

Fiske Hall Graduate Paper Award\*

**Bloodied Kansas:  
Nazi Retribution in a Kansas POW Camp**

Mark P. Schock

Fear! Raw, naked, animal fear! Kameraden! Kameraden! Help! Help! Someone, please! Anyone, please? Faces, a blur of faces. Some sneer. Some laugh! Others look down, look away. Run! Where? The gate, they will help. They must help! No! Where are they going? This can't happen, not here! Blows--fists, boots, hammer-like blows!

Exhaustion. Silence. Acceptance. And finally...darkness.

In Nazi-occupied Europe this scenario played out for thousands of victims. But this wasn't Europe. This tragedy occurred in the United States, in Kansas. The victim was Captain Felix Tropschuh, *Afrika Korps* veteran, and a prisoner of war under the charge of the U.S. Army. His tormentors were his fellow prisoners and his ordeal was endured right under the noses of his American captors and under conditions existing with American acquiescence.

Captain Tropschuh had arrived at the newly constructed prisoner of war camp in Kansas with the first battle-hardened *Afrika Korps* veterans in July 1943.<sup>1</sup> Officially named the Alien Internment Camp, Concordia, Kansas, the camp was known to the local civilian population and the American military personnel stationed there as simply Camp Concordia.<sup>2</sup>

The United States had agreed to construct POW camps on its soil at the request of the British. By August 1942 the British were holding more than 250,000 German and Italian prisoners. Quite simply, the British were running out of facilities to securely hold these men under humane conditions.<sup>3</sup>

The first POW camps in the U.S. were located on unused areas of existing military bases and federal property such as abandoned Civilian Conservation Corps camps. These were last used during the Great Depression to house workers engaged in federal construction projects.<sup>4</sup>

As more and more enemy prisoners flooded America's shores, the government was forced to look for more locations. Fear of escape and sabotage prompted that the new camps be located out of range of large population centers, shipyards and war production facilities. As a result of these concerns more than 80 percent of the 155 base

---

\*Named after the building which houses the Department of History, the Fisk Hall Graduate Paper Award is given to the best paper by a graduate student in a non-seminar course.

<sup>1</sup> Lowell A. May, *Camp Concordia: German POWs in the Midwest* (Manhattan, Kansas: Sunflower University Press, 1995), 21.

<sup>2</sup> May, *xiv*.

<sup>3</sup> David Fiedler, *The Enemy Among Us: POWs in Missouri During World War II* (Saint Louis, Missouri: Missouri Historical Society Press: Distributed by University of Missouri Press, 2003), 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

camps eventually opened were located in the South or Midwest.<sup>5</sup> By the end of the war there were 371,683 German, 51,156 Italian, and 5,413 Japanese prisoners held on American soil.<sup>6</sup>

Over 500 branch camps would eventually be built to supplement the base camps.<sup>7</sup> In 1943 Camp Concordia was allocated three branch camps located at Hays and Peabody, Kansas, and at Hebron, Nebraska.<sup>8</sup> In February and April 1944 four more branch camps were added to Camp Concordia's complement. These camps were located at Remer, Bena, Deer River and Owatonna, Minnesota.<sup>9</sup> Many of Rommel's *Afrika Korps* veterans, those who stayed in line anyway, would call these camps home until October 1945.<sup>10</sup>

Camp Concordia, located in Cloud County in north central Kansas, was one of the new base camps. The camp property covered 640 acres, or a one square-mile section of farmland. The camp proper, however, utilized only 157 acres with a barbed-wire perimeter spotted with guard towers.<sup>11</sup> The camps square corners allowed for evenly placed streets named for American military heroes, such as Grant, Lee and MacArthur. The name Eisenhower was conspicuous in its absence.<sup>12</sup> The prisoner population at Camp Concordia would reach 4,027 by November 1943.<sup>13</sup>

*The History of Camp Concordia from Site Survey to Deactivation* is a compilation of reports submitted by the camp's assistant executive officer, Captain Karl C. Teufel, before the camp's deactivation. In one report he described the prison population as follows:

For the most part, they were members of the crack German Afrika Korps, which had fought under Rommel and had nearly won the North African Campaign. Eleventh hour Allied reinforcements in men and materials had prevented that eventuality, but not until clear superiority in both phases of power had been brought to bear. No better German soldiers existed anywhere, and these men came to this country still proud of their accomplishments, still assured of the coming victory of National Socialism over the rest of the World, still confident and arrogant in their own strength, and fully prepared to make things as difficult for their custodians as safely possible. There were a thousand Officers among them, ranging from second lieutenants to Colonels (two of whom were later promoted to General rank), and hence some of Hitler's best military brains were here also.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>6</sup> May., xiv.

<sup>7</sup> Arnold Krammer, introduction to *Nazi Prisoners of War in America* (New York: Stein and Day, 1979), xiv.

<sup>8</sup> May, 137.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 137-39.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>11</sup> Lowell A. May, author of *Camp Concordia: German POWs in the Midwest*, e-mail interview by author, Concordia, Kansas, 29 November 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Patrick O'Brien, Thomas D. Isern, and R. Daniel Lumley, "Stalag Sunflower: German Prisoners of War," *Kansas History*, Autumn 1984, 184.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>14</sup> Captain Karl C. Teufel, ed., "The History of Camp Concordia from Site Survey to Deactivation" (Washington D.C.: National Archives, Record Group 389, box 1612, unpubl., 1945, Kansas State Historical Society, microfilm #LM 322, Topeka, Kansas), 39.

The American personnel, on the other hand, were fresh from basic training. The confidence and arrogance of the German veterans intimidated many of the American soldiers who the Germans considered to be bumbling amateurs.<sup>15</sup> In a 2003 telephone interview, former prisoner Horst Kuhnke asked author Lowell May, “Do you know (1970’s television show) *Hogan’s Heroes*? That was Camp Concordia.”<sup>16</sup>

It was not until late 1944 when the original American personnel were replaced by returning American combat veterans that the prisoners began to respect their guards. The prisoners could tell the combat veterans by the decorations on their uniforms and would go so far as to step off the sidewalks to demonstrate their respect.<sup>17</sup>

While the impression the American personnel may have made on the prisoners was less than satisfactory, the prisoners’ initial impression of the grounds was generally favorable. Frederick Ethhofen, a twenty-four-year-old second lieutenant at the time, recalled that everything was neat and orderly, but there were no flowers, bushes or trees.<sup>18</sup> Another young lieutenant, Axel Bauer, also noticed the lack of landscaping, but remembered Concordia as an appreciable upgrade from their temporary holding areas on the edge of the Sahara.<sup>19</sup> Some prisoners were disappointed to learn that roaming Indians and vast herds of buffalo no longer populated the American West.<sup>20</sup> The Kansas heat was not yet a problem for men so recently arrived from the deserts of the North Africa.

Within weeks of the first prisoners’ arrival, the routine of Camp Concordia seemed to be set. The prisoners were free to continue to wear their German uniforms complete with insignia of rank while within the confines of the camp. Prisoners working outside the camp, mostly on neighboring farms, were issued either denim work clothes or American World War I era uniforms dyed blue with the letters PW stenciled on the legs, back, sleeves and rear.<sup>21</sup> The prisoners could even purchase new German uniforms made by American companies.<sup>22</sup>

Healthy enlisted prisoners were required to work. Non-commissioned officers could only work in supervisory positions, and while officers could not be forced to work they could volunteer. All prisoners were paid for their work and their pay could be spent in the camp canteen, to order newspapers, books, or magazines or be saved for future use.<sup>23</sup> To the American soldiers and civilians who strolled the camp in the course of their

<sup>15</sup> Lowell A. May, author of *Camp Concordia: German POWs in the Midwest*, interview by author, 22 November 2004.

<sup>16</sup> Horst Kuhnke, Stuttgart, Germany, telephone interview by Lowell May, Concordia, Kansas, 13 September 2003, POW Camp Concordia 1943-45: An Oral History, a project of the POW Camp Concordia Preservation Society and the Kansas Humanities Council, transcript in hand of Cloud County Community College library.

<sup>17</sup> May, interview 29 November 2004.

<sup>18</sup> Frederick C. Ethhofen, Elizaville, New York, telephone interview by Lowell May, Concordia, Kansas, 22 August 2003, POW Camp Concordia 1943-45: An Oral History, a project of the POW Camp Concordia Preservation Society and the Kansas Humanities Council, transcript in hand of Cloud County Community College library.

<sup>19</sup> Axel Bauer, Icking, Germany, telephone interview by Lowell May, Concordia, Kansas, 28 August 2003, POW Camp Concordia 1943-45: An Oral History, a project of the POW Camp Concordia Preservation Society and the Kansas Humanities Council, transcript in hand of Cloud County Community College library.

<sup>20</sup> O’Brien, 183.

<sup>21</sup> May, 21.

<sup>22</sup> May, interview 22 November 2004.

<sup>23</sup> May, 26.

daily duties the German prisoners appeared a bit arrogant, to be sure, but otherwise militarily efficient, courteous and content with their situation.

If the road to hell is paved with good intentions, the hell of Captain Tropschuh's last hours, and those of at least one other Concordia prisoner, was at least partially paved with American good intentions. Concerned for the safety of the more than 90,000 American prisoners being held in German POW camps, the U.S. War Department committed itself to strict compliance with every article of the Geneva Convention. Since it was the Nazi regime that held these Americans it naturally followed that it was the German prisoners with strong Nazi leanings that the Americans did their best to keep happy.<sup>24</sup>

Recognizing the situation, the most ideologically dedicated Nazis in the camps were emboldened to assume the leadership positions among the prisoners. They also realized that the Americans' primary concern was to keep the prisoners and their camps peaceful. As long as the Nazis didn't cause trouble for the Americans, the Americans were content to meet almost any request the Nazis put forth.

On September 23, 1943, the Americans agreed to one such request. Article 76 of the Geneva Convention allows for the honorable burial of any prisoner who dies in captivity. Cognizant of this article the Nazi prisoners petitioned the U.S. War Department to allow for the casket of any German prisoner who died in U.S. custody to be draped with the swastika banner. Not only did the War Department agree to this request, it also told all POW camp commanders to allow for the display of small pictures of Nazi leaders, flags and emblems on the prisoners' bunks or lockers.<sup>25</sup>

As the Nazi war machine struggled to hold its gains in Eastern Europe, it tightened its hold on Western Europe and impressed hundreds of thousands to work in war production and on fortifications, thereby separating thousands of families. The Americans, again trying to ensure humane treatment of American prisoners in Nazi hands, were helping to reunite family members among the German prisoners.

Germany was drafting men and boys from fourteen to sixty-five into the Wehrmacht. This meant that the prisoners held in America often had relatives being held in other camps in this country. Fathers, sons and brothers could request transfer to other camps within the country in order to reunite family members. The only requirement was that the prisoners pay for their own transportation from the funds they earned while working in America.<sup>26</sup>

Compared to the conditions their comrades were experiencing on the battlefronts, life for the prisoners at Concordia was quite comfortable. The prisoners enjoyed an open-air stage, paid for in part by the Vatican, a movie theater, a library, and soccer fields.<sup>27</sup> They were allowed to choose from an extensive curriculum of college courses, authorized by the University of Kansas, to earn college credit in courses taught by

---

<sup>24</sup> Krammer, 153.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>26</sup> Glenn Thompson, *Prisoners on the Plains: German POWs in America* (Holdrege, Nebraska: Phelps County Historical Society, 1993), 141.

<sup>27</sup> Author Lowell May says that the soccer fields were the instrument of the Concordia prisoners only known effort to injure the American war effort. When the prisoners discovered that the Americans were supplying them with more flour than was necessary for their needs, they used the excess flour to chalk the soccer fields rather than return it to the Americans.

German officers who had been doctors, lawyers or college faculty members before the war.<sup>28</sup>

The prisoners also constructed a number of social club buildings that they called casinos. Here they could purchase 3.2 beer, entertain friends, and celebrate birthdays and holidays. The buildings were constructed from scrap, but were furnished with handmade furniture and paintings created by the many talented artists interned at the camp.<sup>29</sup>

To the American personnel at Camp Concordia it appeared that their German charges had decided to make the most of their situation and were content to sit out the war and the dying throes of National Socialism on the sidelines. A series of tragic events, beginning in the last months of 1943 would shatter this facade.

On Monday morning, August 9, 1943, Capt. Gustav Dormann, a native of Wilhelmshaven, Germany, was found hanging in the officer's compound. The decorated *Afrika Korps* veteran's death appeared to be a suicide. Funeral services were conducted by a German chaplain and German officers acted as pallbearers.<sup>30</sup> The Captain left no suicide note and the motives behind his suicide were never learned. Local newspapers would later suggest his death was politically motivated, but no credible evidence was ever found to back up that assertion.<sup>31</sup> Later events would suggest that the fact that his fellow prisoners attended the Captain's funeral gave credence to the conclusion that this first prisoner death at least, was a suicide.

No sooner had the excitement surrounding Capt. Dormann's death subsided, when another incident shocked the camp. The soccer fields were located adjacent to the camp perimeter, and a dead-line was established within fifteen feet of the perimeter fence. On October 16, 1943, as the prisoners were playing soccer, prisoner Corp. Adolf Huebner was shot and killed by a guard while retrieving a soccer ball that had been kicked across the dead-line.<sup>32</sup>

The immediate response of the prisoners to the shooting was shouting and the singing of German military songs, but they did not riot.<sup>33</sup> The Germans believed the shooting to be an act of murder and refused to work for three days. They marked the spot of Huebner's death with a cross bearing the words, "This cross marks the spot where Adolf Huebner was murdered by Americans."<sup>34</sup>

A court-martial was convened to formally investigate the incident.<sup>35</sup> The inquiry revealed that Corporal Huebner had repeatedly crossed the dead-line during the soccer match and had been repeatedly warned. Either out of arrogance or confidence in the Americans lack of resolve, Huebner ignored the calls to "halt." The guard who fired the fatal shot was cleared of all charges, but was nonetheless transferred out of Concordia, and the dead-line was abolished.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Teufel, 29-30.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>30</sup> *Kansas* (Concordia, Kansas) 12 August 1943.

<sup>31</sup> Teufel, 34.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> May, 31.

<sup>34</sup> O'Brien, 186.

<sup>35</sup> An ironic note to this incident is that former Concordia guard Robert H. Brumleve told author Lowell May that the guard in question was the poorest shot at the camp. The other guards were shocked that he had fired at all and further shocked that the shot had hit the prisoner.

<sup>36</sup> O'Brien, 186.

It appears that the Nazis used the emotions stirred up by the Huebner incident to further assert their power over the prison population. It is quite possible that they used their influence to temper the prisoners' response. They needed to remain "sheep" in the eyes of the Americans, while acting as "wolves" among their comrades. The actual number of ardent Nazis among the prisoners is in dispute. In his report, Capt. Teufel divided the prison population in this manner:

- (A) Opponents of Nazism, who here, as in Germany, were more or less forced to remain in the background;
- (B) A great mass of by nature politically indifferent people who, however, had been very strongly propagandized; and
- (C) The so-called "active" Nazis, who were subdivided into three types—stubborn militarists who considered Nazism a convenient idea to inspire people to fight, unscrupulous demagogues with personal motivations, and the intolerant, bossy type of individual who loves authority.<sup>37</sup>

He estimated that no more than five percent fell into the anti-Nazi grouping. He believed that only fifteen to twenty percent were pro-Nazi, with five percent of these holding positions of authority within the camp in 1943. The rest of the prisoners were doing their best to stay out of trouble with either the Nazis or the Americans.<sup>38</sup>

By contrast, Arnold Krammer in his work, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, reports that American studies late in the war determined that approximately forty percent of the prisoners held in America were pro-Nazi, with eight to ten percent of these being fanatic and the other thirty percent of this number being deeply sympathetic. A more important factor in the atmosphere of the camps was the fact that many of those who were not Nazis, were nonetheless German nationalists. Many of these were deeply loyal to Hitler and confident in ultimate German victory without feeling any particular loyalty to the Nazi party.<sup>39</sup>

Still indulging the Geneva Convention, the Americans allowed the prisoners to appoint their own leadership at the camps. This led to the most ardent Nazis holding the positions of power.<sup>40</sup> At Camp Concordia these people used their positions to influence and coerce the entire prisoner population.

The prisoners had their own German language newspaper, *Neue Stacheldraht Nachrichten* (*New Barbed Wire Nightly News*). According to the printer of the paper, Karl Gassmann, the initials NS in the newspaper's name were meant to symbolize National Socialism. A German Jewish immigrant from Frankfurt censored the paper for the Americans.<sup>41</sup> The fact that the paper was censored did not prevent the Nazis from using its pages to give their opinions on the conduct of the war.

---

<sup>37</sup> Teufel, 56.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Krammer, 149.

<sup>40</sup> Teufel, 56.

<sup>41</sup> Karl Gassmann, Schweinfurt, Germany, to Cloud County Historical Museum, Concordia, Kansas, 27 July 1994, transcript in the hand of Cloud County Historical Museum, Camp Concordia room, Concordia, Kansas.

The December 24, 1944 issue of *Neue Stacheldraht Nachrichten* calls upon the prisoners to engage in activities to rebuild their physical strength and mental toughness in order to continue the struggle against the Allies. An article reprinted from the Associated Press, London, exaggerates the impact of the V-2 rocket on English morale. The newspaper went on to criticize the Allied bombing campaign on German cities for the loss of German civilian lives and property.<sup>42</sup>

Nazi propaganda was necessary to counteract what the prisoners had witnessed with their own eyes. Before their surrender, the *Afrika Korps* had listened to German radio reports that American cities were themselves the target of German bombers. They had seen no evidence of bomb damage in all their travel from the East Coast to Kansas.<sup>43</sup>

The newspaper, however, was the most benign effort at manipulation employed by the Nazis. Prisoner Frederick Ethhofen remembered that the Nazis threatened to punish the prisoners' families in Germany for any word or act of disloyalty. Wounded and sick prisoners were frequently repatriated to Germany and the Nazis warned that these prisoners would relay any charges of disloyalty to the proper agencies in Germany.<sup>44</sup>

Franz Kramer related that the Nazi officers possessed a clandestine short-wave radio with which they received news and orders direct from Germany. The prisoners would be notified that they were to assemble at an appointed location and time to be briefed on the information received via this radio. Any absences from these sessions were viewed as signs of disloyalty.<sup>45</sup>

Within days of Corporal Huebner's death, perhaps taking advantage of the nationalistic fervor engendered by the killing, the Nazis extracted the ultimate penalty for perceived disloyalty in the German ranks. Captain Tropschuh would be the first victim known to pay with his life for crossing the Nazi "dead-line." To make matters worse, the Americans were warned of what was going to happen, and whether out of disbelief or feelings of guilt over the Huebner shooting, failed to do anything to prevent the murder. At first they even failed, or refused, to acknowledge the truth of what had transpired after the deed was done.

Captain Tropschuh's ordeal began with the theft of his diary. The captain had confided to his diary his distaste for Hitler and the Nazi regime. A roommate had discovered the contents of the diary, stolen it, and turned it over to the German camp commander. The commander, whose official title at the camp was Senior German Spokesman, Colonel Alfred Koester, ordered all the prisoners to assemble in the camp's main square on the morning of October 18, 1943.<sup>46</sup>

The colonel read from the diary to the assembled prisoners and accused Tropschuh of treason. As the charge was leveled, the terrified officer ran for the camp's gate in a desperate attempt at escape. A guard truck was passing the gate as the captain approached. The Americans slowed for an instant, then sped away. The fugitive was soon surrounded by the pursuing Nazis, severely beaten, and dragged away.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>42</sup> *Neue Stacheldraht Nachrichten* (Camp Concordia, Kansas), 24 December 1944, translation notes by Sigi Horton. (Kansas State Historical Society, microfilm #1691, Topeka, Kansas.)

<sup>43</sup> May, interview 22 November 2004.

<sup>44</sup> Ethhofen, interview 22 August 2003.

<sup>45</sup> Kramer, letter.

<sup>46</sup> Bauer, interview 28 August 2003.

<sup>47</sup> Lynn Ermann. "Learning Freedom in Captivity," *The Washington Post Magazine*, 18 January 2004, 18.

Lt. Wolf Dieter Zander, a secret anti-Nazi, managed to gain an audience with the American camp commander, Col. John A. Sterling, and begged him to remove Tropschuh from the prison compound, but the American failed to grasp the seriousness of the situation. "We have Republicans and Democrats and we don't kill each other," he told the incredulous Zander.<sup>48</sup>

The following night, Koester presided over a Geheim-Gericht (Secret-Court) and Tropschuh was sentenced to death for the crime of treason to the German Reich.<sup>49</sup> The *Concordia (Kans.) Kansan*, citing sources from the U.S. Seventh Service Command investigation conducted weeks after the incident, reported that Tropschuh was given a rope and chair with which to hang himself. This was necessary, as there was no pistol available to perform the traditional suicide for a disgraced German officer.<sup>50</sup> Ethhofen, however, stated that an Austrian lieutenant named Rauch acted as executioner.<sup>51</sup>

When Captain Tropschuh was not present for roll call the next day American guards found his body still hanging. The local newspapers reported the death as the camp's second suicide.<sup>52</sup> The *Clyde (Kans.) Republican* even reported the presence of a suicide note in which the captain expressed his intention to take his own life.<sup>53</sup> The camp authorities also initially accepted the illusion of suicide. They appear even to have placed no significance to the fact that the prisoners refused, en masse, to attend Tropschuh's funeral and Koester insisted that the captain be buried outside the boundary of the cemetery holding the remains of Captain Dormann and Corporal Huebner.<sup>54</sup>

At this distance we can only speculate at the reasoning initially adopted by the American camp commander, Col. John A. Sterling. In his report, Captain Teufel commented. "Perhaps the Colonel was too kindly a man, perhaps he had no real interest in his assignment, or perhaps he was not backed by an efficient staff, but, in any case, things were shortly out of hand at Concordia. The Germans seem to have seized the initiative from the beginning."<sup>55</sup>

It may be that the colonel believed that Tropschuh had indeed hung himself after being only beaten by his fellow Germans. He may have believed that the German captain had other problems unrelated to Nazi harassment. The *Kansan* reported that Tropschuh's hospital records indicated he "was suffering from a chronic disease of such a nature as to cause despondency."<sup>56</sup> He may have seen the entire incident as a German internal matter best left in their hands, or he may have simply been in over his head and existing in a state of denial. Whatever the case, an American internal problem would soon overwhelm the colonel and end his Concordia career.

On Saturday night, October 23, 1943, a long simmering feud between two American captains erupted in gunfire at the camp's American officer's club. Captain Joseph R. King, transportation officer and president of the officers' mess and Captain

---

<sup>48</sup> Ermann, 19-20.

<sup>49</sup> Bauer, interview 28 August 2003.

<sup>50</sup> *Kansan*, 13 January 1944.

<sup>51</sup> Ethhofen, interview 22 August 2003.

<sup>52</sup> *Kansan*, 21 October 1943, *Clyde Republican* (Clyde, Kansas), 21 October 1943.

<sup>53</sup> *Clyde Republican*, 21 October 1943.

<sup>54</sup> *Concordia Blade-Empire*, 14 January 1944.

<sup>55</sup> Teufel, 39-40.

<sup>56</sup> *Kansan*, 21 October 1943.



David Roberts, a World War I veteran of the British Army, and Camp Concordia's mess officer, had long quarreled over the operation of the club.<sup>57</sup>

Captain King's eighteen-year-old daughter, Betty, joined in an argument between her mother and Captain Roberts. Roberts, who had had a few drinks over the course of the evening, bristled at the interruption and ordered her to be quiet. When Mrs. King came to her daughter's defense, Robert's drew his service revolver. The wife of the camp's commander, Mrs. John Sterling, stepped between Roberts and the Kings and was shot in the abdomen when Roberts fired. A scuffle ensued and Roberts managed to fire three more times before being overpowered. Luckily the three wild shots struck no one. Mrs. Sterling was rushed to the Concordia hospital and Roberts was confined in the camp's hospital for mental evaluation.<sup>58</sup>

Mrs. Sterling recovered from her wound and testified at Robert's ensuing court-martial. Perhaps some insight into both her and her husband's mindset can be deduced from the fact that she testified in Robert's defense, claiming that an officer should not be challenged by a seventeen-year-old girl (*sic*). "He was not drunk, but justly angry," she testified.<sup>59</sup>

To again quote the Teufel report; "The resulting publicity was the straw that broke the camel's back in higher Headquarters, and it was immediately indicated that there would be some changes made. Colonel Sterling and a goodly portion of his staff were done at Concordia. The Colonel was relieved as of 12 December 1943, although his successor was on the ground on 24 November."<sup>60</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Lester Vocke was a regular army officer known for discipline and efficiency. His personality and booming voice immediately made their impression on the camp staff. He left no mistake that he had been sent to the camp with the full authority and intention to instill order in both his American and German charges.<sup>61</sup> The American personnel were impressed. A new tragedy would demonstrate that the Nazis were not.

On January 11, 1944, an Austrian private named Franz Kettner committed suicide by slashing his wrists with a razor blade.<sup>62</sup> According to the statements of other German prisoners, Kettner had publicly denounced Hitler while interned at the branch camp in Peabody, Kansas, in the fall of 1943. Nazi retaliation was immediate and he pleaded with the American guards at Peabody to be transferred back to Concordia.<sup>63</sup>

On his return to Concordia, Kettner was kept in protective custody in the American guardhouse while arrangements were made to transfer him to a different POW camp unofficially designated as "anti-Nazi." Since Captain Tropschuh's death, eight other prisoners had been transferred after convincing the new camp administration that their lives were in danger because of their anti-Nazi sympathies.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> *Kansan*, 28 October 1943.

<sup>58</sup> *Clyde Republican*, 28 October 1943.

<sup>59</sup> *Concordia Blade-Empire*, 7 January 1944.

<sup>60</sup> Teufel, 40.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 40-41.

<sup>62</sup> *Kansan*, 13 January 1944.

<sup>63</sup> *Clyde Republican*, 20 January 1944.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

Kettner was a veteran of both Stalingrad and North Africa.<sup>65</sup> He was also a Catholic from the Tyrol.<sup>66</sup> Tyrolean Catholics had been vocal and demonstrative in their resistance to the Nazi curtailment of their religious freedom, actually increasing church attendance and sometimes even winning the support of their local Nazi elite.<sup>67</sup> After the German defeat at Stalingrad, Nazi officials reported a resurgence of Austrian patriotism and a marked increase of anti-Nazi graffiti in the Tyrol.<sup>68</sup> Had Kettner received news from home, or read of events in his homeland in the American newspapers available to the prisoners? We will never know.

What we do know is that Private Kettner left a suicide note to his wife and fourteen-year-old son, closing with the words, "Long live Austria."<sup>69</sup> Why did he take his own life? Did the horrors of Stalingrad, of North Africa, of his situation at Camp Concordia, combine to extinguish his will to live? Or did he believe his death would spare his family from Nazi retribution for his treason? Whatever his motivation, the desperation of his final act would spark a firestorm.

State and local newspapers announced Kettner's death with sensational headlines. Quickly linking the Tropschuh suicide to Kettner's, the print media recognized what Sterling had not. "War Captives Live in Terror of Nazi Wrath," trumpeted the *Wichita Beacon*, revealing that Seventh Services Command had launched an investigation. The article also noted that, as in the case of Tropschuh, the prisoners refused to participate in Kettner's funeral.<sup>70</sup> Unlike Colonel Sterling, Colonel Volke refused the German demand that Kettner be buried outside the cemetery boundary. Private Kettner was buried within the cemetery margin with full military honors rendered by American personnel.<sup>71</sup>

The story was too big for Kansas and in March 1944 the *Kansan* reported that the Camp Concordia incidents had appeared in a "very complete story" in the *London Daily Mail* newspaper. The same issue of the *Kansan* reported that American enlisted men in New Guinea were both "amused and irked" at the attention generated by the camp's incidents.<sup>72</sup>

Col. G. S. Pierce conducted the Seventh Services Command investigation. Although Colonel Pierce could find no definitive proof that the two victims were actually murdered, he believed that the two men were coerced and bullied into their final act.<sup>73</sup> Forty-four German officers were transferred out of the camp by February 1945.<sup>74</sup> Included in this group was the Senior German Spokesman, Colonel Koester.<sup>75</sup> These men were taken to a camp at Alva, Oklahoma, reserved for hard-core Nazis.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>65</sup> *Concordia Blade-Empire*, 11 January 1944.

<sup>66</sup> *Kansan*, 13 January 1944.

<sup>67</sup> Evan Burr Bukey, *Hitler's Austria: Popular Sentiment in the Nazi Era 1938-1945* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 165.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>69</sup> *Clyde Republican*, 20 January 1944.

<sup>70</sup> *Wichita Beacon*, 13 January 1944.

<sup>71</sup> Teufel, 35.

<sup>72</sup> *Kansan*, 16 March 1944.

<sup>73</sup> *New York Herald Tribune*, 6 July 1944.

<sup>74</sup> *Concordia Blade-Empire*, 28 February 1945.

<sup>75</sup> Al Purdy, Concordia, Kansas, to Cloud County Historical Museum, Concordia, Kansas, 22 October 1995, transcript in hand of Cloud County Historical Museum, Camp Concordia folder, Concordia, Kansas.

<sup>76</sup> *Concordia Blade-Empire*, 28 February 1945.

Colonel Eduard Waltenberger replaced Koester and earned the respect of both the Americans and the prisoners.<sup>77</sup> By October 1944 *Colliers* magazine was reporting that the camp once known as the nation's worst now rated as one of the best.<sup>78</sup> The magazine gave most of the credit for the turnabout to Colonel Volke and his no nonsense attitude. They quoted his blueprint for success in dealing with prisoners of war. "You don't bargain with them. You tell them. And they respect you for it. I am not a missionary. I am a soldier."<sup>79</sup>

The Nazi influence was never totally eradicated at Camp Concordia. In April 1945, just days before the Nazi Fuhrer took his own life and his Third Reich collapsed in surrender, over 100 prisoners were caught celebrating Hitler's birthday. The prisoners had asked for, and been denied, permission for this celebration.<sup>80</sup> As they well knew, the regime that had cost them, their comrades, and their homeland so much was disappearing in death and destruction but they could not refrain from reasserting their loyalty.

It is an all too common misperception that the average German soldier was only "doing his duty" in World War II and bore little if any loyalty to Hitler or his regime. This idea does not stand up under close scrutiny. As historian Stephen Fritz points out in his book, *Frontsoldaten*:

As Hegel long ago pointed out, men will fight to defend ideas much more readily than material interests, an insight given renewed validity by an examination of the behavior of the average *Landser*. From the German perspective, World War II . . . was the ultimate ideological war . . . the staying power of the average German soldier, his sense of seriousness and purpose—which often went beyond sacrifice, courage, and resolution to fanaticism—depended in large measure on the conviction that National Socialist Germany had redeemed the failures of World War I . . . he committed unspeakable acts of aggression and destruction, at the same time being consumed himself, both physically and spiritually, by the machine of war.<sup>81</sup>

The machine of war consumed all of Camp Concordia's dead. No doubt it also consumed the spirit of many of the camp's survivors. In 1995 the city of Concordia hosted a reunion for the camp. As part of the celebration Lowell May drove six of the visiting Germans to Fort Riley to visit the graves of those who had died there. The graves had been removed to Fort Riley after Camp Concordia was closed.

Mr. May had purchased small bouquets so that the Germans could lay them on the graves. As Willi Lelle knelt to place his bouquet on the grave of Captain Tropschuh he

---

<sup>77</sup> May, 31.

<sup>78</sup> It must be noted that Camp Concordia was certainly not the only POW camp to experience instances of Nazi terrorism. The *Concordia Blade—Empire* reported on March 3, 1995, that murders were also reported at Camp Hearne, Texas; Papago Park, Arizona; Camp Chaffee, Arkansas; Camp Gordon, Georgia; and Tonkawa, Oklahoma.

<sup>79</sup> *Colliers*, 14 October 1944, cited in Teufel, 80.

<sup>80</sup> May, 71.

<sup>81</sup> Stephen G. Fritz, *Frontsoldaten: The German Soldier in World War II* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 9-10.

broke down and wept. As Mr. Lille was helped to his feet, he cried out, "He was my friend."<sup>82</sup>

Had the specter of Felix Tropschuh haunted Willi Lille for those fifty-plus years? Not one of the captain's comrades had attended his funeral. Not one of Franz Kettner's comrades stepped forth to honor his death. The questions of guilt and innocence, of complicity and participation in the deaths of these men can only be answered in the hearts of the men who survived being consumed by the machine of war.

---

<sup>82</sup> May, interview 28 November 2004.