

JULES J. AREL

GERMAN PRISONERS OF WAR IN MAINE
1944-1946

Like many states during World War II, Maine faced a severe labor shortage at a time when wartime needs boosted production demands. Northern Maine farmers and paper makers used German prisoners of war to help meet these extraordinary demands. Despite early apprehensions among local people, the POWs, stationed in Houlton, remained unobtrusive. They responded well to the rigors of climate and work, and some of them formed lasting friendships with local residents.

The agricultural and forest products of county, were vital to the United States during World War II. The estimated 10,000 residents that left the county, either to enter the armed forces or to seek lucrative defense jobs, created a severe labor shortage that threatened these vital supplies. Maine Senator Ralph Owen Brewster, seeking a solution, addressed a letter to area residents detailing the benefits of Prisoner of War (POW) labor in the forty-one states where POW camps were already located.

Residents of the Houlton area expressed fear that a POW camp might be established at Houlton Army Airfield, which in July 1944 was almost empty. The Houlton Grange published an



Captured on the front lines during World War II, these German soldiers were transported stateside to a POW camp at Houlton. They helped with the laborious task of harvesting Aroostook County's potato crop. Note the "POW" stamp on the clothing.

Photo courtesy of the author.

open letter in the local newspaper stressing the possibility of sabotage or international complications with Canada in the event escaping prisoners should cross the border.¹ There was always the chance that prisoners would set forest fires, and seldom mentioned but on every mind was the specter of murder and mayhem committed on the civilian population.

Despite these misgivings, on July 1, 1944, with little publicity, Camp Houlton, one of 155 base camps located throughout the country, was opened with an initial shipment of 299 POWs from Camp Edwards, Massachusetts. Shortly after, another 600 prisoners arrived. Eventually, almost 3,000 POWs would be sent

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to Houlton. Initially prisoners were shipped via the Canadian Pacific Railway, which had a spur directly into Houlton Army Airfield. Prisoners arriving via the Bangor and Aroostook Railroad disembarked at the depot in downtown Houlton and were trucked the three miles to the camp. Because they were being transported in coach cars instead of boxcars, as was the practice in Europe, many POWs felt that captivity might not be as bad as they originally anticipated.² Prisoners were segregated into three groups: Afrika Korps veterans, Wehrmacht troops captured in Normandy, and, eventually, Russian soldiers.³ Those arriving in the summer and fall of 1944 were impressed with the beauty and cool temperatures of the countryside. They had yet to experience a "County" winter.

The POW compound was located on the east side of the airfield, within feet of the international border. Because of a shift in flying activity to Presque Isle, Houlton had been relegated to the status of an auxiliary field. Air Corp personnel had been reduced to several dozen men, while soldiers involved in guard duty numbered 200 officers and enlisted men of the 704th M.P. battalion. It was known as Service Command Unit 1119 (SCU-1119).⁴ Camp commander LTC Victor W. Phelps, a member of the federalized Connecticut National Guard, was in his mid-fifties and considered too old for overseas duty.

The compound itself measured 1,350 feet long by 650 feet wide and consisted of a double barbed wire fence with six machine gun towers. Inside the fence were fifteen "H" shaped barracks 100 feet in length. The middle section of the "H" contained showers and toilets.⁵ Also included in the compound was an infirmary staffed with an American doctor, Major Thomas A. McNerny, and three German sanitation specialists: Joseph F. Fischer, Hermann Kaschel, and Freidrich Bruggemann.⁶ The German POWs elected Private Eugene Rapp as their spokesman. A man in his late thirties, Rapp had spent many years in the German Merchant Marine before entering the Army. He was captured at Normandy. Rapp spoke fairly good English and was

conscientious and fair in representing POW grievances and complaints.⁷

Camp routine included a morning head count, followed by sick call. Any serious cases were transported to the hospital at Presque Isle. In the evening, a second head count was made. Upon completing the day's work, and all day Sunday, POWs were allowed to relax.

The University of Maine sent more than four hundred books to establish a library, which eventually grew to over four thousand volumes. Approximately five hundred prisoners were engaged in some type of educational or cultural activity. There was a full-time director of education, with several instructors, most having been teachers in German schools and colleges.⁸ Prisoners formed a small orchestra (*bauernkapelle*), with donated instruments, and others were active in theater and art groups. Protestant and Catholic services were conducted weekly.⁹

Marc Raeff was one of three U.S. Army interpreters who interrogated newly arrived prisoners and had them fill out International Red Cross cards with the name and address of relatives in Germany, who were informed of the whereabouts of the prisoner. Raeff, the only interpreter who was also fluent in Russian, noticed a group of men who kept to themselves. He called them forward to start their paperwork and overheard them talking in Russian. On further questioning he discovered the group was composed entirely of Russians. Raeff approached the Provost Marshall, Major John T. Rourke and said, "Sir, we have a group of Georgians among the prisoners." The major, not knowing what Raeff was talking about, replied, "Georgians? Georgians? I thought the Civil War was over with!" It took some time for Raeff to convince his superior that there were indeed some Russians in the camp. Raeff's information was passed to the Provost Marshall General's Office in Washington. They in turn surveyed all of the POW camps in the country and discovered that most of them also contained Russians.

Raeff's report to the camp intelligence officer contained the following observations: "With one or two exceptions, the

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Russians came from illiterate peasant stock. Men with no education at all and no training in anything more complex than herding cattle and general farm work." Many of them had been members of a division founded by General Andrei Vlasov, who had been captured by the Germans and was able to partially convince them there were enough Anti-Stalinist Russian prisoners to form an army to help overthrow the Soviet leader. Although the Germans agreed to the formation of this army, few if any of its men were provided arms; most were used behind the lines in labor battalions. At the time of their capture the Russians were wearing German uniforms and were assumed to be German soldiers. The Russian prisoners refused to fill out the Red Cross cards, since discovery of their collusion with the Germans would have branded them – and their families in the Soviet Union – as traitors.

Residents of Houlton got their first inkling that there might be other than Germans at the POW camp in late October 1944. The rumor quickly spread that a Japanese had been seen in town, under guard. Residents were just beginning to accept the idea of German POWs, but considered the Japanese a race to be exterminated. In fact, one of the Russian prisoners, of Mongolian descent and with distinct Asiatic features, had developed an abscessed tooth, for which he was taken to a local dentist for treatment. Incidentally, he elected to stand while the dentist extracted the tooth, without benefit of anesthetic.¹⁰

The spokesman for the Russians, known only as Shibishev, presented a petition to the camp commander requesting that all Russian POWs be enlisted into the American Army and transferred to Europe to fight the Germans. Though it was forwarded to higher headquarters it never received serious consideration. In December 1944, the roughly one-hundred Russians at Houlton were shipped, along with all their countrymen located in camps throughout the United States, to a camp constructed exclusively for Russians at Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. At the close of the war, it was the site of mass rioting and some suicides by those who did not want to be forcibly repatriated to the certain fate they all



POWs volunteered for farm work because of the wages, the chance to operate farm equipment, and the possibility of seeing local farm women.

Photo courtesy of the author.

knew awaited them on their return. Intelligence estimates were that few if any of the 5,000 repatriated Russians survived after their return to Russia.¹¹

The Houlton camp also contained a group of anti-Nazi POWs that had been transferred back from the branch camp at Stark, New Hampshire, because of their disruptive behavior. This group of thirty POWs, many of them Communists and deserters, created a multitude of problems and was eventually transferred to Ft. Devens, Massachusetts, which was designated as an anti-Nazi POW camp for enlisted men. Camp Aliceville, Alabama, housed anti-Nazi NCO's, while anti-Nazi officers were quartered at Camp Ruston, Louisiana.¹²

Sickness, periods of bitter cold, or spring thaws, when fields and woods were made impassable by mud and water, were the only times when prisoners were not working. Indeed, it was rare to find a prisoner who did not want to work, because activity offered an escape from the boredom of the compound and provided a man with a monthly salary. The money was used in the canteen to buy items that made life a little easier – cigarettes thirteen cents a pack, chocolate bars five cents, beer twenty-five cents a quart, and even razor blades.¹³

Farmers interested in utilizing POW labor were required to provide the necessary transportation to and from the camp. POWs worked in groups of ten, each gang accompanied by two guards. The farmer reimbursed the government according to the number of barrels of potatoes picked or pounds of peas or beans harvested.¹⁴ POW labor proved invaluable. During the harvest of 1944, they picked 291,000 pounds of beans and 725,000 barrels of potatoes, which provided the government with \$145,000 in revenue.¹⁵

Farm work drew the most volunteers. In addition to the wages, prisoners were fascinated by tractors and other farm equipment, often vying with one another to drive and operate the equipment. Also, there was the possibility of seeing women farm workers. One story circulating through town concerned a young, attractive prisoner who suddenly disappeared from a group of potato pickers. An intensive search failed to turn him up. Three days later, with the search still in progress, the gaunt, exhausted prisoner turned himself in and requested he be returned to the camp immediately. It seems that a young woman who had been picking potatoes close by developed a crush on the prisoner, and while his co-workers distracted the guards, she hid him in a potato house for three days.¹⁶

A number of people interviewed, including ex-prisoners, indicated that guards were often lax in their duties.¹⁷ Ira Parks, a potato farmer at the time, related the following incident:

On a hot September afternoon, both soldiers assigned to guard the group of prisoners I had working for me had fallen asleep under some

apple trees. I had gotten this same group of men, including the guards on several occasions. They knew each other well enough to call the guards by their first names. Several of the prisoners were taking a break and sitting under the same apple tree as one of the sleeping guards, when a large red fox jumped out of the nearby woods and started loping across the field. A prisoner sitting close to the guard picked up his rifle, carefully drew a bead on the fox and fired. The fox, well over one hundred yards away, somersaulted once and fell dead. At the shot, the guard jumped up, and everyone wondered what would happen next. The prisoner dropped the rifle to the ground, turned and smiled, and everyone broke out laughing, including the guard.¹⁸

According to some prisoners, it was common to have a prisoner wake up a guard dozing under a tree when they saw the corporal of the guard approach in a jeep. "The guards were very lax," said ex-POW Hans Krueger. "You could watch them sleeping and dozing in the daytime. We would throw small pebbles or stones against the guard towers. Sometimes it would take ten minutes to wake them up."¹⁹ Guards watching wood-cutting operations, according to Major Frank L. Brown, "remained upon the roads; the work crews were apparently not under much supervision."²⁰

During the harvest, the local Birdseye frozen food plant operated twenty-four hours a day, freezing and packing peas and beans, with most of the labor supplied by the POWs. Prisoners worked up to ten hours a day in the fields. This did not include the time required to travel to and from the farms, some of which were twenty miles or more from the camp. Rations consisted of a box lunch and water. Occasionally a farm wife would make a big pot of coffee and some doughnuts for the prisoners. Edith Long recalled:

When my husband took the coffee to the potato house, sometimes our two small boys went along.

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The prisoners seemed to enjoy seeing the boys, and would watch them and smile at them. One day the youngest child did some amusing little thing and they all laughed. One of the prisoners who seemed to watch the boys with a sort of hungry look in his eyes, tapped himself on the chest, pointed to the two children, then measured in the air the height of three. My husband gathered that this young fellow had children of his own. It made us feel very sad that he had to be so far away from his family.²¹

It amazed the POWs that the wild apples that grew on all the farms were allowed to rot on the ground. They eagerly gathered them during rest periods and took those they did not eat back to camp. There, they used them to make illegal cider.²²

In late fall, following the harvest, the work shifted to contract wood cutting. Great Northern Paper Company, Oxford Paper Company, Eastern Corporation, and Maine Seaboard Paper Company were four of the seven concerns employing prisoners. The other three were private contractors.²³ Each man was required to cut six-tenths of a cord of wood per day. This was increased in May 1945 to nine-tenths of a cord. Contractors provided transportation to and from the work sites, using buses rather than open trucks because of the winter weather. With some of the sites as much as thirty-five miles from Houlton, some operations actually cut only five to six hours a day, even though they averaged eleven to twelve hours outside the stockade. Still, the quotas were inflexible: Any crew not meeting them was placed in confinement, on restricted diet for seven days.²⁴ All prisoners were provided training in the various facets of wood cutting operations. This took the form of instructional films which depicted the proper way to fell trees and saw them up with or without portable gasoline-powered circular saws. Stress was placed on accident prevention. Between October 1944 and January 1945, POWs averaged 12,000 cords per month.²⁵

Some observers expressed concern at the lax security at most wood cutting sites. In actuality there was little need for concern. The wood lots were remote, the snow deep, the temperatures bitterly cold, and the majority of the prisoners spoke no English. "We had been told the forest was populated by wild Indians who would not hesitate to kill escaping prisoners," said Rudi Richter; "We had no reason not to believe these stories."²⁶ In November 1944, Fritz Knauthe and Karl Heuft became separated from a woods crew in Oakfield. They realized they were lost at about the time the guards noticed they were missing. Instead of trying to escape, they yelled as loudly as possible and built a fire to keep from freezing. They were located within a few hours.²⁷

The four major branch camps were located at Spencer Lake, Seboomook, Princeton, and Stark, New Hampshire. POWs assigned to these camps were employed in wood cutting operations. Houlton also provided several dozen prisoners to Presque Isle airbase, Dow airbase at Bangor, and Camp Keyes at Augusta, where they worked as orderlies and on maintenance crews.²⁸

At Spencer Lake, Major William M. Marshall commanded the detachment of three officers, one a surgeon and thirty-seven enlisted men. The camp was located approximately forty miles west of Greenville, at the site of a CCC camp. A fenced compound with guard towers surrounded the buildings that housed the POWs.²⁹ The facilities at Spencer Lake were exceptionally good. The camp contained recreational facilities, including a day room complete with reading material (in German) and a fully stocked canteen. Because of the severe winter weather, additional heating and special clothing was provided. An average of 275 POWs were assigned to the camp.

Seboomook was commanded by Captain James D. Olson, four officers, and thirty-nine enlisted men. The camp was located at the northern end of Moosehead Lake. The 250 POWs were billeted in housing owned by Great Northern Paper Company. As in other branch camps, Seboomook contained a



Having access to newspapers, magazines, and news films, POWs realized the end of the war was near by 1945. Even after Germany's surrender on May 1, however, many would wait months or years for their return.

Photo courtesy of the author

canteen and recreational facilities.³⁰ Princeton, seventy-five miles south of Houlton, was also located in a CCC camp. It was commanded by Major John J. Murphy, three officers, and thirty-seven enlisted men. As in other branch camps, security was quite lax. The guards and prisoners got to know each other quite well, and except for an occasional lost prisoner, who truly wanted to be found, missing POWs were unheard of. Regulations, such as appropriately marked clothing, were routinely ignored.³¹ Stark was located seventeen miles northwest of Berlin, New Hampshire. It was commanded by Captain Alexandium Kobus, two officers, and forty-one enlisted men. The approximately 250 POWs worked at wood cutting. An excellent history of the camp by Allen V. Koop, *Stark Decency*, is available from the University Press of New England. The branch camps continued in operation until the spring of 1946, when the prisoners began to transfer back to Houlton and started down

the long road to repatriation. Their labor was an important compensation for the critical civilian labor shortage.

In March 1945, Pvt. Eugene Rapp was replaced as the POW camp spokesman by Paul Seiler, of which little is known.³² Having access to newspapers, magazines and being shown news films of the war, most prisoners realized that the end was near. The surrender on May 8, 1945, was followed by a general feeling of anxiety for the future of their homeland and heightened expectations of quick repatriation.

Throughout the war, the United States had been extremely diligent in applying the Geneva convention rules in its treatment of prisoners. Unfortunately, as soon as the war ended, the U.S. began ignoring the Geneva rules. Work quotas were increased as much as 60 percent, while food rations were decreased to 3,400 calories on work days and 2,500 calories on non-work days. (Civilian lumberjacks were fed 4500 to 5000 calories per day.) In addition, prisoners were no longer allowed to purchase such items as candy, cakes, soft drinks and beer in the canteens. Working prisoners also discovered that officers, nonworking non-coms, and non-cooperative prisoners were being repatriated immediately, while they were held indefinitely. Contrary to all the lectures and programs on human rights and democracy they had heard, they felt this was America's way of "kicking a man when he is down," and it served to undermine any positive feelings they might have acquired.³³

During the spring and summer of 1945, POWs worked in the fields, planting pea, bean, and potato crops, and in the fall they worked at harvesting. With the approaching winter, they returned to the forests and wood cutting operations. Morale began to improve in January 1946, as the first group of prisoners was transferred to Ft. Devens, the first leg of the anticipated repatriation to their homeland. Unfortunately, some would spend an additional year or two working at rebuilding England, or in the French coal mines, before finally arriving home.

The last camp spokesman, POW Andreas Haberbeck, was one of the 179 prisoners remaining when Camp Houlton was closed on May 8, 1946. Most had remained behind voluntarily

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to help in dismantling the camp. The fences had been torn down, and even the beds had been removed. They slept on mattresses laid on the barracks floor. Within a week, the last POW was gone.³⁴

The POW camps in Maine proved to be the salvation of many a farm and pulp-cutting operation which, without the prisoner labor, would not have been able to continue. With rare exceptions, the German soldiers expressed their appreciation for the humane treatment they received in the camp, especially from farm families and paper company employees. A letter dated June 6, 1947, from Helmuth Claussen, a young prisoner assigned to work with field engineer Allison Conlogue, expressed the feelings of many:

Honorable Mr. Conlogue.

I, Helmut, am sending you my heartfelt greetings from Germany. I am thanking you from the bottom of my heart for your dear letters. Healthwise I am doing very well, and I hope you are doing the same. I am working on the railroad as a plumber. Things are pretty good at this place and I am making a good salary, but it cannot buy much because everything is rationed. You get tickets once in a while to obtain rations. As yet I am not married. With the young girl in Kiel, my affair has finished. I have lost interest and with the times being so bad one cannot afford to get married.

I often think of the beautiful times I enjoyed with you folks in Houlton. I hardly noticed that I was in captivity. I always had enough to eat; every day I could eat my fill and chocolate was plentiful, not to mention all the other plentiful things. All these are beautiful memories. The things I enjoyed while there I will, both now and in the future, have to deny myself. It will take a

long time before we enjoy such things here again. Yes, my journey was very long. I had to spend four weeks in France. Many of my kameraden are still in France, working in the coal mines. The blonde fellow who worked with me for Mr. Stewart is still in the French coal mines. It is a terrible shame that these young men have to experience this. I have met some people who were also in Houlton, but you would not know them. I would love to spend some time with all of you again, but, as my father is no longer alive I have to look after the family. I am so sorry, I have only one small photograph to send you. Later I will send you a larger one. Now, for today, I will send you my best regards.

Yours,
Helmut

Please write soon again.

Helmut Claussen, (23) Oldengurg, Eidenstrasse 98,
Germany, British Zone.³⁵

EPILOGUE

In 1977 as I sat in my office at the Houlton International airport, a gentleman walked in and asked, in a heavy German accent, if he might have my permission to take pictures of the airport. I told him no permission was required and he should feel free to take all the pictures he wishes. In thanking me, he mentioned that he was on vacation and had brought his wife to see where he had been held as a German prisoner of war during World War II.

That was my first hint that Houlton had been the site of a POW camp. I spent the next several years seeking out anyone I could find who might have information on the history of the camp. In that time several more prisoners came to Houlton to visit. They provided me with the names and addresses of others

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they knew to have also been in the Houlton POW camp. Houlton residents occasionally suggested contacts who had worked at the camp or had hired POWs. It was a fascinating search that led to travel to Washington, D.C., Columbia University, and numerous towns in Maine in search of more information.

NOTES

¹*Houlton Pioneer Times*, March 16, 1944.

²Personal interview with Rudi Richter, former POW, May 11, 1980.

³Personal interview with Marc Raeff, U.S. Army interpreter, April 15, 1978.

⁴Document no. 294-48-3, p.1, National Archives and Records Service, Modern Military Branch, Military Archives Division (hereafter NARS).

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Document no. PMGO (29) 383.6, p.1, NARS.

⁷Document no. 1194503, p.1, NARS.

⁸Document no. 1194504, p.3, NARS.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Raeff interview.

¹²Arnold Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America* (New York, 1979), p. 180.

¹³Richter interview.

¹⁴Report of Inspection of Camp Houlton, September 6-10, 1945, NARS.

¹⁵Document no. 294-48-3, NARS.

¹⁶Personal interview with Edith Long, May 17, 1979.

¹⁷Hans Krueger to the author, September 10, 1979; Richter interview; interview with Ira Parks, potato farmer, April 12, 1978.

¹⁸Parks interview.

¹⁹Krueger letter.

²⁰Document no. 1194001, p. 3, NARS.

²¹Long interview.

²²Richter interview.

²³Report of Inspection of Camp Houlton, September 6-10, 1945, NARS.

²⁴Document no. TC8741; document 1194505; Report of Inspection of Camp Houlton, December 1944, p. 2, NARS.

²⁵Report of Inspection of Camp Houlton, December 1944, p. 2, NARS.

²⁶Richter interview.

²⁷*Houlton Pioneer Times*, August 14, 1945.

²⁸Document no. 1194505, Prisoner of War Camp Houlton and Branch Camps, NARS.

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹*Ibid.*

³²*Ibid.*

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³³Ibid., and document, "Special Project Matters," May 29, 1945, NARS.

³⁴Report of Visit to Camp Houlton, May 5-6, 1946, by Mr. Van Arsdale Turner, Department of State, NARS.

³⁵Letter given to author by Dorothy Conlogue, April 9, 1978.

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