

NAVAL INTELLIGENCE AT FORT HUNT PARK

.....One of ONI's most successful HUMINT operations of World War II

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Along the shores of the Potomac about ten miles south of today's Washington National Airport is Fort Hunt Park. Originally part of George Washington's Mt. Vernon Plantation, it served briefly at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries as part of the fortifications defending the approaches to Washington D.C. and then was turned over to the National Park Service. Today the park provides a bucolic setting for nature trails, athletic fields, and picnic areas. Visitors to the park might notice signs stating that, during World War II, the park was used by the Army to interrogate German prisoners-of-war (POWs) as well as to train American GIs in escape and evasion. During World War II there were some 90 buildings constructed on the site, but all are gone now. Only the signs remain, and they give little hint regarding one of the U.S. Navy's most successful HUMINT collection operations of the war.

The existence of the Fort Hunt POW facility--known only as Post Office Box 1142-- was secret. It was administered by the Army but also used extensively by the Navy to house German Navy personnel, primarily survivors of U-boats sunk in the Atlantic. By war's end, the facility had processed some 3500 POWs, but usually it accommodated fewer than 100 navy POWs, and frequently only about half that number. It was not a normal POW camp like the large facilities located at Ft. Meade, MD and other locations in the Washington-Baltimore area. P.O. Box 1142 existed as a highly specialized short-term site for interrogation of POWs thought to possess important information and who had been *carefully assessed as likely to be willing to cooperate*. Many did, and the program produced vast amounts of valuable intelligence.

P.O. Box 1142 opened in August 1942 and among the first POWs processed were survivors of U-352, sunk off the U.S. east coast in May 1942. During 1942 and 1943, some 700 German Navy POWs from some thirty sunken U-boats were interrogated. By the end of the war, the Navy had processed survivors from some 60 sunken, captured, or surrendered U-boats.

The POW exploitation program was conducted by the Special Activities Branch of ONI (Op-16Z). POWs were initially screened at the ports where they were landed (primarily Boston, New York City, and Norfolk) either by Op-16Z personnel or by German-speaking personnel from the local District Intelligence Office (DIO)¹, whose ostensive job was to "help fill out the administrative forms required for processing." The forms required extensive biographic and background information and, while the POWs were answering the questions, the interviewing officer was assessing the POW's knowledge and attitude and filling out his own form, which concluded with a yes-no appraisal of whether the subject was suitable for "further interview." Answer "no" and off he goes to the general POW population. Answer "yes," and after further

¹ As an example, German-speakers at DIO 3 (NYC) "Coastal Information Section" conducted original POW screenings. In 1943 the name of the section was changed to "Operational Intelligence Section" to better reflect the mission.

processing at a POW camp, he might find his way to P.O. Box 1142. Only about ten percent of the POWs interviewed ultimately made it to P.O. Box 1142.

The interrogation process at Fort Hunt was originally designed by the Army and further refined by Op-16Z. Selection (and training) of the interrogators was as carefully conducted as the screening and selection of the POWs. All interrogators had to be native German-speakers, ideally from the same area of Germany as the target POW. German Jews who had fled to the United States to escape Hitler in the 1930s provided a rich pool of talent for this job as well as for conducting the original screening by the DIOs.

- POWs were to be comfortably housed and fed. They received the pay of their equivalent rate/rank in the U.S. Navy. They were to be treated with the respect due to their rank.

- Order and discipline were the responsibility of the German officers and petty officers. Camp guards seldom were required to interpose themselves.

- No physical violence or threat thereof. No intimidation.

- Voluntary cooperation was the goal.

- Uncooperative or trouble-making POWs were simply removed and returned to the general POW population.

When possible and, in particular, when the senior officers appeared likely to cooperate, efforts were made to keep U-boat crews together. This proved a very efficient technique. The prospect of being taken away from his shipmates and sent to the general POW pool was often enough to ensure cooperation.

But there was one tragic footnote. In April 1944 German U-boat ace (27 sinkings including three Royal Navy warships) Lieutenant Commander Werner Henke was captured together with most of his crew when U-515 was sunk by the USS Guadalcanal (CVE60) Task Group. Henke signed an agreement to cooperate and it appeared that almost all of his crew would also be cooperative. They were sent to P.O. Box 1142. But Henke reneged on his agreement. Fearful that he would be removed from P.O. Box 1142 and turned over to the British (who considered him a war criminal), he made a dash to escape and was shot and killed. Of the 450,000 German POWs in more than 500 camps in the U.S. during World War II, he was the only one to be killed attempting to escape.

The enlightened selection and exploitation techniques of this program resulted in a bonanza of technical intelligence on German U-boats and weaponry. An ONI assessment at war's end noted that the program provided the "sole source of advance information" on: the German acoustic torpedo; German high underwater speed U-boats; the Schnorkel ; and German radar search receivers. Additionally, it was the primary source for information on bubble decoy systems,

circling torpedoes for use against convoys, radar decoy balloons, anti-radar coverings, mines, U-boat minelayers, and infrared systems.²

At the end of the war, Fort Hunt Park housed German scientists and senior military officers brought to the United States under *Operation Paperclip*, "to include such well-known names as Wehrner Von Braun and Rheinart Gehlen. It reverted back to the National Park Service in 1948. Unknown to almost anyone, it had housed the Navy's most successful HUMINT technical intelligence collection operation of World War II.

² CAPT Wyman H. Packard, *A Century of U.S. Naval Intelligence*, Washington D.C., U.S. Dept of the Navy, 1996, p.128