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THE STORY OF CAMP ELLIS

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THE STORY OF CAMP ELLIS

There was much unease within Bernadotte and Farmers Townships of Fulton County, Illinois, in the early spring of 1942. America had been at war with two powerful nations—Germany and Japan—for just a few months. Government land surveyors had traipsed through local farm fields, driving stakes into the ground over a wide area. Rumors were rampant concerning War Department plans to build an army training base there. No one knew with certainty what would happen, or when. Illinois senator Scott Lucas encouraged the farmers to go ahead and plant their crops as usual, and so they did. There was similar apprehension in the nearby small towns of Ipava and Table Grove along east/west Route 136 (then Route 10) bordering these two townships on the south. The village of Bernadotte along the Spoon River bordered these two townships to the north.

America in 1942, especially rural America, was still recovering from the Great Depression of the 1930s. Industrial sectors had largely recovered from the Depression owing in part to the demand for war production for supply to Britain, the Soviet Union, and other allies. But farmland and farm commodity prices had not returned to pre-Depression levels. It was felt in Fulton County that, while an army base would be a great

THE STORY OF CAMP ELLIS

disruption to these tranquil communities, it would also bring welcome jobs in supply, construction, communications, and maintenance. And plenty of business to the stores and shops in nearby towns.

The War Department announced its final decision in mid-September 1942. Steps had already been taken to condemn the land needed for the base (some 17,500 acres), and farmers were given a scant few weeks to clear their land of ripening crops and abandon their residences and farm buildings. Each person or family to be dislocated (whether a landowner, tenant farmer, or simply a rural resident) was advised of the price they would be paid for their land, building, or tenancy. Recourse could be had to the federal court in Springfield, Illinois, if the amount was deemed insufficient. The land to be initially occupied by the new base would cover more than twenty-six square miles (about the distance from downtown Chicago and the Lake north to Addison Street, and then west to Cicero, squared up). Soon army bulldozers, trucks, railroad workers, land scrapers, and all sorts of heavy equipment of the era were on this land as the brutal winter of 1942-43 set in.

Why Build an Entirely New Base Here?

The road to Berlin and Tokyo is neither paved nor landscaped. So read part of an editorial in an early (May 7, 1943) issue of the weekly *Camp Ellis News*. Work by the War Department planners to prepare the United States for war had long preceded the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Events in Europe in the 1930s made it clear that the United States armed forces would eventually become involved in the war in Europe, just as had been the case some twenty-five years before at the time of the Great War of 1914-18. The entry of United States troops late in that conflict (after the other combatants were nearly exhausted) had proved to be decisive. American armed forces and most training facilities were quickly demobilized after Armistice Day on November 11, 1918,

THE STORY OF CAMP ELLIS

in keeping with America's long-standing tradition of not maintaining a large standing army.

So once again in 1942 a huge mobilization effort was needed to raise, train, supply, and deploy large numbers of American soldiers, this time across both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. As Camp Ellis was being built, the German Nazis held most of Europe and the Japanese controlled the Pacific and most lands west of Hawaii. Throughout 1943 Stalin was desperately calling on the British and Americans to open a second front against the Nazis in Western Europe. Meanwhile, after Dunkirk, two-thirds of Britain's army had taken refuge in Britain, impatiently waiting for the Americans and their equipment to arrive. Camp Ellis was hard at work on this mission.

Isoroku Yamamoto, commander of the Japanese fleet, was said to have serious reservations about the surprise attack on the United States. As a student at Harvard University (1919-21) he had become an expert poker player. He is reported to have observed: *I fear that all we have done is to awaken a sleeping giant and fill him with a terrible resolve. And: I can run wild for six months . . . after that I have no expectation of success.* Indeed, a decisive blow to the Japanese navy came in June 1942 just six months after Pearl Harbor at the Battle of Midway, thanks mainly to American code breakers. The same code breakers enabled P-51 fighter planes to track and shoot down Yamamoto's plane, resulting in his death in April 1943 just as Camp Ellis was opening.

A Word About Fulton County History

The very land on which this new army base was being constructed had once been used as compensation to citizen soldiers following the War of 1812. Fulton County was part of the so-called Military Tract set aside at the end of that war, giving soldiers the right to acquire, at no cost, 160-acre tracts of land. The Military Tract encompassed a triangular section

THE STORY OF CAMP ELLIS

of Illinois beginning near St. Louis at the confluence of the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers, and continuing more than one hundred miles north to an east-west line between these two rivers. This was part of the first land to be surveyed for allotment and sale in Illinois, and was thus occupied earlier than the rest of the state. When Illinois became a state in 1818, almost its entire population (about thirty-five thousand, excluding Native Americans) was resident within this triangle and in portions of Illinois south of St. Louis.

The Camp and Its Mission

Camp Ellis, as it came to be named, was a World War II United States Army training facility. Its mission was to train army supply and support forces, not combat or foot soldiers. Hence, most of those who came to Camp Ellis were enlisted men, not draftees. Men who enlisted in the army, rather than waiting to be drafted, had more control over what their military duties would be. Even so, army basic training, usually at least thirteen weeks, was required of everyone. Many enlistees arriving at Camp Ellis had received this basic training elsewhere. If not, Camp Ellis could provide that too. The camp was named in recognition of Sergeant Michael B. Ellis of St. Louis, a World War I Congressional Medal of Honor recipient.

Why was this location chosen for such a large facility to be built from scratch? Short answer. Access to railroads, relatively cheap open land not requiring extensive demolition, availability of fresh water, and a site not close to the distractions of large population centers. The barracks at Camp Ellis were hastily constructed during the winter and spring of 1942-43. Most rested on two-foot-square concrete corner footings and were raised above ground. Each barrack structure housed fifty men on two-level bunks, with a coal-burning stove at each end. They were dimly lit and without running water. When complete, the camp included

THE STORY OF CAMP ELLIS

some 2,200 frame buildings. A railway spur to the camp from the nearby hamlet of Table Grove provided a connection to the CB&Q (Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy) main line at Galesburg, some forty-six miles to the northwest. Extensive warehouses were constructed at the camp to hold the building materials and other supplies arriving on as many as one hundred railcars each day during peak construction.

This meant that jobs were plentiful in all construction trades, as well as in the ancillary communications, transportation, and record-keeping functions. Plumbing, water treatment, sewage, telephone lines, recreation buildings, kitchens, mess halls, parade grounds, headquarters facilities, roadways, postal and telegraph centers, PX facilities, shooting ranges, equipment depots—everything needed for an army community which at its peak would number nearly forty thousand servicemen and civilian workers (men and women) had to be built for Camp Ellis to emerge from these former cornfields. To complicate matters, the weather did not cooperate. The winter of 1942 was abnormally cold and the spring of 1943 unusually wet, with unprecedented flooding on the nearby Illinois River. As it was said: *You could stand in mud up to your knees with dirt blowing in your face.* In these early days it was sometimes called *Swamp* Ellis. Camp Ellis opened in April 1943 (a few days before Yamamoto's death, and two years before Hitler's). It was dedicated on July 4, 1943, with Illinois governor Dwight Green and an estimated fifty thousand visitors in attendance. When functioning fully, Camp Ellis may have been second only to Chicago as an Illinois population center.

The War Department decided to train army support personnel at Camp Ellis in units whose members would train and complete their entire service tour together so far as possible. This was a relatively new training and deployment concept and many of the training methods were first worked out by trial and error at Camp Ellis. At the same time, it was recognized that support functions in combat zones and near front lines could easily transition into the need for everyone to engage in

THE STORY OF CAMP ELLIS

actual combat. Thus each specialized support unit was also taught to use the same weapons and techniques of battle as the regular infantry soldiers. This included crawling through fields in mud and rain with live ammunition flying overhead and the use of standard army rifles, machine guns, and grenades.

What were these special unit training functions for which Camp Ellis was designed and at which it excelled? They may be broadly divided into the following four: **Quartermaster, Signal, Engineering,** and **Medical** support groups.

The **Quartermaster** units were basically charged with getting to the combat front lines and keeping in adequate supply and condition the weapons, ammunition, food, clothing, and equipment needed to fight a fast-moving war. This included everything from ammunition wagons to field kitchens that could cook basic meals and hundreds of loaves of bread daily, as well as the mechanics to refuel, service, and repair (as needed) Jeeps, trucks, and tanks.

The **Signal Group** was responsible for installing, servicing, and operating the radio and telephone equipment necessary for effective communication between and within battlefield theatres of operation and their headquarters staff.

The **Engineers Group** was one of the largest and most active at Camp Ellis. Its initial commander, Colonel Robert Ingalls, was (like many of the commanders and senior officers at Camp Ellis) a World War I veteran. Just before coming to Camp Ellis he had headed a combat engineer regiment in charge of the construction of 250 miles of the Alaskan Highway. The newly arriving engineers and engineering trainees first had to see to the installation at Camp Ellis of many functional areas such as gun ranges, obstacle courses, roads, and bridges. This was in addition to extensive duty in the spring of both 1943 and 1944 assisting with flood control in nearby communities and along the Illinois River where water levels reached historic highs.

THE STORY OF CAMP ELLIS

The work of training army engineering units involved such special functions as road and airstrip building, railroad track installation and repair, bridge building, blacksmithing, plumbing installations, and masonry construction. This required the ability to use heavy equipment such as bulldozers, scrapers, cranes, graders, jackhammers, and welding gear.

Earlier in this paper I mentioned the Spoon River along the northern border of Camp Ellis. This river was made famous in Edgar Lee Masters' (1868-1950) *Spoon River Anthology* of 1915. His narrative detailed parts of the lives of people from the nearby town of Lewiston from the perspective of graveside monologues. A tiny town on this river, Bernadotte, was completely demolished as Camp Ellis was being built. It has since been reconstructed but remains small (population perhaps 50-100). The finest small restaurant in Fulton County, the Bernadotte Café, is here. It's a great place for real home cooking and fresh fried catfish. The Camp Ellis engineers built, tore down, and rebuilt, time and again, bridges over the Spoon River—suspension bridges, pontoon bridges, even steel girder bridges strong enough to support a twenty-five-ton load. In time they would build a railroad bridge over the Rhine River in Germany which would remain in use for seven years after the war.

The Medical Station

(including beagles chasing rabbits on the lawn)

The importance to the war effort of the training and patient service facilities of the **Station Hospital** was significant. As one of the largest hospitals in the country (civilian or military), the Station Hospital occupied 140 acres, contained hundreds of beds, and included a single corridor nearly three thousand feet long. In addition to its training facilities and functions, the Station Hospital served both American servicemen and prisoners of war. Five hundred nurses attended the sick and wounded in

THE STORY OF CAMP ELLIS

three shifts. Many were returning casualties of the war. Others were just sick service personnel or prisoners.

The hospital contained state-of-the-art X-ray, surgical, and diagnostic equipment. On one occasion a noted brain surgeon was flown in to treat a soldier who suffered a severe intracranial injury in a fall from a truck. Camp Ellis sent one of its Stinson L-5 Sentinel planes (with a cruising speed of around 100 mph—known to many as “the flying Jeep”) to Iowa to collect the surgeon and bring him to the base.

The Station Hospital was a pioneer in the (then and still today) emerging field of rehabilitation or physical therapy utilizing specially designed exercises and games to assist in reconditioning after injury. As a small example, some patients enjoyed participating in rabbit hunts on the hospital grounds led by six beagle hounds. No guns were used, only sticks and rocks. The rabbits came to little harm, but the patients were both in motion and outside in the fresh air.

It had been clear in 1942 to the planners of Camp Ellis that Allied forces would continue to suffer casualties in the Pacific, in Africa, Italy, and eventually in Western Europe. The trench warfare of World War I had meant that forces (and casualties) remained mainly in place, moving over relatively short distances with the fortunes of battle. Medical support for the sick and wounded could be placed near the front, hopefully just outside the range of artillery. Not so in World War II, the first major war fought mainly on wheels, where a front line might move many miles in a single day. The key to the survival and effective treatment of wounded soldiers was timely treatment. That meant bringing the medics, surgeons, and hospital facilities as close as possible to the injured and wounded. Camp Ellis pioneered and excelled at designing systems and understanding the training and logistics required to do this well.

Another innovation at Camp Ellis was what we now know from the *M*A*S*H* television series with Alan Alda and company as the Mobile Army Surgical Hospital. Everything necessary for such a hospital (equipment,

THE STORY OF CAMP ELLIS

tents, medical supplies, surgical tools, a power generator, a Jeep outfitted to serve as a field ambulance, and trained medical personnel) could be loaded into three or four C-47s and flown to wherever an emergency treatment center might be needed. This routine was practiced by the Camp Ellis trainees as they would load the C-47s, take off and fly a short while, then land back at the base and set up the hospital facility, only to dismantle it and repeat the process a few days later. After that they would be sent, as a unit, to wherever in the war regions they might be needed.

Many of us who were first introduced to air travel in the 1950s became familiar with the C-47 or Douglas DC-3, as it was known in its civilian designation. This two-engine airplane with a range of 1,600 miles was the air transport workhorse of World War II. Recall that the United States Air Force in World War II was part of the army; the air force as a separate service branch was not established until 1947. More than ten thousand C-47s and DC-3s were built, and some remain in service around the world to this day. At 18,000 lbs empty, the fully loaded C-47 could take off with 7,000 lbs of fuel and 6,000 lbs of cargo. Camp Ellis had two specially constructed airstrips for these and other service planes. They were 5,000 feet long and 150 feet wide and in constant use. The first was built in one twenty-four-hour period using specially designed pieces of mesh metal grating, fastened together into an airstrip and resting on the underlying soil. No tarmac was needed or used for this airstrip.

Here are excerpts from a report from the Fifty-Second Portable Hospital, one of the *M*A*S*H*-type units sent from Camp Ellis to the Pacific theatre in February 1944:

Our POE [port of embarkation] was San Francisco on . . . a new ship with fine accommodations. . . . While at Guadalcanal we ran a small dispensary, awaiting further orders. Late in July we . . . moved to Kijajein [where] our unit set up an annex to the already present Station Hospital. . . . This brings us to the Invasion of the Philippines in which . . . we landed D plus one and

THE STORY OF CAMP ELLIS

on D plus two set up our station. . . . We worked day and night for six days operating midst air attacks, bombings and constant artillery firing overhead. At night most of the time we had to operate with flashlights. . . . We have handled all types of surgery and have carried out our mission successfully.
(Bordner, 89)

Other medical staff trained at Camp Ellis learned to provide assistance to the injured on hospital trains. Such trains were used extensively in Europe in 1944-45 and were an outgrowth of the so-called “ambulance trains” of World War I. The objective was to have available on the train essentially all the treatment facilities of a hospital, thus expediting care for the wounded. A typical train included twenty-one cars—a kitchen, dining/pharmacy, baggage/utility car, and officers’ quarters. Patients rode in modified Pullman cars with double-deck beds—bedridden patients on the lower tier, and ambulatory patients above. The crew included enlisted men, nurses, attending physicians, and trained technical staff, most all of whom would have trained together at Camp Ellis.

Here is an account from the Twenty-Sixth Hospital Train, activated at Camp Ellis on December 10, 1943:

On 8 June 1944 five hospital trains were temporarily consolidated and moved to the United Kingdom where we arrived on 30 June, 1944. . . . On 23 September, 1944 we left an English port. On 30 September we arrived in Paris and were assigned to the Surgeon, Seine Section, ETO (European Theatre of Operations). . . . Since [then] we have been detailed to evacuate battle casualties from field hospitals, evacuation hospitals and occasionally to ports of debarkation. In carrying out our mission to date we have traveled approximately twenty thousand miles on the Continent and evacuated 9,264 battle casualties. In all this operation except for a few minor derailments the train has functioned without mishap until 23 December 1944 when a large enemy bomb exploded approximately thirty yards from the personnel cars shattering all the windows

THE STORY OF CAMP ELLIS

and causing severe damage to [the] quarters. Despite . . . damage to the cars we were able to continue evacuating battle casualties back to Paris before any repairs were started. Although personnel were badly shaken and shocked no severe casualties resulted. (Bordner, 103)

Showtime, Sports, Recreation, and Dances

(and a chance to meet some young girls)

To get a feel for the pace and flow of life in the camp I read through the weekly *Camp Ellis News*. It started as a single mimeograph sheet in April 1943 as the camp was opening and ceased publication shortly after VJ Day in August 1945. Peak circulation exceeded thirteen thousand. The paper was edited by the same two men from inception. There was always ample coverage of camp-centered sports and entertainment. Clearly the War Department knew that, despite the perilous times, all work or training and no play was neither sensible nor feasible for these American soldiers. It brings to mind the remark of the Duke of Wellington observing a cricket match at Eton College in about 1825 that “[T]he battle of Waterloo [1815] had been won on the playing fields here.”

Gymnasiums, athletic fields, film theatres, concert halls, libraries, and places of worship were interspersed throughout the camp. First-run films from Hollywood were shown in all six of the theatres, with new features attended by some forty thousand army men and civilian employees each week. There was intramural baseball, basketball, football, and boxing; with teams from Camp Ellis regularly competing against other army bases in the Midwest or against Midwest college teams. Some of the players had experience as professional athletes with major league baseball or professional football teams, or had been college all-Americans.

Five Camp Ellis men were on the Chicago team that battled New York in the Golden Gloves final in Madison Square Garden in 1944. A visit to Camp Ellis by the army’s Joe Louis and a team of accompanying

THE STORY OF CAMP ELLIS

boxers, including a young Sugar Ray Robinson, drew a crowd of some twenty-five thousand from the camp to their boxing exhibition. Former St. Louis Cardinals and Cincinnati Reds players led the camp baseball squad to a US Army Service League championship in 1944. At its peak, in addition to the all-camp squads, Camp Ellis had 184 softball and 224 basketball teams playing in intramural camp leagues of the Engineers, Quartermaster, and Medical Groups.

Then there were the dances. It seems all the servicemen of this era loved to attend dances—and it does not seem so surprising, on reflection, that the young women from towns near and far, including Peoria, Springfield, Macomb, and Galesburg, were happy to attend these events, often sponsored by the local USO or other service organization. The men from camp would arrive, often by bus, be furnished a buffet meal, and then the music and dancing would start. These seem to have been pretty tame affairs by modern standards—well chaperoned, and with steps taken to assure that each man and woman present had ample opportunity to meet and mix with others. More than one marriage—albeit down the road—resulted from these gatherings.

The recreational and entertainment activities at Camp Ellis were managed by a Special Services Section devoted to this purpose. This Section featured talented servicemen, including some professional musicians and actors, to develop and manage stage shows, concerts, and all-soldier productions, as well as the various athletic endeavors. During its short history the camp produced three Broadway-style musical revues titled respectively: *By the Numbers*, *Take a Break*, and *My Busted Back*. Each of these was written and staffed entirely from Camp Ellis. *By the Numbers* was also viewed by large audiences in nearby Macomb, Lewiston, Galesburg, and Springfield.

Hollywood celebrities visited the camp on occasion. These visits might have been more frequent, had not a full day's train travel each way been necessary for visitors from Chicago or St. Louis. Further, the public appetite for new feature films in the 1940s was such that popular actors

THE STORY OF CAMP ELLIS

and actresses were busy on the Hollywood production lots much of the time. Still, Camp Ellis welcomed such stars as Brian Donlevy, Charles Bickford, Shirley Deane, and Lynn Merrick. The Wayne King band and entertainers like Nat King Cole, a Chicagoan, also visited.

A Segregated Camp?

In researching this subject I paid close attention to what I could learn of race relations at the camp. Housing and training functions were segregated. President Truman's executive order banning segregation in the armed forces was not issued until July 26, 1948. Barracks were separate, as were the PX, religious, and some of the recreational facilities, including USO centers, in several nearby towns. But there are photographs of camp social events, and even of some training activities, in which black and white soldiers are seen together in what looks like completely harmonious circumstances. I found no references to racial conflict in the Camp Ellis newspaper, or in any of the other accounts of the camp that came to my attention. In local towns the black soldiers were sometimes welcomed in public places (Lewiston) and sometimes not (Galesburg). Times were different then. There is no doubt that everyone at Camp Ellis was fully dedicated to the defeat of Germany and Japan, with the exception of the German prisoners of war.

Stories from Camp

(Whatever you do, don't volunteer for anything.)

Prior to departing for Camp Ellis one enlistee was advised by his father: *Don't volunteer for anything. Follow orders, but do not volunteer. Quickest way to get killed.* Upon arriving at camp the enlistee soon picked up the scent of horses. He followed his nose to a shelter area where indeed a number of horses were stabled. No one was around, but he noticed a poster pinned to a post that read:

THE STORY OF CAMP ELLIS

Volunteers needed to work with the horses. Sign your name and camp location below if you are available and have good knowledge of horses.

The young enlistee hesitated, thinking of his father's admonition, but signed his name anyway. Summoned to the stables the next day, he satisfied the officer in charge as to his experience and competence and was happily assigned to stable duty for the rest of his time in the service.

You may be surprised to hear of horses at a modern army camp. They were invaluable at Camp Ellis. During wet and muddy conditions during construction, the horses could move goods around the base when most vehicles were useless. Further, as the base was extended with some training arenas and facilities several miles from headquarters, horses were sometimes the only reliable means by which orders or a message could be sent to these far reaches. Also, like all army bases, Camp Ellis had a contingent of MPs (Military Police), and the frequent need on parade grounds for the presence of ceremonial bands and arrays of personnel. MPs on horseback provided great crowd control and an impressive ceremonial presence. Besides, it was wartime, and hay was more plentiful than gasoline.

Another enlistee had received training in the Engineers Group and was working on assignment with his unit somewhere in Colorado. One day a fellow worker was very seriously injured handling some heavy equipment at a remote location. There was an obvious fracture and major loss of blood. The enlistee came immediately to the aid of his injured workmate, stopping the bleeding with an improvised tourniquet and stabilizing the broken limb with a splint such that the injured man could be removed for further treatment. The officer in charge said to this good Samaritan: *Where did you learn to do that?* The answer: *Back home.* Next thing, the enlistee found he was transferred back to Camp Ellis, this time for training as a medic.

As you can imagine, Camp Ellis was overwhelmingly a male enclave, and younger women were always in high demand and short

THE STORY OF CAMP ELLIS

supply. Many in the support staff of the base (switchboard operators, stenographers, typists, records personnel, supply clerks, and so on) were women, but they were few in comparison to the servicemen arriving in greater and greater numbers as the camp filled out. These men in training welcomed any opportunity to meet, visit, or dance with the opposite sex.

Not that lasting relationships were always the objective, particularly if they could get to Peoria (my hometown), which was notorious for its open gambling and prostitution during the war and for a number of years thereafter. Two ladies of doubtful virtue were found one day lounging about a small park area in downtown Ipava at the southern edge of the camp. The two could give no satisfactory explanation for their presence upon inquiry by Miner Brock, a local social worker variously for the Red Cross, USO, and Salvation Army. Brock placed the pair on a northbound train making its first stop in Lewiston. There they noticed the approach of a southbound train, which they promptly boarded. The next day, to Brock's surprise, both could be seen looking for business opportunities in the same park in Ipava from which they had been removed the day before.

One of the civilian mechanics showed up on a working day at the camp motor pool around noon, to have his boss ask: "Where in h__ have you been?" He replied: "The tires are shot on my old jalopy. Two flats this morning. I had to hitchhike thirty miles just to get here at all." When he got home that evening he found that his supervisor at Camp Ellis had arranged to have four new tires (with new inner tubes) installed on his car that day. Problem solved; all arranged through his local tire rationing board. Tires were strictly rationed during the war as the Japanese controlled major sources of rubber. It was said that gasoline rationing was designed mainly to prolong the life of tires, as well as the so-called "victory" speed limit of 35 mph.

Prisoners of War

(Does anyone here speak German, Italian, or Japanese?)

Camp Ellis included a separate prisoner-of-war camp that opened in August 1943. War prisoners from North Africa and the European theatre were among the early arrivals. In many cases these prisoners were quite content to be quartered at Camp Ellis. Germany's field marshal Rommel had instructed his Afrika Korps troops (nearly two hundred thousand men) to surrender in May 1943 when they found themselves surrounded by Allied forces and without fuel, food, water, or ammunition. Some of these German troops ended up at Camp Ellis. There they were treated in strict accord with the Geneva Convention, and had more than adequate food, housing, recreational facilities, and medical care—especially in comparison to what they had left behind. At the end of the war many were reluctant to leave and a few returned in later years to settle in the area or to visit. Prisoners received an allowance of ten cents per day, eighty cents if they did volunteer work on area farms or on public works and nearby canneries.

Americans' strict adherence to the Geneva Convention arose partly out of concern for the treatment of American prisoners in German POW camps (recall *Stalag 13* and the TV series *Hogan's Heroes*). Nearly three thousand war prisoners passed through the gates of Camp Ellis into the POW camp area with its special fences and barbed wire. Many prisoners released for work details enjoyed relative freedom while outside the camp. With minor exceptions, few attempted escape. One escapee wandered into a local coffee shop to order coffee. He was quickly apprehended and returned to the prison camp when he tried to pay fifty cents for a five-cent cup of coffee.

Reinhold Pabel, a German POW, escaped from his quarters at a Libby's canning factory in Washington, Illinois, in September 1945 and managed to elude discovery until he was found by the FBI in May

THE STORY OF CAMP ELLIS

1953 in Chicago, married with children and running a bookstore he had opened. He was soon deported to Germany for a brief time but returned to the United States in 1954 to resume his life here. When charged with unlawful entry and presence in the United States, his lawyer pointed out that he had been brought here against his will by the same United States government that was now prosecuting him. Both Irv Kupcinec and Illinois senator Paul Douglas were sympathetic to Pabel's cause. Pabel's account of his life, titled *Enemies Are Human*, was published in 1955.

Last fall I attended the annual Camp Ellis Days reunion in the little town of Ipava (near the southeast corner of the former camp). Ipava also contains the Easley Museum, which has a major collection of Camp Ellis artifacts, memorabilia, and exhibits. There was just one Camp Ellis alum in attendance, ninety-four-year-old William Kreimer, who provided those in attendance with the following extemporaneous narrative of his wartime recollections:

I grew up in Pennsylvania and was drafted into the army in 1942. . . . Something happened during basic training at Fort Bragg and I was in a coma for a week. After I recovered I was assigned to the officers' mess. I later heard that my basic training unit was the first to land on the beach at Anzio in January 1944 and that all were killed. I was reassigned to an artillery unit and took another round of basic training, this time at Fort Meade. After that we took a troop train to Michigan and spent time there firing artillery in the snow. An officer came by asking if anyone could speak German, Italian, or Japanese. This was in late 1943. I said I know some German. Next thing I am assigned to a barracks in Fort Custer, Michigan, and told to read and reread the Geneva Convention on prisoners of war. After that I was ordered to Camp Ellis in the spring of 1944. There was flooding, mud, and water everywhere until May. At the POW camp there were about 1,500 mostly German prisoners. Most were well behaved and willing to work. I escorted some of these to the Topeka area not far from Havana,

THE STORY OF CAMP ELLIS

Illinois, to cut limbs for fence posts from the Osage orange trees. One of the prisoners lost an eye using his axe so we had to return him to the camp hospital. One day a German officer swore at me in German as we were standing in a mess hall line. I said: "I dare you to repeat that in English," which he promptly did. Then I slugged the SOB as hard as I could on the side of his head, cutting his ear. This was reported to my commander. Next thing I was back in my barracks reading the Geneva Convention again. One time I was ordered to accompany three POWs to shovel snow. I smelled whiskey on them but couldn't find anyone back at camp to report it to, so I let it go. . . . Later I was up in Chicago at Camp Skokie where arriving prisoners were taken in. After my honorable discharge in 1945 I went to Macomb, Illinois, and married the girl I had met there while serving at Camp Ellis. She is now my wife of seventy-three years.

After the War

Even before the surrender of Germany and then Japan in 1945, the War Department was scaling back operations at Camp Ellis. The support units for American forces in Europe and in the Pacific had mostly been trained and shipped out by the early part of 1945. From a modern perspective it is amazing how quickly the United States assembled, deployed, and then retired the largest armed force in our history. On October 1, 1945, the entire camp, land, and buildings, costing a little over \$23 million, was declared surplus by the War Department. For a time the Illinois National Guard occupied part of the base, but by the mid-1950s the land and buildings had mostly all been sold to civilian buyers in a series of auctions.

The arable land has been mostly returned to corn and soybean farming. Many of the buildings were sold, dismantled, and moved to other locations for use as housing, schools, storage, and recreational facilities. This was particularly helpful as building materials remained in short supply for several years after World War II. Today, an outline of Camp Ellis can be made out from the air under favorable conditions, especially

THE STORY OF CAMP ELLIS

when crops are out of the fields. The physical remains are limited to two concrete water towers and some brick chimneys standing in isolation. In recent years the United States Army Corps of Engineers and private contractors have conducted a careful (and costly) examination of certain areas of the camp where it is known that unexploded shells and landmines remain embedded in the soil. This work seems mostly complete.

Personal Reflections

What attracted me to this subject? I grew up in downstate Illinois, spending teenage summers on a farm in McLean County with my uncle Herman Schultz who had been in Europe during the war, surviving the Battle of the Bulge. He was not heard from for nearly seven weeks in December and January of 1944 and 1945. Camp Ellis engineers were in the middle of this battle. He spoke to me often of his wartime experiences, mostly about the training and travel—not much of the conflict itself. Until he enlisted he had never been farther from home than Chicago, and he never slept one night away from the family farm for the next fifty years after his return. A few years back I catalogued his wartime photos and the memorabilia he brought back and placed them with the McLean County Historical Society. I do recall talk around the farm about Camp Ellis, but it was already a fading subject in the 1950s. My father, along with the entire workforce at the Caterpillar Tractor Company in East Peoria, worked for several weeks on the 1943 Illinois River flooding that threatened Caterpillar production, especially of earthmoving equipment needed by the army and the crawler track assemblies used to propel tanks over uneven terrain.

About twenty years ago I happened to stop at the Dickson Mounds State Museum, which was well known in my youth as the place to see dead people's bones spread out on the ground below a balcony area—bones of Native Americans long since buried there. They were

THE STORY OF CAMP ELLIS

removed from public view in 1992. What I found on this later visit was a special exhibition devoted to pictures and accounts of Camp Ellis that the museum staff (particularly Mr. Kelvin Sampson) had expertly and carefully assembled in a most engaging display. When I got the idea for a paper on this subject, I called the museum and spoke directly to Mr. Sampson asking him what happened to that marvelous display. He referred me to a little museum in Ipava to which the entire Camp Ellis display had been sent and could now be found. This small museum, the Easley Pioneer Museum, is lovingly and carefully attended by Marion Cornelius and his wife, Phyllis. I have visited there several times, as well as the library at Western Illinois University where extensive Camp Ellis materials are held in the archives. One unifying factor in all this is a woman named Marjorie Rich Bordner (1915-2016) who was involved with the camp from inception, and in 1943 joined the faculty at Western Illinois University. Her book, *From Cornfields to Marching Feet*, published in 1993, is the best place to start with any inquiry into the history of Camp Ellis.

One evening, after leaving the archives at Western Illinois University and driving to my campground for the night, I spotted a sign for a small town—Easton, Illinois—which I remembered from my youth. Easton, population then and now less than five hundred, was the small town to which my father's parents retired in the late 1930s. We drove there to visit from East Peoria during the war years and after, until my grandfather's death around 1950. Driving through this town brought to mind those Sunday dinners prepared by my grandmother on a wood- and coal-burning cookstove. Before dinner I would join the men in a walk to a nearby failed bank building then being used as a tavern, with spittoons, slot machines, and air redolent of tobacco smoke and spilled beer and whiskey.

Leaving Easton, it occurred to me that I should share an account of my brief visit there with . . . with whom? I ran through a mental list—my grandparents, parents, sister, aunts, uncles, cousins—there was no one I

could think of from those days still alive with whom I could speak. This felt strange and new to me, to be left with vivid memories that could not be shared with anyone present at the time. Later that evening reading alone, I happened upon a reference to the Etruscans, predecessors to the Romans in Italy. Their concept for this “beyond living memory” phenomenon crept into the Latin language in the word *saeculum*. A period just beyond the memory of any person present at the time of an event—normally around 80-90 years. There is a phrase in the Latin Mass, *ad saecula saeculorum* (Philippians 4:20), meaning roughly—forever.

There are not many left with a living memory of Camp Ellis. I had met one. There are likely a few others—almost certainly in their mid-nineties or beyond. They all shared a few weeks in a hastily constructed and soon abandoned place of congruence on the former Illinois prairie. Then they went on to battle, some never to return to their home shores. They were part of what Tom Brokaw has called “the greatest generation”; and I agree.

References and Sources

There is quite a lot of material on the Internet if you search “Camp Ellis” and “Illinois.” The quality and reliability of this material is variable. **YouTube** has a good approximately thirty-minute entry under *Illinois Stories, Camp Ellis* done by the Public Broadcasting Corporation and posted on September 18, 2012. Also, I can recommend:

The Story of Camp Ellis, 194?. This is a 128-page monograph with extensive photographs concerning the camp that army personnel assembled and completed near the end of the camp’s time as an active training institution. It does not contain a publication date, and many hands were clearly involved in its conception, assembly, composition, and publication such that essentially communal

THE STORY OF CAMP ELLIS

authorship is suggested. It is accessible on the Internet in a format titled: *Full text of "The Story of Camp Ellis"*—*Internet Archive*.

Marjorie Rich Bordner, *Camp Ellis, Illinois. From Cornfields to Marching Feet*. (Dallas: Curtis Media Corporation, 1993). This is the most comprehensive single book on the camp, and it contains the full text of the army monograph referred to above. Marjorie Bordner was closely connected to Camp Ellis and its history, from inception until her death at age 101 in 2016. She taught at Western Illinois University at Macomb, Illinois. This book is out of print but available at the Easley Pioneer Museum in Ipava, Illinois, and from Internet sources.

Pabel Reinhold, *Enemies are Human*. (Philadelphia: John C. Winston Co., 1955. Out of print—can be found on Amazon or other Internet sources.) This is the story of the only successful escape of a German POW from Camp Ellis, with an engaging account of his life both before capture in Italy and after his successful escape and subsequent life in Chicago.

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