

Journey to Internment

The journey from capture to internment was horrendous for many of the men. Most captured airmen were transported by truck or in the French “Forty and Eight” boxcars – a discomfort they might revisit several times during the war, sometimes under better circumstances but sometimes under much worse.

“Forty and Eight”s

Armies became reliant upon railroads for supplies and men and supplies flowed to the occupied and front lines in railroad cars. A familiar sight to the American military was the French "forty and eight" railroad cars. These infamous boxcars were used in WW I as well as during WW II to transport troops to and from the front. These cars received their names because they could carry 40 men or eight horses, as was clearly painted on each boxcar.

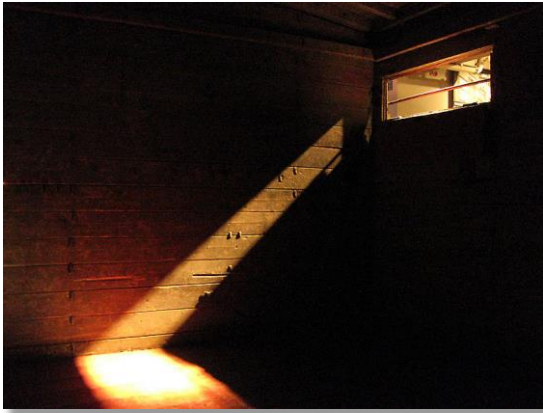
During World War II, the little-changed "forty and eight" boxcars still transported supplies and troops to the front, but they also returned to Germany with new cargoes. Many Allied prisoners of war rode to German POW camps in these boxcars -- sometimes with as many as 90 men forced into each boxcar. Millions of Holocaust victims were herded into similar boxcars on their way to concentration camps. Boxcars such as the one in this photo carried 168 Allied POWs from Paris to the Buchenwald concentration camp in August 1944. Many POWs endured harsh conditions during their trips to POW camps, which sometimes included mistaken attacks from Allied aircraft.

Constructed in France in 1943, this "forty and eight" railroad car operated in occupied France during WWII, and it most likely transported human cargoes from France to Germany. Withdrawn from service in the 1980s, the French Railroad Company (SNCF) painstakingly restored it to a near-original condition in honor of those American POWs transferred by "forty and eights." Assisted by the French military, the U.S. Air Force airlifted the 13-ton railcar from Istres Air Base, France, to the Air Force museum in Dayton Ohio in late July 2001.

The cars were stubby, only 20.5 feet long and 8.5 feet wide. Although memories of riding in them were not always pleasant, the cars nonetheless gave their name to a fraternity formed within the American Legion — La Société des Quarante Hommes et Huit Chevaux — in 1920. In 1945, many American troops (including liberated POWs) were transported from Germany to France for return to the States in a rough-riding 40 and 8. Veterans' memories of travel in the rickety, unheated cars are pretty vivid; some men even resorted to building fires inside them to keep warm on the long, slow trips.

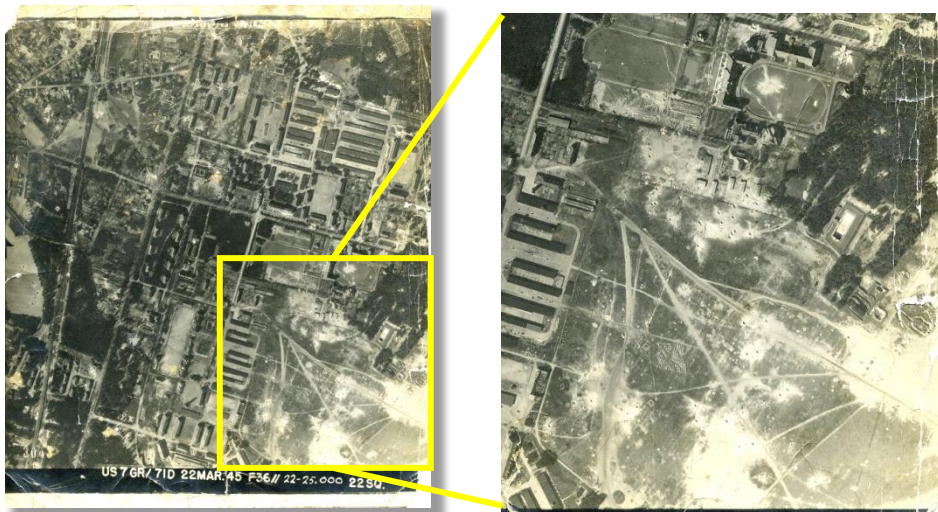


2nd Lt. James W. Harrison’s initial journey within days of his capture on September 27, 1944, 1944, from Kall, Germany, to his first stop Oberursel-Wetzlar, Germany, began with being paraded through local towns before he was loaded onto a truck or “forty and eight” with God knows how many other captives. If transported by train they would be locked in an overcrowded, dark, barely ventilated box that smelled of horses and prior human cargo. During the 100 mile multi-stop ride to nowhere there was no food, water and probably few if any bathroom breaks. One end of the boxcar was the designated toilet. It must have seemed endless and most likely took more than a day.



Dulag Luft Interrogation Center, Oberursel-Wexlar, Germany – October 1944

The first Dulag Luft in Frankfurt had been destroyed on a March 24, 1944 bombing attack on Frankfurt. The remnants of those early bombings still scarred the outskirts of the city as seen in this 1945 reconnaissance photo.



After the bombing the operations were moved 25 miles north to Oberursel-Wetzlar. That is where 1st Lt. Harrison first set foot when he stepped out of his "forty and eight" or truck, but not before he and other prisoners were paraded around Frankfurt for a few hours in front of cursing, spitting and hostile German civilians.

"Durchgangslager der Luftwaffe" or "Transit Camp of the Luftwaffe" was called Dulag Luft by the POWs. By May of 1944 it was located at Oberursel (13 km north-west of Frankfurt-am-Main with a population of about 20,000) and was recognized as the greatest interrogation center in all of Europe. Nearly all captured Allied airmen were sent there to be interrogated before being assigned to a permanent prison camp. While at Dulag Luft - Oberursel the prisoners were kept in solitary confinement. The average stay in solitary was one or two weeks. Some were kept in excess of 25 days!! According to the Geneva convention a prisoner could not be kept in solitary confinement for interrogation purposes for more than 28 days.

James Richard Williams, Jr.'s son remembers his father's descriptions all too well.

"We can still see him shaking his head and saying how horrible solitary confinement was. He was locked all alone in a dark cell with nothing to do, see, read or listen to for 24 hours a day, day after day !!"



Solitary confinement cell at Dulag Luft



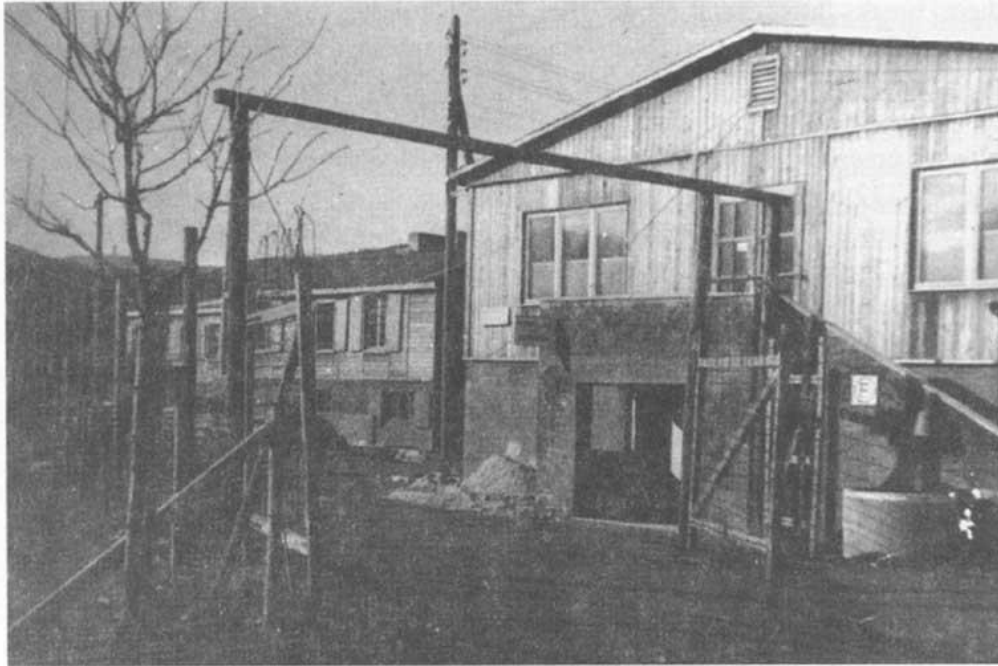
With the large Bomber crews they would typically pick a few of the crew to hold longer and press for information while rapidly processing the other crew members through and on to a permanent camp. Fighter pilots were always held. There each new prisoner, while still trying to recover from the recent trauma of his shoot-down and capture, was skillfully interrogated for military information of value to the Germans. The German interrogators claimed that they regularly obtained the names of unit commanders, information on new tactics and new weapons, and order of battle from naive or careless U.S. airmen, without resort to torture. New prisoners were kept in solitary confinement while under interrogation and then moved into a collecting camp. After a week or ten days, they were sent in groups to a permanent camp such as Stalag Luft I or III for officers or Stalag VIB for enlisted men. A nearby hospital employing captured doctors and medical corpsmen received and cared for wounded prisoners.



These two images from A.P. Clark's scrapbook showing the Dulag Luft Luftwaffe intelligence interrogation center to which all newly captured allied POWs were brought after capture.



New arrivals are marched into camp



THROUGH THESE PORTALS . . .

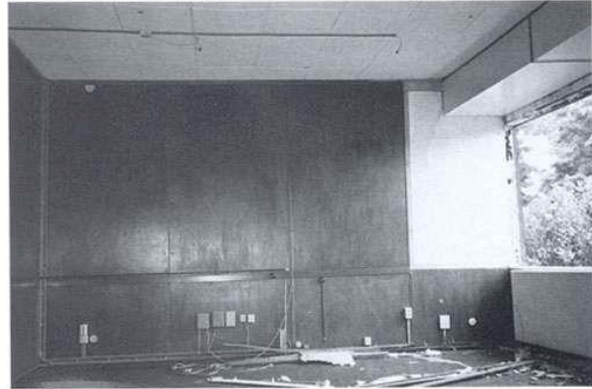
Some of the finest fighter and bomber crews of the Allied forces passed through this gateway to the cooler at the interrogation center based at Oberursel.



ANXIOUS POWS ARRIVE AT THE INTERROGATION CENTER

The future looks bleak for these American flyers who have been captured and are arriving at the Interrogation Center at Oberursel. Scharff took this photo from his office window.

Interrogation center for captured Allied airmen, Dulag Luft, Wetzlar. (U.S. National Archives)



Left: The main corridor and right Room 47 where prisoners were interrogated. The windows have been smashed by vandals.

The Interrogation Process: – Excerpts from the book "Kriegie" by Kenneth W. Simmons, published 1960.

"At Dulag Luft each prisoner was studied by several psychologists in order to learn his likes, dislikes, habits and powers of resistance. The method of procedure was then determined, and the machinery was set into operation to destroy his mental resistance in the shortest possible time. If the prisoner showed signs of fright or appeared nervous, he was threatened with all kinds of torture, some of which were carried out, and he was handled in a rough manner. Others were bribed by luxuries. They were traded clean clothes, good living quarters, food and cigarettes for answers to certain questions. Those

who could neither be swayed nor bribed were treated with respect and handled with care in the interrogator's office, but were made to suffer long miserable hours of solitary confinement in the prison cells.

Nothing was overlooked by the German interrogators. They studied the results of each interview, and devised new methods to gain the desired information. Allied Air Corps Intelligence started a counter attack against Dulag Luft by training every flier in its command on how to act as a prisoner of war. Every method used to gain information from prisoners was illustrated with films and lectures. (see our Documents page for examples) Interviews between prisoners and their interrogators were clearly demonstrated to bring out the tactics of the German interrogators. Name, rank and serial number became the byword of the counterattack. Men were drilled and trained by Intelligence until they knew exactly what to expect and what to do. Patriotism and loyalty were stressed, and American airmen were shown the results of information the Germans had secured from prisoners at Dulag.



Hanns Scharff was primarily an American 8th and 9th Air Force Fighter pilot interrogator. He was considered the best of the interrogators at Dulag Luft. He gained the reputation of magically getting all the answers he needed from the prisoners of war, often with the prisoners never realizing that their words, small talk or otherwise, were important pieces of the mosaic. It is said he always treated his prisoners with respect and dignity and by using psychic not physical techniques, he was able to make them drop their guard and converse with him even though they were conditioned to remain silent. One POW commented that "Hanns could

probably get a confession of infidelity from a nun." Hanns personally stepped in to search for information that saved the lives of six US POWs when the SS wanted to execute them. Many acts of kindness by Scharff to sick and dying American POWs are documented. He would regularly visit some of the more seriously ill POWs and arrange to make their accommodations more humane. At one time the Luftwaffe was investigating him. After the war, he was invited by the USAF to make speeches about his methods to military audiences in the US and he eventually moved to the United States. General Jimmy Doolittle was one of the first to extend



LUFTWAFFE CORPORAL WITH TWO VIP POWS
Gefreiter Scharff stands behind USAAF Col. Charles Stark and South African Captain B. W. H. Fergus. Scharff was seldom required to wear a uniform. Though just a corporal, Scharff was believed to be a high-ranking officer by most POWs.

the hand of friendship to Hanns after the war, inviting him to a luncheon where they compared notes. Later he was invited to the home of Col. Hub Zemke who thereafter would send Hanns what he called a "Red Cross Parcel" every Christmas. And 38 years after he was Hanns "guest" at Dulag Luft - Oberursel, Col. Francis "Gabby" Gabreski was a guest of honor at Hanns 75th birthday party. In the United States Scharff worked as a mosaic artist. His works are on display in Cinderella's castle at Disney World.

Of course we must remember that Hanns was the exception at Dulag Luft and there were other interrogators that were nothing at all like Hanns, whose treatment of the prisoners was more of a physical and threatening nature.

[There is an excellent book written about Hanns called "The Interrogator" by Raymond F. Toliver.]

The camp at Dulag Luft - Oberursel was built on level ground. There were large white rocks that covered the length of the front lawn forming the words "Prisoner of War Camp". The same identification was painted in white letters across the roof of nearly every building. Dulag Luft was of great importance to the Germans and they knew the Allies would never bomb it as long as it could be identified from the air.



The camp was estimated to cover about 500 acres, The boundaries of the camp were formed by two parallel fences ten feet apart and they stood 12 feet tall, with trenches and barbed wire entangled between them. Watch towers were spaced around the camp at one hundred yard intervals. Trained dogs prowled the outer boundaries and heavily armed pill boxes were scattered beyond the barbed wire."

