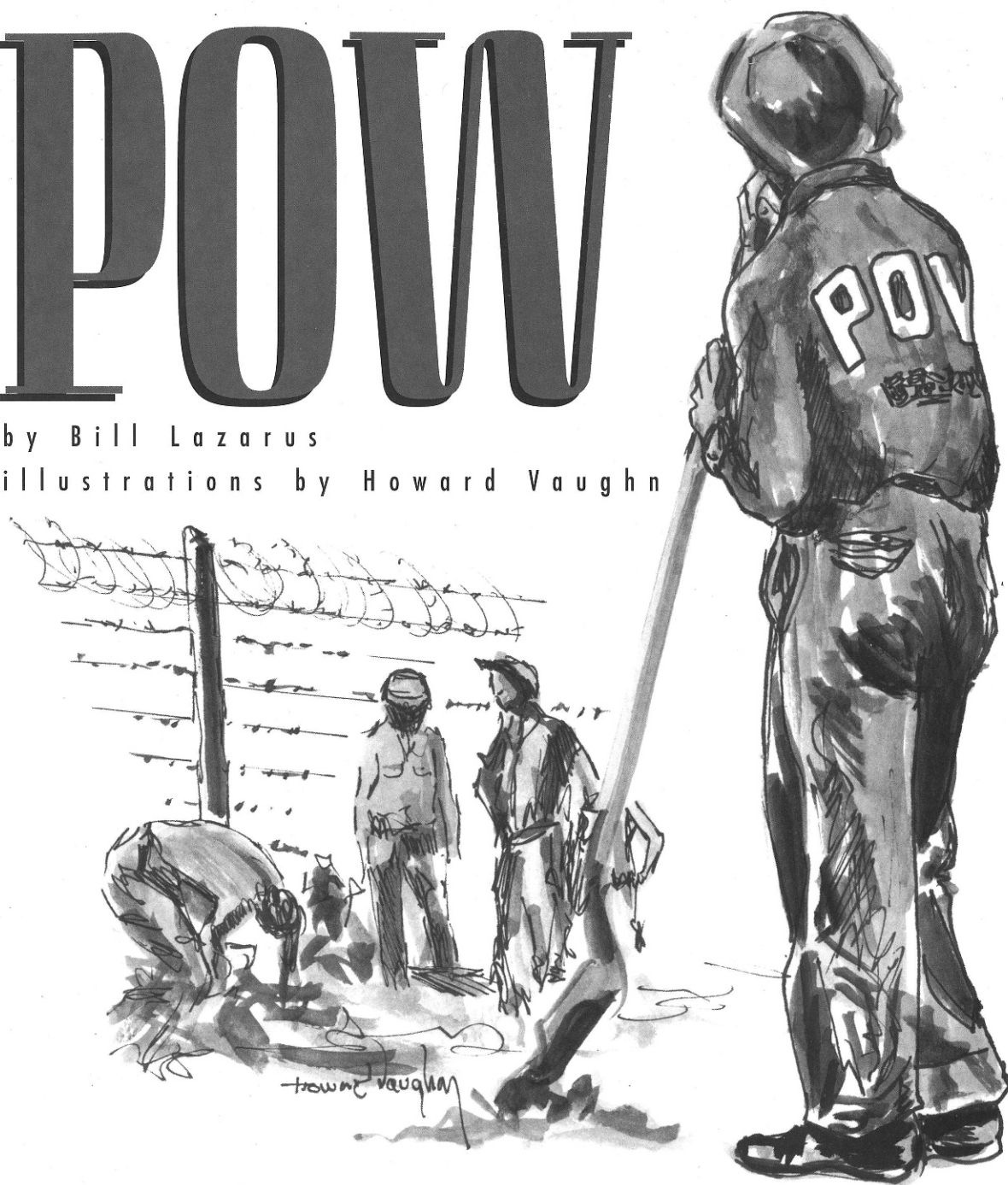


POW

by Bill Lazarus

illustrations by Howard Vaughn



In February 1945, a small group of strangers made their first appearance in Daytona Beach. All foreign-born and tightly guarded, they moved into a former Women's Army Air Corp (WAAC) training center on the grounds of Welch Convalescent Hospital. Then located on what is now the Daytona Beach Community College campus, Welch was a wing of Halifax Medical Center, which had been founded in 1927.

The newcomers did not cause much of a stir during this little known and little remembered episode in the

the few German POWs who spent about 16 months in what was then a tiny, isolated community in Central Florida.

There were supposed to be 100 men assigned to Daytona Beach, but eventually 254 POWs moved into the five barracks next to the hospital. Guarded by 27 American soldiers, they wore Navy-blue fatigue uniforms with the letters "PW" stitched onto the shirt and pants. While not working, they were dressed in German Army uniforms, regardless of their branch of service.

The prisoners had been sent from Fort Blanding,

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life of the Funcoast. *The Centennial History of Volusia County*, although published in the early 1950s, doesn't mention the event. Neither does a book titled *A History of Florida*.

That's how the Federal Government wanted it. The fewer people who knew that German prisoners of war were living here, the better.

The memory of their presence has not survived either. The horrors of Nazi concentration camps, the tales of Holocaust survivors and the traumatic experiences reported by returning American soldiers overshadowed any lingering recollections of

which was located near Starke and served as the largest single POW center in Florida. Now, it is the Florida Army National Guard's primary training facility. The Clay County camp includes a small museum that highlights the few years German POWs lived there. At one point, with 10,000 men confined to the site, Fort Blanding was the fifth largest city in Florida. Located about 40 miles west of Jacksonville, it had started to receive captured U-boat naval personnel in 1942.

In 1943, with World War II raging, the military expanded the facility across 150,000 acres of swamps,

snakes and burning sun. Eventually, 19 "side camps," including Daytona Beach, were created to provide manpower to various industries. A total of about 10,000 German POWs were sent to Florida; more than 400,000 other POWs were distributed throughout other states.

Volusia County's role in the national POW program was small and was largely ignored. For example, a touring International Red Cross official, who set out to visit all the POW facilities in 1945, never came here or to camps in Dade City and White Springs. "Rather far from the main highways," Guy Mettraux reported, "and, according to the spokesman, no special problems have arisen."

Nevertheless, at least one prisoner did cause a bit of a commotion. Werner Jentsch decided to escape.

A former member of the notorious SS, Hitler's private army, Jentsch, then 22, stood out among his colleagues. They averaged about 5-foot-7. He was 6-foot-2 with blue eyes and dark hair. He also weighed about 175 pounds, making him an imposing figure.

In September 1945, he slipped away from the hospital. *The Daytona Beach Evening News*, which was folded into *The News-Journal* in the late 1980s, reported he was an ardent Nazi. The FBI said Jentsch "may be dangerous."

There was no question that he wasn't going to make it back to Germany, not with the Atlantic in between. On the other hand, the idea of a German prisoner of war wandering free in American communities was not exactly comforting.

Jentsch somehow hitched a ride to New Smyrna Beach. He then hopped a freight train to carry him to Miami. His method of transportation was fairly typical. The Depression, which began in 1929, had sent a steady stream of transients to the railroads for unauthorized rides to distant sites. Searching for jobs, they developed a style and culture chronicled by troubadours like Woody Guthrie and American writers.

The attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 had launched America into World War II, but many men (and a few women) continued to take unauthorized trains throughout the war. Jentsch would have been accepted without a second glance, even though he

"spoke English with difficulty," according to an FBI report.

It's likely he had learned it during his stay either at Camp Blanding or in Daytona Beach. In hopes of changing German attitudes, government officials set up classes to teach American concepts of liberty to soldiers raised accustomed to a Nazi dictatorship. The schools, which also offered courses in English, American geography and history, were not very successful.

The soldiers may have fought on the German side, but not all of them were ardent believers in Nazi philosophy or wanted to spend time around those who were. Some were not even German, but represented a variety of nationalities impressed into the Axis side of the conflict. As a result, several camps had to cope with battles between inmates. The POWs were threatened more by their col-

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German Prisoner of War Camps in Florida

Site

Camp Blanding
Camp Gordon Johnson

Location

near Starke
near Carrabelle

Prisoners

7,500
2,500

Prisoners from the main camps were then dispersed to "side" camps

Blanding Side Camps

Banana River	Jacksonville
Belle Glade	Kendall
Bell Haven	Leesburg
Clewiston	MacDill Field
Dade City	Melbourne
Daytona Beach	Orlando
Drew Field	Page Field
Green Cove Springs	Venice
Hastings	White Springs
Homestead	Winter Haven

Gordon Johnson Side Camps

Dale Mabry Field
Eglin Field
Telogia

Additional Side Camps in Florida

Marianna Haag Show Grounds side camp for Fort Benning, Ga.
Naval Auxiliary Air Station Whiting Field side camp of
Camp Rucker, Ala.

Total Number of POWs in the U.S.:

378,898 Germans
51,455 Italians
5,435 Japanese

Source: Billinger Jr., Ralph D., *Hitler's Soldiers in the Sunshine State*, University Press of Florida (2000).

leagues than by Americans, according to history professor Ralph D. Billinger Jr., who chronicled the experience of German POWs in Florida in his 2000 book *Hitler's Soldiers in the Sunshine State*.

Moreover, the POWs were intent on going home, not to study hall. By March 1945, it was apparent that Germany had lost. The D-Day invasion in June 1944 had driven a dagger into the heart of the Fatherland. Most prisoners in this country just wanted to find out if their families had survived the carnage.

"In this little camp," a YMCA visitor reported after seeing the Daytona Beach facility, "men seemed particularly quiet – almost passive. Men have only one idea – to go home as soon as possible. Other prisoners didn't want to go back to their war-torn land and were hoping to stay. They weren't interested in studying, but in making new lives for themselves in this country."

Jentsch probably fell into the latter category. He spent a week in Miami swimming in the warm Atlantic and looking for employment. He would have had a lot of company to hide in. Miami was already attracting about 2 million tourists a year then. FBI agents finally found Jentsch sleeping in a truck.

By simply trying to escape, he was unusual. Only 33 German prisoners made the attempt in Florida. "Perhaps that is because the Florida most German prisoners saw was not tourist Florida, but swamps and woods, rural citrus and potato fields, and old-time county sheriffs and farmers with shotguns, dogs and speech patterns that made even those Germans with some knowledge of English think they had stumbled into the American frontier," Billinger Jr. wrote. "Rural Florida in the 1940s was not the end of the world, but it must have

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have conjured up.

Betancourt is enamored with Berlin, who wrote many of the most beloved songs of the 20th century. In fitting homage, Betancourt plays only the black keys on the piano in imitation of Berlin's limited ability on that instrument.

Eventually, Speegle opted out of the process – although he's now helping get the music set for final production – and Betancourt had to write the song himself.

He then assigned himself the task of singing it at the flag-raising ceremony.

"I don't know if anything would have happened with the song if I hadn't been mayor," Betancourt admits.

In the audience that spring day was Robert Ryan, who had retired to Volusia County after a career in the United Nations. Ryan liked the song – which Betancourt sang with the three other singers on tape – and encouraged him to see about getting the United Nations to adopt it.

That was music to any songwriter's ears. Betancourt would never get much money from the UN, regardless of whether or not the song is accepted, but if it became the theme song, every time it was used in movies or on television, he would receive a royalty check.

Even then, the results could be a pittance. "Such a song may not generate the royalties of a hit country song," Betancourt concedes, "but has a greater value as a part of history. What better legacy for a songwriter, but to be a part of history?"

A copy of "We Salute" was sent to Kofi Annan, the UN Secretary General. Then- U.S. Ambassador Richard Holbrook was reeled in. The song was sent

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on to the White House. If then-President Bill Clinton had signed on, the song would have become an instant anthem. However, Clinton and Holbrook both left the White House before any decision was announced. The incoming Bush Administration has been preoccupied with transition and is not thought to be as supportive of the United Nations.

"Music shouldn't be political anyway," Betancourt says.

It is. Back in the Shores, Betancourt had to fend off a direct attack by the Armstrongs, who had a national conservation magazine publish their letter denouncing the flying of the UN flag – the flag raising was visited by a lone protester who handed out flyers claiming a UN takeover of the tiny park that houses the flagpoles. Eventually, the city council voted 3-2 to remove the UN flag, only to have that decision overturned by an outside parliamentarian who ruled the council had voted for and against the same issue in the same meeting. Actually, they voted three times with alternating results.

The debate has since died. The flag still is flying.

Now, Betancourt is leaving for New York to give "We Salute" a further push towards the upper echelon of the United Nations. He goes with a song in his heart and on his lips, and the betting here is that he'll also be singing as lustily as ever when the opportunity comes.