Expectations Among
American Prisoners of War Held in Nazi Germany

HIST 421

Dr. Birkner

Spring 2020

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work
and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

“The toughest thing about being captured was that you had no control over your life whatsoever. They controlled it. You were under their domination. I was their slave. Whatever they wanted me to do, I did it, or else.” —Tom Grove, captured January 1945¹

Prisoners of war occupy a uniquely vulnerable position in armed conflict. Often immediately following the stress of combat, captured service members find themselves under the complete control of mortal enemies. Upon capture, they lose their status as combatants and become subject to a new set of legal expectations. Grove’s recollection reveals the difficulty that he and his fellow prisoners faced in trying to fulfill those expectations. Even though his training taught him not to cooperate with the enemy, resistance was exceedingly dangerous. When the guards’ orders were enforced with violence and death, what else was there to do but comply?

In the European Theater, successful prisoners were flexible, resourceful, and maintained their personal and national identities despite dehumanizing conditions. They were uncompromising in the preservation of a sense of self, but amended or abandoned many other cultural narratives about bravery, honesty, and masculinity in order to survive.

Support for this observation comes in large part from the prisoners themselves. Survivor Charles Stenger offers a clear articulation of his own: “I had a role still, a personality, an identity. I just kept saying to myself over and over, ‘I am not a prisoner of war.’”²

Ex-prisoner recollections, both written and oral, constitute a large proportion of the available literature. Some diaries and other writings generated during the war exist, although they are comparatively rare due to the difficulty prisoners had obtaining writing materials and

¹ Tom Bird, *American POWs of World War II: Forgotten Men Tell Their Stories* (Westport: Praeger, 1992), 81.

² *Ibid*, 37.

keeping them concealed from guards during captivity. Correspondence in and out of prison camps was limited and strictly censored. The result is a historical record that relies significantly, though not totally, on documents produced after the fact. They are firsthand accounts in that their narrators directly experienced the events contained therein, but they are subject to the fallibility of human recollection. Published post-repatriation accounts, even those that were originally created during captivity, are further limited to the perspective of survivors, and often those with the most dramatic or heroic (and thus marketable) stories. While it is unlikely that any significant portion of memoirists or interviewees are given to outright fabrication, these narratives must be taken if not with skepticism, with awareness of an incomplete documentary record.

This project uses accounts from ten Americans held in Germany: Tom Grove, Charles Stenger, Mario Garbin, Peter Neft, Richard Keirn, Hugh Colbert, Robert “Bob” Corbin, Henry “Hank” Freedman, Bill Blackmon, and Claudio “Steve” Carano (who took care to record not only his own story, but that of Joe “Slim” Lassiter and several more of his fellow prisoners as well in his YMCA-provided journal).³

Defining Mandates

Modern American service members, upon capture, are bound by a six-part code of conduct. This code instructs prisoners to affirm their American identities, retain their command structures as much as possible, and resist the enemy in every possible way. However, this code

³ Garbin, Grove, Neft, and Stenger are recorded in *American POWs of World War II: Forgotten Men Tell Their Stories*, edited by Tom Bird. Keirn gave an interview to the National Prisoner of War Museum. Colbert, Corbin, and Freedman gave interviews to the National WWII Museum. Blackmon and Carano’s stories are recorded in *Not Without Honor: The Nazi POW Journal of Steve Carano; With Accounts by John C. Bitzer and Bill Blackmon*, edited by Kay Sloan.

was not drafted until after the conclusion of the Second World War. Although the United States lacked any equivalent to the modern code of conduct in its simplicity and wide applicability, the War Department did compile a list of instructions for service members, especially air personnel, who were at risk of capture.⁴

Published in 1944, the M.I.S.-X Manual for Evasion, Resistance, and Escape (hereafter, M.I.S.-X Manual) outlined the importance of operational security, ways to conceal sensitive information upon capture, and detailed explanations of various interrogation strategies. The manual repeatedly emphasized the dangers of revealing even small amounts of intelligence to the enemy and admonished service members not to give into coercion or promises of better conditions. “As a P.O.W. you not only represent a temporary loss of manpower, but you have become a potential danger to your country,” the manual states.⁵ Prisoners were encouraged to resist wherever possible and avoid cooperating unduly with the enemy (although, per the Geneva convention of 1929, enlisted personnel could be compelled to work), and escape was encouraged. The manual extensively covered the recommended strategies for evading capture in enemy territory and escaping once confined to a prison camp, but offered little guidance on how to survive when escape was not feasible. There is some evidence that service members received other forms of training—Bill Blackmon recalled a lecture from an escapee from Stalag XVII-B, the same camp where he and his friend Steve Carano would later be interned—but many

⁴ U.S. War Department, Military Intelligence Service, “M.I.S.-X Manual on Evasion, Escape, and Survival,” (Washington, DC, February 1944).

⁵ U.S. War Department, “M.I.S.-X Manual,” Resisting Interrogation 3.

memoirists reported that they never seriously considered the possibility that they themselves would someday face captivity.⁶

American war memory depicts the prisoner of war experience as a monumental test of will and resilience. Surviving ex-prisoners' accounts of violence, starvation, and disease certainly support this idea. However, this cultural perception appears not to have developed until later in the twentieth century. While modern prisoners who conduct themselves honorably are granted a medal upon repatriation, no such award existed during and after the Second World War. The War Department considered captivity to be a challenging experience, but no more so than any a service member could expect, especially in a combat role.⁷ The M.I.S.-X Manual, despite its many cautions and warnings, denied that prisoners would encounter violence from German captors and encouraged prisoners to insist on strict adherence to the Geneva Convention, with a rather optimistic injunction to "LEARN YOUR RIGHTS AND YOU CAN'T GO WRONG."⁸

While that line seems naïve when placed next to accounts of hardship and starvation, it is worth noting that Americans held in Germany were usually treated in accordance with the Geneva Convention. Several American prisoners noted that their counterparts from Russia, which was not a signatory, fared noticeably worse than they did.⁹

⁶ Bill Blackmon, "Bill Blackmon's Story," in *Not Without Honor: The Nazi POW Journal of Steve Carano; With Accounts by John C. Bitzer and Bill Blackmon* ed. Kay Sloan (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2008), 135.

⁷ Arieh J. Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity: Britain and the United States and their POWs in Nazi Germany* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005): 102.

⁸ U.S. War Department, "M.I.S.-X Manual," Geneva Convention 15.

⁹ Carano, Claudio, "A Wartime Log," in *Not Without Honor: The Nazi POW Journal of Steve Carano; With Accounts by John C. Bitzer and Bill Blackmon*, ed. Kay Sloan (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2008), 37.

The M.I.S.-X Manual is a useful estimation of prisoners' expectations. Despite its limitations (in addition to the fundamental difference between theory and practice, it was published after some of these service members were captured), its instructions offer a portrait of the quintessential American prisoner of war. The ideal survivor is loyal and smart. He understands the risk of capture and knows what to expect when he arrives at a prison camp. He maintains organization. When questioned, he knows to remain silent and ultimately professional, because "the Germans are a military people, even in defeat... and they will respect you if you are as military as they."¹⁰ He avoids speaking even about trivial things, lest he be led into revealing classified information or caught in a lie. He has a commitment to "remain always, even in captivity, the enemy of the enemy."¹¹

On this last point, most surviving ex-prisoners seem successful. Their accounts, unsurprisingly, show little affection for their former captors, and in some cases express bitter resentment. Although he did not participate himself, Bill Blackmon recalled that several prisoners even murdered their former guards upon liberation.¹² However, their opportunities for resistance could be limited. Beyond the hunger and depression that many reported, some lived with a constant threat of violence: Steve Perun witnessed the murder of a prisoner who built an illicit crystal radio.¹³ Perhaps it is not unexpected, then, that almost no accounts project the cool professionalism advised by the M.I.S.-X Manual.

The question of expectations for prisoners, then, was not only legal but cultural. There were few offenses for which a prisoner might be court-martialed upon repatriation. However,

¹⁰ U.S. War Department, "M.I.S.-X Manual," Resisting Interrogation 8.

¹¹ Ibid, 9.

¹² Blackmon, "Bill Blackmon's Story," in *Not Without Honor*, 144.

¹³ Bird, *American POWs of World War II*, 70-71.

the cultural stigma around surrender and captivity ran deep, and made its way into some of the communications that prisoners received from home. One anonymous contributor to Carano's book lamented that "one 'father' (if he can be called that) wrote his son never to come home again, as he was not welcome, for he was a quitter. Girlfriends even wrote, 'You're a yellow-bellied quitter otherwise you wouldn't be a prisoner; you gave up. So I am marrying a man with courage...'"¹⁴ It was known that despondency and loss of purpose could hamstring prisoners' efforts at survival and escape, but it was likely disorienting to have such discouraging language come from home and family as well as German guards. The men staved off hopelessness by writing scathing, occasionally sarcastic replies. "You haven't got a weapon and you can't even stand up to run, but if it was you, "my hero," I bet you would have some fun... but every man here has done his part, to preserve Democracy," wrote one.¹⁵

Surrender and the Beginning of Captivity

Perhaps at the root of the relative apathy of both the government and the public towards the plight of captivity was the sense of embarrassment and shame at the idea of surrender that many ex-prisoners reported. As much as service members dreaded the possibility of capture, the moment of surrender was not always marked by a violent struggle or dramatic show of resistance. As far as the War Department was concerned, those captured in Europe were not expected to fight to the last, although the M.I.S.-X. Manual did suggest that "should the Japanese resume their policy of executing flyers, it might be preferable to shoot it out when capture appears certain, so as to take some Japs with you."¹⁶

¹⁴ Carano, "A Wartime Log," in *Not Without Honor*, 67.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 68.

¹⁶ U.S. War Department, "M.I.S.-X Manual," Prisoner of War Camps 16.

For all its advice on evasion and escape, the M.I.S.-X Manual was silent on the question of how a service member should behave when confronted by Germans behind enemy lines. Those who found themselves shot down or cut off in unfriendly territory were advised to abandon any weapons during attempts at evasion, so that they could not be accused of espionage.¹⁷ It could be extrapolated that anyone who had followed those guidelines would not be able to resist if they were located by the enemy.

Downed pilots made up a substantial portion of captured Americans during the war. When planes went down over enemy-occupied territory, their crews were isolated and often wounded from the crash. Depending on the population density around the crash site and the altitude at which the crew bailed out, enemy searchers could close in on stranded airmen very shortly after the landing. A crew's prospects for evasion hinged largely on where they landed. If they were in the vicinity of sympathetic civilians, who the M.I.S.-X. Manual advised were in abundance, then they might join the ranks of the 338 prisoners who had evaded capture by January 1943.¹⁸ To give downed airmen the best chance at evasion, the War Department furnished each of them with an aids box of basic supplies so that they could cover a long distance even if help was not forthcoming.¹⁹ However, those who crashed too close to the enemy could find themselves cornered before attempting evasion at all. Not all airmen had time to bury their parachutes or distance themselves from the crash site as instructed.

Claudio "Steve" Carano was one such aviator, a radioman who went down with an Army plane on December 1, 1943. The plane was badly damaged over Cologne, Germany. The crew turned for their British air base and continued to exchange fire with German fighters until they

¹⁷ U.S. War Department, "M.I.S.-X Manual," Evasion in Europe 5.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, 7-8.

were forced to ditch in the sea, a short distance off the coast of Holland. Carano and six others of the ten-man crew survived the impact. A Dutch rowboat fished them out of the water and turned them over to German occupiers without resistance.²⁰ Even when recounting the more dramatic story of Joe “Slim” Lassiter, who was shot down over German-occupied France and evaded the enemy for some time, Carano emphasized how quickly the moment of capture came. After traveling across France with the help of many different sympathetic locals, one of them alerted the Gestapo, and Lassiter was captured with his fellow airmen. “And from out of nowhere pistols appeared dangerously pointed at his [Lassiter’s] face. . . . The whole crew sat dazed, this just couldn’t be—but here it was staring them in the face.”²¹ To that point, Lassiter and his crewmates had kept to the War Department’s instructions and been generally successful. Their bid for freedom ended when they failed to recognize a Nazi collaborator among those who offered them assistance. Fear of exposing organizations of helpers prevented stranded Allies from confirming the identities or intentions of their benefactors.²²

Capture, however, was not always a question of opportunity for evasion. As much as service members loathed the prospect of surrender, some chose to do so. Charles Stenger, a medic, held up an improvised white flag when it became clear he and his fellow medical personnel could not adequately treat their soldiers’ wounds. “We wanted to get some help from the Germans because we knew they were the only ones around,” remembered Stenger. “They responded very well.”²³ Even though Stenger argued that he was a noncombatant under the

²⁰ Carano, “A Wartime Log,” in *Not Without Honor*, 32.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

²² U.S. War Department, “M.I.S.-X Manual,” *Evasion in Europe* 13.

²³ Bird, *American POWs of World War II*, 47.

Geneva Convention, the Germans denied him permission to return to Allied lines, and he remained with the surrendered casualties.

Some personnel surrendered voluntarily, with even less question as to their status. When it became clear that a group of Americans was isolated and outmatched, without the realistic possibility of causing significant damage to the enemy, surrender was considered the only viable option. At the Battle of the Bulge, Mario Garbin and his fellow soldiers found themselves in such circumstances. German officers approached the American forces under a flag of truce and warned that the position was surrounded, offering surrender rather than destruction. An officer named Moon accepted the offer and ordered his men to stand down. Everyone obeyed except for one Polish refugee, who had to be “knock[ed] to the ground and tie[d] up.”²⁴ Still, before vacating their position, Garbin and his comrades took care to disable or sabotage their weapons and vehicles. Further west, Hugh Colbert’s battalion was facing down an advancing group of German tanks when they realized that they were badly outmatched. “We couldn’t do any good firing... that little carbine was just pinging off like a BB gun.”²⁵ Though Colbert didn’t know exactly who it was, an officer made the decision that it would be useless to do anything but throw down arms and surrender to the tankers.

Clearly surrender was sometimes unavoidable, as undesirable as it was. Still, some prisoners resented its necessity and even went so far as to place blame on other soldiers for making their positions untenable. “Couple of those guys [28th Infantry Division], they were next to us. And they said “you guys chickened out and got us captured” ... I knew myself that I’d done all I could,” remembered Colbert.²⁶ The animosity from his fellow men was discouraging,

²⁴ Ibid, 55.

²⁵ Hugh Colbert, Interview for the National WWII Museum. New Orleans, 2015.

²⁶ Ibid.

but Colbert was confident that he had fulfilled his duty. For the 28th ID members who held him in such low regard, it may have been a matter of finding an explanation for their own unenviable position. As the writers of the M.I.S.-X. Manual realized, “you always feel it can’t happen to you.”²⁷

Once taken into custody, prisoners of war were moved away from the lines of battle. For most prisoners held in Germany, the first stop was a short-term camp called a Dulag (Durchgang Lager, or “transit camp” according to the War Department’s translation).²⁸ These camps were devoted to the purpose of formal interrogation.

Interrogation

The War Department feared the danger to secrecy more than the cost of men and materiel when service members were captured, devoting a full section of the M.I.S.-X Manual to the subject of interrogation. Although the Manual assured service members that they were unlikely to be beaten or tortured for information (“The Nazi ... uses all possible means short of actual violence to make you talk”), it warned of various psychological tricks that the Germans might use to pressure a prisoner into revealing sensitive information.²⁹ Personnel were admonished not to attempt lying or talking only about unclassified matters, as it was all too easy to mistakenly say something true or valuable.³⁰ Bill Blackmon’s account mirrored the Manual’s warning almost exactly. He did not experience violence, but instead was held in solitary confinement for a few days and refused to answer questions until the interrogators gave up and sent him on to

²⁷ U.S. War Department, “M.I.S.-X Manual,” Introduction—Security 6.

²⁸ Ibid, Prisoner of War Camps 3.

²⁹ Ibid, Resisting Interrogation 8.

³⁰ Ibid, 17-18.

Stalag XVII B.³¹ Similarly, Robert “Bob” Corbin flustered his interrogation officer by refusing to answer questions regarding military matters, although he did respond to more innocent questions, despite the M.I.S.-X. Manual’s injunctions to the contrary.³² After being shot down over Leipzig, Richard Keirn had a similar, if more immediately frightening experience. After pressing Keirn for details about the type of aircraft he flew, the Germans threatened to execute him, following through on the bluff as far as blindfolding him and leading him outside, only to send him on to a permanent camp unharmed.³³ Keirn remembered the experience with a dose of perspective, as he felt it was much easier to be interrogated by the Germans during the Second World War than it was during his seven years of captivity in the Vietnam War.

Steve Perun, a machine gunner captured on the Normandy beachhead, soon found that not all interrogation officers were so scrupulous in their observation of the Geneva Convention. “[A German colonel] wanted to know a lot of stuff and we, of course, weren’t allowed to tell him anything. He slapped me around quite a bit.”³⁴ Lassiter did not report personally experiencing violence, but he learned of British prisoners who were “thoroughly flogged in order to gain information” and a Hungarian who “had been beaten up so badly that he feared he might weaken and give the names of his associates, so he committed suicide.”³⁵

However, both men only mentioned this violence in passing, and did not elaborate further on any interrogation. Lassiter’s account only says that he and his cohort “went through their interrogation to no avail.”³⁶ Henry “Hank” Freedman’s interrogation ended similarly. His

³¹ Blackmon, “Bill Blackmon’s Story,” in *Not Without Honor*, 138.

³² Robert Corbin, Interview for the National WWII Museum. New Orleans, 2015.

³³ Richard Keirn, Interview for the National Prisoner of War Museum. Pensacola, 1996.

³⁴ Bird, *American POWs of World War II*, 68.

³⁵ Carano, “A Wartime Log,” in *Not Without Honor*, 64.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 64.

cohort was asked to fill out paperwork regarding their origins and family histories, which Freedman felt was part of a continued effort to realize the Holocaust. When the men refused, they were forced to stand outside in winter weather for several hours, but received no further interrogation. “We found out that the Germans were very impatient people.”³⁷

Meanwhile, Hugh Colbert was spared even preliminary questioning. “I was never really interrogated... we did have to give our name, rank, and serial number.”³⁸ A significant proportion of ex-prisoners do not mention interrogation in their accounts at all, focusing instead on the challenge of survival in the inhospitable conditions of German camps. The absence is conspicuous, although it could potentially be explained by the usually short duration of interrogation periods relative to the total length of captivity (the M.I.S.-X Manual admonished that any man kept at a Dulag for more than a week or two had to be useful in some way to the Germans).³⁹ For all the War Department’s warnings about clever deceptions, bullying threats, and microphones in trees, some surviving prisoners either were not interrogated like Colbert, did not count interrogation as an important enough part of their time in captivity to add it to their recollections, or else did not want to commit those experiences to the public record.

In any case, none of these ten survivors reported even the temptation to reveal sensitive information, and were generally sent on to permanent camps after a short time. Once there, the torrent of advice from the M.I.S.-X. Manual dries up. Beyond obvious requirements to remain loyal to the United States, maintain the secrecy established during the interrogation period, and attempt escape or harass the enemy wherever possible, little guidance on how to survive is provided.

³⁷ Henry Freedman, Interview for the National WWII Museum. New Orleans, 2015.

³⁸ Hugh Colbert, Interview for the National WWII Museum. New Orleans, 2015.

³⁹ U.S. War Department, “M.I.S.-X Manual,” Resisting Interrogation 6.

Rank, Privilege, and Respect

The War Department generally expected captured Americans to retain military structure wherever possible. Prisoners of higher rank were tasked with command, and those below them with supporting officers and maintaining discipline. The preservation of order was intended to keep the men grounded and help organize efforts at both resistance and survival. It was not uncommon for prisoners to organize into committees both official and unofficial to further those ends.⁴⁰ “The Germans controlled the fences and the guard towers, but inside, Americans were running the show,” remembered Bob Corbin.⁴¹

The leader of a cohort of prisoners could have been previously in command or elected by the prisoners themselves. In either case, if the officer was competent, composed, and helped prisoners maintain both their safety and dignity, he could expect them to treat him with the respect due his position. Steve Carano took care to record a rousing Independence Day speech by a highly-respected “Stalag camp leader” Kenneth Kurtenbach: “Still, we carry on with the traditions and ideals as laid down by the makers of our country on that great Fourth of July 1776. ... Although we are enclosed by a barbed wire fence and ringed by our enemies, and although we have broken wings, our spirits still and will fly high.”⁴² By connecting the prisoners under his leadership with American history and values, Kurtenbach not only earned respect, but likely contributed to the psychological resilience of those who heard him. Carano was impressed enough to commit one of his limited diary pages to Kurtenbach’s speech. Kurtenbach, for his part, displayed physical leadership as well as rhetorical. He once intervened in a botched escape

⁴⁰ Ibid, Prisoner of War Camps 7.

⁴¹ Robert Corbin, Interview for the National WWII Museum. New Orleans, 2015.

⁴² Carano, “A Wartime Log,” in *Not Without Honor*, 71-72.

attempt, preventing the guards from killing a wounded escapee and earning a rifle butt to the jaw for his trouble.⁴³

Peter Neft felt that his German captors were impressed with his approach to leadership when he agreed to trade cells with two wounded enlisted men. “Here I was, an officer, giving up my warm cell to my two sergeants with broken legs.”⁴⁴ Neft believed the Germans were surprised at his willingness to give up the privileges of his rank, especially in a situation as demoralizing as captivity.

The formalities of rank and respect were not always so closely followed, however. Per the Geneva Convention, prisoners were expected to render salutes when they encountered officers of the military which held them. American service members were warned that refusal to “conform to local rules” could result in punishment according to the enemy’s own law, including, if the offense was severe enough, a court martial.⁴⁵ Mario Garbin remembered that his British counterparts tended to comply with the Convention and saluted their captors. However, not all of the Americans followed suit, sometimes with choice words. “I’m not going to salute that fucking son of a bitch,” Garbin remembered an American captive saying, to the chagrin of his straight-laced British peer.⁴⁶ If the prisoner’s attitude was not precisely in line with international law, he did make true the cultural narrative of defiant prisoners, and certainly succeeded in remaining “the enemy of the enemy.”

Garbin’s own conduct flouted Geneva Convention expectations of rank. Although Garbin was a private first class, he heard that non-commissioned officers could expect much

⁴³ Joseph R. Kurtenbach, “War Behind the Wire: Life and Escape from Stalag 17B,” *Air Power History* 58, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 10.

⁴⁴ Bird, *American POWs of World War II*, 89.

⁴⁵ U.S. War Department, “M.I.S.-X Manual,” Geneva Convention 8.

⁴⁶ Bird, *American POWs of World War II*, 57.

better treatment than junior enlisted personnel like himself, so he forged papers that listed him as a Staff Sergeant.⁴⁷ Garbin's deception was certainly resourceful and saved him from the rougher handling and hard labor requirement that he would have received according to his true rank, but it did cause friction between him and the actual sergeants in his camp. Garbin disregarded both international law and the War Department's own orders, which required captured Americans to honestly identify themselves. A sergeant threatened to reveal Garbin's lie to the guards, a predicament which he solved by menacing the officer with a bread knife.⁴⁸

Slim Lassiter had a more amicable relationship with the senior officer in his small cohort of captured airmen, but took issue over the fairness of food distribution. When the officer received food for himself and his cellmates, he "would carefully examine each bit in size and give the other men the smaller pieces, keeping the largest for himself."⁴⁹ Lassiter objected, resulting in a series of arguments between the prisoners and several weeks of frosty interactions between Lassiter and the officer, although they eventually smoothed things over.

In 2012, a pair of social scientists found that prisoners who were subject to stricter hierarchy of rank were statistically less likely to survive than those in looser organizations, perhaps because the chain of command was ill-suited to adapt to the different environment and goals of service members in prison camps than on the battlefield.⁵⁰ Anecdotally, prisoners like Garbin and Lassiter might agree, while prisoners like Carano who held their officers in high regard would be less likely to do so. The researchers were able to control for some differences in the conditions of individual camps, but one significant limitation to their findings is that the only

⁴⁷ Ibid, 56-57.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 59.

⁴⁹ Carano, "A Wartime Log," in *Not Without Honor*, 63.

⁵⁰ Clifford G. Holderness and Jeffrey Pontiff, "Hierarchies and the Survival of Prisoners of War During World War II," *Management Science* 58, no. 10 (2012): 1883.

data they were able to analyze was quantitative. There is no mathematical definition of good leadership. Structure gave officers like Lassiter's hungry senior and Garbin's jealous sergeant the opportunity to decrease their subordinates' quality of life, while more selfless officers like Kutenbach earned respect through their positions. Still, after several years of engagement, the War Department maintained that organization was an important tool for holding off the hopelessness dubbed "barbed-wire fever."⁵¹

Escape Attempts

Perhaps the most dramatic and celebrated aspect of the prisoner of war story in war memory is the possibility of escape. The War Department admonished service members that "even if you have the misfortune of becoming a prisoner, YOU ARE NOT OUT OF THE WAR."⁵² Prisoners stayed in the fight by planning, aiding, and attempting escape. Even if they were unsuccessful, they could gain intelligence about the surrounding area that could be valuable to the next runner, and tie up German personnel and resources during the search.

Actually escaping custody, however, was easier said than done. Tom Grove knew that his best chance of getting away would come while he was in transit, before he arrived at a permanent prison camp. While on a forced march, Grove thought he might be able to get away by working his way to the back of his group and eventually falling out of line. As he approached the rear, he saw the German guards beating the wounded who were not able to keep up, and he decided against making the attempt.⁵³

⁵¹ U.S. War Department, "M.I.S.-X Manual," Prisoner of War Camps 9.

⁵² Ibid, Escape – Europe 3.

⁵³ Bird, *American POWs of World War II*, 78.

Sometimes, even if prisoners had the opportunity to escape, they realized that their chances of making it back to Allied lines were so slim that they chose not to take the risk. Most had no knowledge of the surrounding area, no supplies, and did not speak French or German. They knew they would not get far without assistance, especially if they were wounded, and that assistance was not always forthcoming. Thus, some prisoners found themselves in the position of passing up otherwise viable escape opportunities. Steve Perun and Peter Neft both reported that some guards even handed the prisoners their rifles so that they could use both hands to climb into a truck. “I could have shot everybody there and got away,” remembered Perun. “But where in the world would I have gone?”⁵⁴

Neft did find another chance to attempt escape later on, after he discovered that he could reach the deadbolt of his holding cell from the inside. Neft let himself out and made for the wilderness, but was almost immediately seen by the guards. Fearing that he would be shot, he surrendered without further incident, and was placed in a cell with a better lock.⁵⁵

Once at permanent camps, escape was more difficult, but prisoners could expect more unsupervised time and better coordination. Since directly breaching the barbed wire circling the camp was almost certain to attract the attention of the guards, the most common course of action was to attempt tunneling.⁵⁶ Over Carano’s objections, Bill Blackmon participated in one such effort. He and his co-conspirators were thwarted when a guard found the hollowed-out ground as he probed the yard with a steel rod.⁵⁷ Carano himself planned to escape, even writing a ‘just-in-case’ letter to his wife, but reconsidered and never made the attempt.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 69.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 89.

⁵⁶ Kurtenbach, “War Behind the Wire,” 10.

⁵⁷ Blackmon, “Bill Blackmon’s Story,” in *Not Without Honor*, 141.

Bob Corbin remembered the chaos at Oflag 64 when Russian forces closed in on the prisoners' location. The German guards were dispatched to hold the Russians off, and only one guard was left to supervise the American prisoners.⁵⁸ Corbin estimated that five hundred of his fellow prisoners made their escape, but he did not go with them for fear of becoming entangled with the Russian army. If Corbin regretted that decision, he did not say so even as he described hunger and illness on the subsequent march north to Poland as the prisoners fled the Russians and the long trek back into Germany. Eventually interned at Hammelburg, Corbin's next opportunity came when a task force from the American 4th Armored Division raided the camp. The tankers, however, could only take a few hundred prisoners with them, so some remained inside the camp and others, including Corbin, took their chances leaving on foot. "I'd always had the dumb idea that if you got outside the barbed wire and you were smart enough, you had about a 50/50 chance of getting back," Corbin explained.⁵⁹ Corbin and a handful of his friends would soon learn just how long those odds really were. After days of moving only at night, no food, and several close calls when they found themselves just yards away from unaware German soldiers, they were finally picked up by an American reconnaissance squadron. "I wouldn't take a million dollars for what that experience taught me, but I wouldn't give you a nickel to do it again," said Corbin.⁶⁰

Despite its insistence that escapees could only be subject to disciplinary punishment, the government was aware that efforts at escape were dangerous. Geneva Convention notwithstanding, prisoners actively engaged in escape were often subject to violence. To further complicate matters, imperfect adherence to the Convention led to a series of reprisals on both the

⁵⁸ Robert Corbin, Interview for the National WWII Museum. New Orleans, 2015.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Allied and Axis sides. Of the 76 prisoners who tunneled out of Stalag Luft III (the breakout made famous by *The Great Escape*), all but three were recaptured in short order. 50 of those returned to captivity were summarily executed.⁶¹

Successful escape from prisoner of war camps remained quite rare. Most prisoners had to live with the reality that they would not be able to return home until the war ended, and that they would not be able to fulfill the ideal of the dogged and determined escapee. Their many unsuccessful attempts met the goal of further draining German resources and manpower, but few prisoners came home with a story that ended with a heroic bid for freedom.

Theft, Lies, and Defiance

After the war, Charles Stenger felt that defiance in the face of the Germans, though at times perilous, was central to the maintenance of prisoner morale. “What you learn immediately is that if you don’t do exactly what you are told, you will be killed. So you quickly learn to comply, which contributes to a continuing sense of fear that at any moment you can be killed or injured,” he admitted. Still, “we would test the limits that we could put on the guards. In other words, if we got them angry we wouldn’t feel so powerless.”⁶²

One common way to push back on the stress and loss of agency that came with captivity was to steal from the German guards. Theft had a dual purpose—it bolstered the prisoners’ meager rations and harassed their captors, giving prisoners a way to fight back even though they were out of combat. Stenger remembered that some prisoners went beyond the essentials. “We managed to steal quite a bit of food, including some of the guys even stole some German medals,

⁶¹ S. P. Mackenzie, “The Treatment of Prisoners of War in World War II,” *The Journal of Modern History* 66, no. 3 (1994): 494.

⁶² Bird, *American POWs of World War II*, 39-40.

like the Iron Cross.”⁶³ Stenger did not look back on the theft of the medals as an unnecessary risk, but instead reminisced about the futile rage that it caused the Germans.

Theft, however, was risky. Tom Grove recounted a harrowing story of two GIs’ disastrous attempt to lift food from a German storehouse. When challenged by a guard, they panicked and attacked, injuring him. For a time, they successfully disappeared into the ranks of their fellow prisoners. The enraged guards threatened to execute the entire cohort unless the two men were given up. The responsible prisoners identified themselves and were shot.⁶⁴

Prisoners could also choose whether to lie in order to improve their conditions. Steve Perun was worried that he might be poorly treated on account of his Ukrainian ancestry, so he was careful to conceal any evidence of it.⁶⁵ Hank Freedman was raised Jewish, and thus in an even more vulnerable position than his fellow men. Upon arrival at Stalag IX-B, the Germans tried to separate all the Jewish prisoners from the rest of the population. “When they asked everybody to [identify themselves], all the men stepped forward.”⁶⁶ The Germans did eventually succeed in segregating the Jewish men, but Freedman remembered the gesture of solidarity as a temporary thwart. Later, as the Allies closed in on the camp, Freedman and his American cohort avoided removal from the camp by collectively feigning illness. “While half of the men collapsed, the others carried them into the barracks where they were treated.”⁶⁷ The ruse paid off, and the Americans were able to delay their movement long enough for the Allies to overrun the camp’s location.

⁶³ Ibid, 49.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 79.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 69.

⁶⁶ Henry Freedman, Interview for the National WWII Museum. New Orleans, 2015.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Sometimes defiance was a matter of survival just as much as morale. Hugh Colbert and his fellow prisoners were held for two days in Koblenz as they awaited transport to a prison camp. “That’s where we got the heavy bombings from the Americans,” Colbert remembered. The Germans insisted they had to await orders before moving out, but the prisoners stood their ground. “You can shoot us if you want, but you can’t shoot us all, we’re going to leave... we defied their orders... but there was so many of us we could do that.”⁶⁸ The guards’ captain was angry, but acquiesced, and marched the prisoners to their next destination. Tom Grove also found that he could push back against the Germans, if not so directly. Shortly after his capture, he managed to talk a guard out of confiscating his boots, the loss of which would have made his march into captivity a much more difficult experience.⁶⁹

Trade, Cooperation, and Selfishness

Despite the consistent scarcity of resources, prisoners generally expected one another to share what they had and work to give their entire cohort the best chance at survival. Outward displays of selfishness and outright theft from fellow prisoners happened, but could be met with strong opposition. Just hours after their capture, Mario Garbin and his fellow men found themselves caring for a sick soldier. When most of the group had run out of drinking water, one man was discovered with a full canteen. He offered to sell it to them for five dollars. “Somebody told him the equivalent of where that canteen was going to end up lodged if he didn’t hand it over,” Garbin remembered.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Hugh Colbert, Interview for the National WWII Museum. New Orleans, 2015.

⁶⁹ Bird, *American POWs of WWII*, 77.

⁷⁰ Bird, *American POWs of WWII*, 56.

American prisoners were meant to receive relief packages from the Red Cross, but these were not always delivered, and it was not uncommon for men to have to share. Hank Freedman remembered the almost-humorous predicament of trying to figure out how to split a tin of sardines twelve ways. Even though the food he was given was woefully inadequate (one medic estimated that he had been eating about 500 calories per day), Freedman found theft among the prisoners even more disturbing. “Some of the men, believe it or not—their own buddies, would get up in the middle of the night and steal that bread out of their pockets.”⁷¹ Colbert, while living in an overcrowded work camp, recalled keeping his shoes on all the time, lest they be stolen. “When we finally took our shoes off, we would take them and put them under our heads as a pillow.”⁷² Necessity seemed to underpin most acts of selfishness and larceny, but the danger from even one’s own fellows must have made the experience all the more trying.

Trade was an important part of some prisoners’ success in captivity. Garbin spoke Italian and some German, and was able to prosper in camp by bartering cigarettes with guards and prisoners alike in exchange for relative freedom of movement and extra food.⁷³ Commerce was not without its risks, however. Garbin felt that the ire he drew from some of the other prisoners (such as the sergeant he threatened with a knife) was due to his success at trading. Steve Perun suffered an even more direct consequence—he was beaten after being caught with extra food.⁷⁴

While hunger and scarcity of resources drove some prisoners to take advantage of one another, many kept the faith (or, at least, chose not to record pervasive theft and selfishness) and found strength, both physical and psychological, in helping one another. On the first night Bob

⁷¹ Henry Freedman, Interview for the National WWII Museum. New Orleans, 2015.

⁷² Hugh Colbert, Interview for the National WWII Museum. New Orleans, 2015.

⁷³ Bird, *American POWs of WWII*, 58.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 70.

Corbin arrived in camp, he did not yet have the privilege of sending mail home, so an old high school friend who was also imprisoned there added a line to the bottom of his message so that his wife could let Corbin's family know where he was.⁷⁵ Since he had previously been classified as missing in action, it was the Corbin family's first confirmation that he was still alive.

It is difficult to identify any particular factors that made prisoners more selfish or more cooperative, in part because few (and none of these ten) ex-prisoners admit to offenses like theft from their own. Whether this is because honest and cooperative men were more likely to survive or because selfish men were less likely to record their stories cannot be told.

Matters of Morale and Hope

"You have a choice here: you can either be cynical and go to rot, or you can remember and still keep on hoping. I choose to remember," wrote Steve Carano in his journal.⁷⁶ As monotony drew one muddy day into the next, he and his fellows recognized the importance of morale. Whether drawing, writing, tinkering with scrap, or simply thinking of home, they kept themselves occupied with the idea that something existed other than defeat. "You might call this sentiment," Carano wrote. "I do not apologize for it."

Relative to many prisoners, Carano wrote prolifically. He preserved his experience of captivity and the stories of those around him, despite the War Department's concern that details about evasion attempts such as Lassiter's (which Carano wrote about in his journal) might jeopardize future efforts if written down and intercepted by the Germans.⁷⁷ Carano seemed to find the sentimentality he wanted in his writing and drawing. In between sketches of friends,

⁷⁵ Robert Corbin, Interview for the National WWII Museum. New Orleans, 2015.

⁷⁶ Carano, "A Wartime Log," in *Not Without Honor*, 23.

⁷⁷ U.S. War Department, "M.I.S.-X Manual," Introduction—Security 5.

including Lassiter and Kurtenbach, he filled pages with rude jokes and cartoons of men in drag.⁷⁸ Carano's friend Bill Blackmon remembered finding hope in a different sort of sketch. Captured Americans had taken to drawing "Kilroy" cartoons on the walls of isolation cells in interrogation centers, reminding future occupants that their comrades-in-arms were not yet broken.⁷⁹

Peter Neft and some of his peers were bold enough not to make any attempt to hide their Jewish faith, even though they knew about the Germans' hatred for them. "An Englishman removed the cross from the camp chapel on Saturdays and replaced it with a Star of David so we could use the space to have a service of our own," he recalled. "We were crazy."⁸⁰ Crazy or not, Neft and his fellow Jewish prisoners felt the need to maintain their sense of self, and found the opportunity to do so.

Per the Geneva Convention, prisoners were supposed to be supplied with space and materials for recreation.⁸¹ Depending on the conditions of the camp, prisoners' experiences could vary. Although the Germans supplied Hank Freedman and his fellow prisoners with a ball, starvation made them physically too weak to do much with it. "We could just sit and sort of roll the ball between ourselves. We didn't really have the strength, or the motivation for that matter..."⁸² Mario Garbin remembered a decline not in strength but in morale that hamstrung some prisoners' ability to function. Even though the Germans provided materials for a respectful burial of American dead, some prisoners simply lost the motivation to hold funerals.⁸³

⁷⁸ Carano, "A Wartime Log," in *Not Without Honor*, 98-99.

⁷⁹ Blackmon, "Bill Blackmon's Story," in *Not Without Honor*, 138.

⁸⁰ Bird, *American POWs of WWII*, 90.

⁸¹ U.S. War Department, "M.I.S.-X Manual," Geneva Convention 7.

⁸² Robert Corbin, Interview for the National WWII Museum. New Orleans, 2015.

⁸³ Bird, *American POWs of WWII*, 60.

Beyond simple acknowledgement that their nationality protected them from the mistreatment suffered by other prisoners, multiple American survivors remembered taking special confidence in their national identity. “In spite of all the hardships the American spirits in us never died,” reflected Carano. “Little did we realize how truly great America really is while we were flying. Yet it took but a short while from the time we were shot down until the first month after we arrived at [Stalag] XVII to realize who and what we fought for.”⁸⁴

Prisoners’ attitudes varied as much as any group of warfighters’ did. The gulf between what was desirable, what was possible, and what was necessary could stretch wide, forcing prisoners to improvise. In the absence of clear direction on how they should conduct themselves when evasion and escape were not possible, captured service members had to figure out for themselves how best to stay alive, stay motivated, and keep doing their part, however changed, in the war. Some survived by breaking nearly every rule set out—Mario Garbin lied about Geneva Convention-required information, disrespected American prisoners of superior rank, and even threatened to kill another prisoner—while others, like the relatively well-structured cohort in Stalag XVII, organized themselves under competent leadership. The only true consensus, it seems, is that prisoners had to become flexible on almost every matter except the most basic of values—the love of country or sense of duty that had pushed them to answer the call to war, the desire to see home again, and the camaraderie that prevented most prisoners from taking advantage of one another even when their material situation was desperate.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder remains a salient issue for ex-prisoners, although not everyone developed symptoms. Bob Corbin only suffered one sleepless night of “jangled

⁸⁴ Carano, “A Wartime Log,” in *Not Without Honor*, 39.

nerves,” the first night after he completed his escape and reached American protection.⁸⁵ Hugh Colbert lived with undiagnosed symptoms for decades, but recovered once better help was available. He was only grateful that his capture occurred early enough in his military career that he did not have to take the life of another human being, having been captured before ever firing a shot in Germany.⁸⁶ Charles Stenger avoided PTSD and credited his success to the maintenance of his pre-capture role as a medic. A sense of control was important, he argued, and successful prisoners were willing to “risk injury or punishment” in order to regain it.⁸⁷

As the postwar decades wore on, the popularization of the prisoner of war experience in film and television shifted American attitudes.⁸⁸ With greater appreciation for the challenges faced by those who lost their lives and freedom in prison camps, it may be difficult for the modern reader to believe the mindsets of the Stalag XVII residents’ families, who told their captured loved ones not to come home. However deep our respect for prisoners and their plight may be, it is important to remember that their story is not simply one of passive endurance. They navigated the expectations and realities of their condition in real time, sometimes without significant training or guidance. Their agency—not only in resistance to the Germans, but in deciding not to attempt dangerous escape, in flouting expectations to improve their own conditions, even in conflict with other prisoners—is at least as important as the tribulations they faced in captivity.

⁸⁵ Robert Corbin, Interview for the National WWII Museum. New Orleans, 2015.

⁸⁶ Hugh Colbert, Interview for the National WWII Museum. New Orleans, 2015.

⁸⁷ Bird, *American POWs of WWII*, xix.

⁸⁸ Arnold Krammer, foreword to *Our Last Mission: A World War II Prisoner in Germany*, by Dawn Trimble Bunyak (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), xii-xiii.

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