

Central Coast: Past, Present, Future

German prisoners, right there in Goleta

By Mark James Miller, June 10, 2018

Blink and you'll miss it: If you've ever driven south on the 101 and looked to your right as you get near El Capitan Road, you might have caught a glimpse of a ramshackle two-story wooden structure outlined against the sky.

If you saw it, you've seen all that remains of what was a prisoner-of-war camp. From 1944 to 1945 it held approximately 300 German soldiers, captured by American forces in Africa and Europe.

The Goleta camp was a branch of the larger Camp Cooke, now Vandenberg Air Force Base. The wooden structure was once a water tower that looked down on the quonset huts where the prisoners lived.

During World War II, 425,000 German prisoners were sent to the United States. They were housed in 700 camps, mostly in the South and East, but California had its share, as did the Central Coast. Besides the Goleta camp and Camp Cooke, there were camps in both San Luis Obispo and Ventura.

The U.S. government was determined to abide by the rules of the Geneva Convention. Prisoners were to have food and housing comparable to U.S. soldiers, they were to form their own internal government, and they were allowed to police themselves.

The latter stipulation had unintended consequences. Some Germans were hardened combat veterans and fanatical Nazis. These men terrorized other prisoners, organized work strikes — this happened in Goleta — defied their American captors by giving the Nazi salute, and even murdered their counterparts if they became too cooperative with the “Amis,” as the Americans were called.

The prisoners in the Goleta camp were used principally to harvest crops, sometimes with unforeseen results. Once, when a Hispanic farmhand was showing a German how to harvest walnuts, the prisoner protested that he did not want to be instructed by a “brown man.” Later that day, as the farmhand was heating burritos for lunch, the German, attracted by the smell, came near. The farmhand offered him one of his burritos. The German loved it, became friendly and soon the ranch hand was bringing burritos for the other prisoners. Sometimes one small act of kindness can overcome deeply-ingrained prejudice.

In order to counteract the Nazi ideology that had been drummed into them at home, German prisoners were instructed in the principles of democracy. As the war came to its end, they were made to watch films of what the Allies found when they liberated concentration camps. The Germans were horrified at what they saw. In one camp, 1,000 prisoners burned their German army uniforms in protest of what their country had done.

Most prisoners realized they were fortunate to be captured by the Americans, who treated captives far better than any of the other allies, even the British or French, and the idea of capture by the Russians terrified even the toughest Nazi. For example, of the 100,000 Germans taken prisoner at Stalingrad, only 5,000 came home.

The last of the prisoners left Goleta in December 1945. In the years that followed the quonset huts were used to house farm laborers. In 1970 the huts and all the other buildings were demolished. Only the water tower remained, growing more rickety year by year, a lonely reminder of what was.

The next time you are in the vicinity of El Capitan Road, glance toward the ocean. You’ll make out the wooden structure that looked down on prisoners

from far away who, by fate perhaps, came here in the midst of the greatest conflict the world has seen. But don't blink, or you'll miss it.

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