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Friends and Enemies: Co-Belligerents and Prisoners of War at Camp Myles Standish, Taunton, Massachusetts during World War II

William F. Hanna

In the late afternoon of March 29, 1944, a long column of United States military vehicles set out from the Boston Army Base under heavy security and headed south toward Taunton, Massachusetts. Its destination was Camp Myles Standish, the sprawling complex that served as the main staging area for the Boston Port of Embarkation (BPOE). By the end of World War II, this port, one of 10 nationwide and one of six on the Atlantic seaboard, ranked third after New York and San Francisco for the amount of men and materiel shipped overseas to the Allied armies.

While the movement of military personnel had become commonplace by 1944, this convoy was different. Its trucks carried 500 former Italian soldiers on their way from Camp Hereford in Somerfield, Texas to southeastern Massachusetts. Among the 600,000 enemy soldiers captured in North Africa earlier in the war, these men were some of the 51,000 Italians who had been shipped across the Atlantic as prisoners. Most had arrived in the U.S. in 1943 and, according to filmmaker Camilla Calamandrei's 2000 web essay "Italian POWs held in America during WWII," were quickly assigned to POW camps in the American heartland, away from coastal and industrial areas. Legally, their status changed in September 1943, when the Italian government of Pietro Badoglio signed an armistice with the Allies. Shortly thereafter, when Italy declared war on Germany, the Italians were no longer prisoners, or enemies, but rather

"co-belligerents." When given the opportunity to help the Allied cause by joining newly organized Italian Service Units (ISU), Calamandrei reports that more than 90 percent assented, and that is what brought these 500 men to Camp Myles Standish.

When the convoy reached its destination, the newcomers found a bustling military installation located in the heart of southeastern Massachusetts. Thirty-five miles from Boston, the camp had opened there on October 7, 1942. Records of the BPOE located in the National Archives state that the base covered 1,620 acres and was traversed by 35 miles of paved roads and almost 10 miles of railroad track connected to the main lines that reached every corner of the nation. Its mission was to receive military personnel from all over the United States and make certain that they and their equipment were ready for immediate shipment to the European Theater of Operations. The

average stay at Standish lasted three to five days during which GIs received physicals, inoculations, dental exams and last-minute training. Meanwhile, their equipment—everything from typewriters to howitzers—was given a last check before being loaded onto trains bound for the ships waiting in Boston Harbor.

To accomplish all this, the camp had a permanent military complement of more than 2,500 personnel, including segregated African-American GIs who worked in service companies and women who served as nurses or members of the Women's Army Corps. The camp also employed approximately 750 civilian workers, most



Cover, *Instruction Booklet for Returning Veterans, Camp Myles Standish, Boston Port of Embarkation, c. 1945.*

living within a 30-mile radius of the base. Thousands of GIs passed through Standish every week. In fact, by the first week of September 1944, BPOE records show that a half million Allied personnel had been processed through the camp. This included not only Americans but also several thousand British, Canadian and Australian soldiers who were in the States for training or on special assignment.

Despite the magnitude of this around-the-clock operation, the Italians coming in as members of the ISUs found the camp well prepared for their arrival. A stockade fence had been erected while lights and sentry boxes were completed just days earlier. Additionally, a 10-bed section within the hospital was set aside for their medical needs.

Immediately upon arrival at Standish, the ex-POWs were assigned to one of two ISUs. Each man earned 80 cents per day in non-negotiable coupons that could be redeemed at one of the camp's many service canteens. Records on file in the National Archives state that 240 men were assigned to kitchen duties while 100 others were placed in maintenance details. Still others were assigned as mechanics, blacksmiths, machinists and carpenters. Often, the vocational skills of service unit members went unrecognized in the urgency of staging thousands of troops. Stonemasons became cooks, while cooks became ditch diggers and carpenters. Vigliam Verzola, for example, was a bricklayer who was set to work in the kitchen cracking thousands of eggs a day. Skilled hands were applied to whatever tasks needed doing. One thing was certain, however; the Italians helped fill a critical labor shortage at Standish. The first two ISUs were so productive that Camp authorities immediately asked the Army for enough men to form two additional service units. This request was granted and the two new units were in place by the end of July 1944. Some of these new



Main Gate, Camp Myles Standish (From the Collection of the Old Colony Historical Society, Taunton, Mass.)

men were hired out to local farms and businesses as day laborers while the rest were put to work inside the camp.

The commanding officer of the ISUs at Myles Standish was George J. Semler, a 27-year-old lieutenant with a degree in English from Colgate University. He found himself presiding over 4,000 Italian workers who had become an integral part of the camp's operation. Although these men were not prisoners of war, they were still subject to army discipline and, like the GIs who belonged to the station complement, they were often exasperated by the army's seemingly endless rules and regulations. Like their American counterparts, for example, the Italians did not have access to all parts of the base. Instead, they were restricted to

the areas where they lived and worked, and they were required to obtain passes for permission to leave the camp. Violators received the same punishments as delinquent GIs.

Like other members of ISUs who were distributed across the nation, the men who came to Camp Myles Standish experienced a complicated relationship with the local population. Though they were no longer the enemy, and had been allies since October 1943, the official records of the BPOE continued to refer to them as prisoners well into the summer of 1944, and the general population, including the *Daily Gazette*, Taunton's local newspaper, continued to speak of them in that way for many years after the war ended. As the conflict in Europe raged, some residents found it difficult to reconcile the fact that while their former enemies were well fed and housed, American boys were still overseas living in great danger and privation.

This resentment, however, was generally not felt in the region's Italian-American neighborhoods. From the Boston area southward through Mansfield and into the Providence, Rhode Island suburbs, thousands of first- and second-generation Italian

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Americans opened their hearts and homes to the ex-POWs. Initially, regulations stated that ISU members who could obtain passes would be allowed to accept invitations to visit Italo-American clubs, churches or homes only when traveling in groups of five and accompanied by a designated GI escort. However, the number and frequency of invitations combined with the overall success of the ISU program convinced camp officials to relax this rule so that within months many former prisoners were regular visitors in the homes of Italian Americans, and eventually the army acceded to requests for the camp's ISU men's choir to perform in area churches.

But the ease with which the ISU members became acclimated to their new surroundings did not sit well with many outside of the Italian-American community. At the end of the first week of July 1944, the BPOE Intelligence Section, in its weekly briefing for the port commander, stated: "The controversy over the 'coddling' of Italian prisoners of war continues in the New England press, with strong resentment expressed against favors granted them." This resulted in a flurry of directives sent downward through the system ordering installation commanders to make certain that the Italians worked full days and that supervision of them remained tight.

By the winter of 1945, following the Rhineland campaign, the outcome of



Prisoner of War Stockade, Camp Myles Standish c. 1946 (From the Collection of the Old Colony Historical Society, Taunton, Mass.)

the conflict in Europe was decided and victory brought significant changes to the BPOE. For two and a half years the personnel at Camp Myles Standish had devoted all of their energies to preparing GIs for shipment overseas, but now the whole process had to be reversed. Tens of thousands of servicemen and women returned home. Some of the returnees were sent to other installations for discharge, but the rest of them began training for the invasion of Japan.

On May 10, 1945—just two days after the official Victory in Europe celebrations—the *Taunton Daily Gazette* published a statement issued by the public relations officer at Standish saying that "several hundred" German POWs

had arrived at the camp from overseas. These men were to be put to work on construction and maintenance tasks as well as performing routine camp labor, and the public was reassured that when not at work the Germans were to be confined to the stockade.

Arnold Krammer, in his excellent 1979 book *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, writes that 360,000 German POWs were brought to the United States during the course of the war. Although most of their detention camps were located in the Southwest, some German prisoners were assigned to New England bases in the months before the European war ended. For example, Camp Devens in Ayer, Massachusetts housed more than 1,000 German POWs in the final months of the conflict. However, in the spring of 1945, with German soldiers in Europe surrendering by the thousands, more space had to be found for those arriving every week, and smaller camps, such as Standish, were utilized. Ultimately, Lieutenant (later Lieutenant Colonel) Semler and his staff were called upon to supervise 3,000 German POWs in addition to the 4,000 Italian co-belligerents already at the camp.

Every camp holding German POWs, including Myles Standish, conducted a so-called Intellectual Diversion Program, in which German prisoners were taught English as well as American civics and history.

Though formerly comrades in arms with the Italians, there were major differences as to how the Germans were regarded by the local populace. The Germans *were* the enemy and were treated as such. Armed guards watched their every move and there were no passes issued for personal errands. A POW's off-duty hours were spent in closely supervised activities. With the exception of approximately 35 prisoners who were trucked under heavy guard each day to work in a Taunton tannery, the general public seldom saw the Germans.

Almost 50 years after the war, Walter Scherdel, a former POW at Standish, visited the site of the camp and spoke with a newspaper reporter and a Taunton historian. In a July 1992 interview published in the North Attleborough *Sun Chronicle*, Scherdel recalled being captured in Belgium as a 17-year-old paratrooper. His American incarceration began at Fort Sill, Oklahoma and ended at Camp Myles Standish. He was well treated but so tight was the security that he had no idea where he was being held. Scherdel was assigned to work in a mess hall where he served meals to GIs returning from Europe. Unlike the Italians, who wore regular work clothes, he and his countrymen were required to wear prison uniforms of black pants and black shirts with the large letters PW painted in white across their backs.

Although he recalled the kindness of individual guards at Standish, Scherdel had other memories as well. In the kitchen area where the Germans worked, large, graphic, recently released photographs of Holocaust victims were hung on the walls to remind the Germans of what their government had done. Likewise, Scherdel recalled guards telling him that he would never reach his home in Germany because after the war the POWs would be sent to rebuild the European cities that Hitler's bombers had destroyed.

The American government, of course, realized that the POWs *would* go home some day and officials wasted no opportunity to influence the kind of nation the returnees would build. Every camp holding German POWs, including Myles Standish, conducted a so-called Intellectual Diversion Program, in which German prisoners were taught English as well as American civics and history. The preeminence of democratic institutions was heavily emphasized, and no dissent was tolerated. Prisoners who resisted were segregated or moved to a camp for troublemakers.

swift. The last German POWs, including 4,200 routed through Standish from Camp Forrest, Tennessee, left Boston in November and December 1945. Just a few weeks later, Camp Myles Standish was deactivated and declared surplus property and with that this once critically important installation passed into history.

In May 1983, a ceremony was held on the grounds of the old camp to rededicate a religious grotto that had been built by Italian laborers during the war. Former Lieutenant Colonel Semler was an invited guest, as were

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Japan's surrender in September 1945 brought an end to Lieutenant Colonel Semler's program for managing detainees at Standish. By war's end more than a few members of the Italian Service Units had become romantically involved with local women, and when the Italians departed Boston for repatriation some of these women followed closely behind. In his book *Italian Prisoners of War in America, 1942-1946: Captives or Allies?* (1992), historian Louis E. Keefer writes that several hundred marriages were forged from these wartime relationships. After marrying in Italy, many of these newlyweds returned to the U.S. to build lives together. For the Germans, a less harmonious end marked their stay in southeastern Massachusetts. Repatriation and deconstruction was

a few remaining ISU veterans. As they stood around him, their old commander spoke with pride about his wartime effort. No POW ever escaped from Standish and all seemed to agree that the system he directed had been a model for the humane treatment of former adversaries.



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