

When German Prisoners of War Passed Through Paoli

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At the November 21, 2010 meeting of the Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society, Roger Thorne, Society president, presented a program on a little-known topic—the transportation of German prisoners of war from the European Theater to remote camps throughout the United States. These highly secretive transfers included trips on the Pennsylvania Railroad's tracks through the heart of the Philadelphia Main Line, unbeknownst to residents and to virtually anyone else who did not have a need to know. While his research into this subject continues, Roger shares much of the fascinating November presentation with our readers in this issue of the Quarterly.

I. Perspective

As the year 1942 began, an Axis victory in World War II was a distinct possibility. The war was going badly for the Allies. The German Army, with its partners, occupied most of Europe and North Africa. American and British defenses in the Pacific and the Far East were crumbling before the Japanese onslaught. Despite the shock of their first Russian winter, the German *Wehrmacht*, one of the most formidable armies in world history, continued to deliver crushing blows to the Soviet Army. In the Atlantic, German submarines were sinking Allied shipping faster than it could be replaced. Flames from dying ships were a common sight from the boardwalk of Atlantic City. If the frail lifeline to the United Kingdom was severed, England could not long survive, and Europe would not be successfully liberated. America, whose infrastructure had been so weakened by the Depression, was now desperately retooling its economy for war, and once again attempting to build a competent and aggressive military. The challenge was almost insurmountable.

But as 1942 ground on, hope glimmered for the Allied cause. The naval Battle of Midway fundamentally changed the nature of the Pacific war, halting the Japanese offensive, and throwing their still-potent military onto the defensive. In Russia, the *Wehrmacht's* increasing momentum toward the Caucasus oil fields had bogged down in the city of Stalingrad, on the Volga River. 260,000 soldiers of the German Sixth Army began the attack on the city in the summer of 1942. By February 1943, only 91,000 had survived to be taken prisoner, and just 6,000 of those were able to endure Soviet captivity to return to their homeland years later.¹

By the fall of 1942, the British Eighth Army had finally cracked the *Deutsches Afrika Korps* at El Alamein, Egypt. This strategic victory launched an initial flow of tens of thousands of German and Italian prisoners of war to camps in the United Kingdom. By the time the American army invaded French North Africa in November 1942, an understanding had been crafted between Britain and the U.S. whereby all prisoners captured in northwest Africa would be "American owned."² With the unconditional surrender of all Axis forces in Africa on 9 May 1943, a virtual flood of German soldiers³ resulted, over the next five months, in the transportation of 113,397 *Afrika Korps* and other prisoners by ship into the United States⁴ for trans-shipment by rail to newly-built camps scattered throughout the interior parts of America.

Though the flow of German prisoners of war (PWs) into this country would continue unabated during each of the 31 months from November 1942 until the end of the European war in May 1945, this flood from North Africa represented the first of three peak entry periods. The second surge, during the six months following D-Day, the invasion of France in June 1944, brought an additional 170,508 German PWs to the U.S. During the final two-month period of the European war, April and May 1945, almost 60,000 more German prisoners entered this country.⁵ This last deluge was one of the largest month-by-month prisoner flows of the entire war. Just over 378,156 German prisoners of war,⁶ approximately 10% of all German PWs captured by U.S. forces,⁷ were transported to American shores during World War II. Transported thousands of miles from the battlefields across hostile seas, this mass of enemy prisoners would total more than *twice* the number of soldiers serving in the entire regular U.S. Army on the eve of America's entry into the conflict.⁸



German soldiers march into captivity, October 1944. An endless procession of *Wehrmacht* prisoners captured with the fall of Aachen, Germany, march through ruined city streets en route to PW enclosures where decisions on the locations of their further captivity would be made. Approximately 10% of German military personnel captured by the American army were transported to the United States. *National Archives and Records Administration.*

The Convoys

It must be understood that the need to transport the thousands of Axis prisoners of war, and the Allied convoy system, were inextricably linked. Since the opening of hostilities in 1939, the British and Canadians began applying lessons learned from the First World War to protect their lifeline of freighters, tankers, and troop ships from the scourge of the dreaded German U-boats. Convoys of from 25 to over 80 ships, ideally capable of traveling at the same speed, would cross the Atlantic protected by naval escorts assigned to defend these otherwise helpless merchantmen from the “wolfpacks.” When the U. S. joined the war effort, its navy and technology aided the frayed defenses of the U.K.’s lifeline.

A researcher studying the Battle of the Atlantic understands that, from 1939 into 1943, it remained in doubt whether England could actually be sustained. Consider that from January 1942 through May 1943, 2,029 Allied and neutral ships, totaling almost 10,000,000 tons, were sunk by the U-boats and the filthy weather of the North Atlantic. In one month alone, March 1943, ninety Allied and neutral ships were sunk in the Atlantic, at a cost of 538,000 tons of precious cargo destined for the war effort and the lives of thousands of sailors and passengers.⁹ Not until May of 1943, when U-boats and their crews were being sunk at a rate of one per day by increasing numbers of Allied naval vessels and aircraft, did the pendulum begin to swing inexorably in the Allies’ favor.¹⁰



An Allied convoy in heavy seas, *Battle of the Atlantic*. The World War II convoys from America were the lifeline to the United Kingdom, and the war effort in Europe. But the passage across the North Atlantic was brutal to ships and to men. Until mid-1943 it was uncertain who would win the Battle of the Atlantic; who won that battle would win the war. *National Archives and Records Administration*.

The ships comprising the eastbound convoys from the U.S. and Canada were loaded to the gunnels with troops and cargos of petroleum and all manner of materiel bound for the United Kingdom and the fighting forces. But once hastily unloaded, these same vessels, in their westbound return to America, generally traveled empty. The one cargo that a troop ship or freighter could carry west, and of which there was an increasingly endless supply, was prisoners of war. The tens of thousands of German PWs transported to America represented a human ballast for merchantmen that would otherwise have returned empty.

There were three East Coast ports to which convoys headed to disembark prisoners of war for trans-shipment by rail to the country's interior: Boston, New York City, and Hampton Roads, Virginia. Far and away the largest of these, both in capacity and actual volume, was the New York Port of Embarkation (NYPE): 600 individual ship anchorages able to accommodate ocean-going vessels; 650 miles of developed waterfront; 1,800 wharves, piers, and docks; 1,100 warehouses; and a complex grid of rail, road, and bridges linking the five boroughs of New York City with the seven cities on the New Jersey side of the harbor. Says Dr. Joseph F. Meany, former New York State Historian, and arguably the foremost expert of the NYPE: "It was by far the world's best and biggest natural harbor, and most of the world's major ports could easily be tucked into it."¹¹

The Railroads

By 1941, the Pennsylvania Railroad was generating 11% of all American railroad income. 4,500 locomotives, one out of every ten engines in the United States, bore the PRR keystone, along with 14% of the nation's freight cars, and over 15% of all passenger cars.¹² Interestingly, rail passenger traffic prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor in December, 1941 was at nearly the same level as in 1929, yet was carried by a quarter fewer cars than in that pre-Depression year.¹³ By the end of the first quarter of 1942, passenger demand had skyrocketed, and as the war continued the railroad was confronted with increasingly unprecedented volumes of civilian and military passengers.

Yet the ordinary American rail traveler, fast becoming accustomed to capacity conditions on every trip, generally had little conception of what was turning into one of the most significant components of wartime railroad volume – the movement of regiments, divisions and other military formations from one installation to another, or from bases to ports of embarkation, in thousands of special troop consists carrying the designation of MAIN trains (*Military Authorization Identification Number*). American railroads handled more than 95% of all troops transported within the U.S. during World War II. Almost 33,000,000 men were included in organized troop movements of 40 men or more.¹⁴ The complexity in coordinating the movement of hundreds of military units, often with all their equipment, was a staggering challenge to which the Army Transportation Corps, the Association of American Railroads (AAR), and the individual railroad companies responded in heroic measure.

From November, 1942 through May, 1945, over 235,000 German prisoners of war, 63% of the total German PWs entering the United States during World War II, arrived through the NYPE.¹⁵ The largest railroad serving the New York City market was the Pennsylvania Railroad,¹⁶ and it is estimated that almost two out of every three German PWs entering through the New York Port of Embarkation, some 150,000 recent combatants, traveled in part or in whole under PRR motive power on the Pennsy's right-of-way en route to one of 155 prisoner of war base camps and over 500 branch camps located throughout forty-five states.¹⁷ The majority of German soldiers transported on the Pennsy would pass through the small railroad town of Paoli, Pennsylvania, 19 miles west of Philadelphia.



PRR Passenger Station, Paoli, Pennsylvania. Paoli has been a “train town” from the earliest days of the Main Line of Public Works and the Philadelphia & Columbia Railroad in the 1830s. World War II proved to be the apex of the town’s railroad activity for at least three reasons: 1) the PRR’s passenger fleet, which incessantly headed eastbound toward New York City, did not actually stop in Center City Philadelphia - only at Paoli or North Philadelphia stations. Therefore, Paoli would serve thousands of long-distance passengers each month as the transfer point to the famed “Paoli Local” for continued service to the Main Line and Philadelphia; 2) the Paoli Car Shop maintained and serviced over 450 multiple-unit commuter cars from across the Pennsylvania Railroad’s system; 3) Paoli rises over 500’ above low-lying Philadelphia. The ceaseless eastbound freight and mineral consists destined for yards in Philadelphia 19 short miles downhill required each train to queue-up as brakemen prepared retainer valves on a certain number of cars on each train in order to prevent runaways during the steep descent toward the city. In this post-war image, one looks southwest past the westbound shelter, across the 4-track PRR Main Line to the eastbound passenger shelter and main station building above. The bridge in the background allows auto traffic on North Valley Road to connect with the famed Lincoln Highway. *Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society Archives.*

Preparations for Transporting PWs by Railroad

At America’s entry into the Second World War, the Pennsylvania Railroad was one of the nation’s largest roads (by some criteria the largest), and yet, on 18 February 1942, in an internal memo written by the Pennsy’s Chief of Passenger Transportation, in response to an Army Quartermaster General inquiry about the PRR’s preparedness for hauling prisoners of war, Mr. E. E. Ernest stated bluntly:

“We do not have **any** prison cars in our equipment, and there is nothing programmed with respect to equipping any cars in this manner.”¹⁸

By the end of 1942, the Army's Office of the Provost Marshal (PMGO) was deploying special units called Military Police Escort Guards (MPEGs), trained to accompany enemy PWs in any portion of their journey from battlefield containment pens, through ocean or railroad passage, to prisoner of war camps in the U.S.¹⁹ Yet it was not until early in 1943 that the War Department made initial distribution of a Technical Manual entitled *Enemy Prisoners of War*,²⁰ which provided explicit guidance on how each independent railroad company was to conduct satisfactory PW transportation.

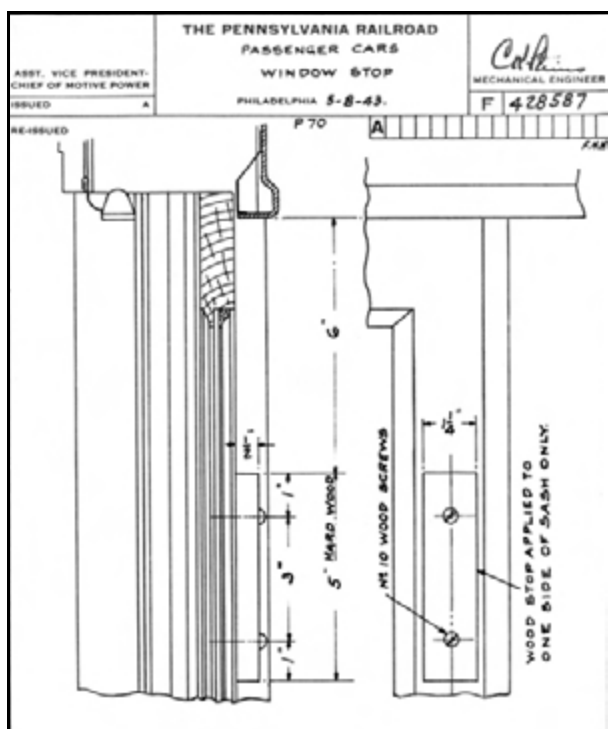
But there was little official dialogue between the War Department and individual railroads like the Pennsy. The role of intermediary was the responsibility of the American Association of Railroads (AAR), with additional policy administration under the purview of the federal Office of Defense Transportation. Once the military issued a directive on what it required concerning railroad transportation, the AAR interpreted that guidance to the individual railroads, and each company then in turn had to create the "hows" of implementation, translating every detail into specific operating orders applicable to that railroad's standing procedures and specific equipment. Not until 16 March 1943 did the Pennsylvania Railroad's management begin issuing orders to its operating divisions concerning the creation of a common PW hauling pool, and elucidating the specific modifications and procedures which would affect a significant number of Pennsy passenger cars and locomotives.²¹

From the scores of compliance stipulations applicable to the hauling of enemy prisoners of war issued by the Pennsylvania Railroad to its operating units, here are but five examples:

- The government required that all able-bodied PWs travel using the lowest-class transportation available. For the PRR, this translated to the following: "no cars other than straight P70s will be used for this service." Specifically, the P70 heavyweight day coaches specified for this service were to have no internal partitions to obstruct a guard's view of the prisoners, and each car would ideally be fitted with wooden (rather than metal) window frames. Such cars represented the road's oldest and least rehabilitated heavyweight coaches.
- Arrangements were to be made to provide and place a baggage car (or alternatively, a kitchen car) between the leading passenger car and the locomotive of the train.
- Most P70 day coaches had a restroom at each end of each car. When a coach was designated for use in PW service, the door of each restroom was to be removed from its hinges, covered with burlap or canvas to prevent defacement, and placed in the baggage car.
- All window frames on P70 "pool cars" were to have blocks installed on the outside in a precise PRR manner to prevent the windows from being opened more than five (later changed to six) inches above the sash. Should a coach be temporarily returned to commercial service, the window blocks could be easily removed without inflicting damage to the car.
- Superintendents were to consider prisoner of war transfers not as ordinary troop movements, but rather as "special movements," with all priority handling given to deliver the prisoners to their destinations.²²



Pennsylvania Railroad heavyweight P70 coach car. Beginning early in the 20th century, the Pennsylvania Railroad authorized initial construction of the all-steel, 80' long P70-class heavyweight coach car. By the beginning of the Second World War, over one thousand P70s served on the PRR's vast fleet, although many had been rebuilt and modernized to meet customer demand. This car shown, #1357, had been built in 1914 for the Pennsy by the Standard Steel Car Co., photographed at Sunnyside Yard, Queens, in 1936, and remained with its spartan, old-style seating arrangement. In 1943, when the War Department required railroad companies to contribute specifically modified coaches for PW transportation, the PRR selected the older, non-modernized P70s, such as #1357, which by that time had been almost completely relegated to branch line service. *Robert Liberstand Collection.*



PRR Installation Drawing for P70 Window Stop, 8 May 1943. Early in 1943 the U.S. Army's Office of the Provost Marshall General provided exacting guidance on what was required of each railroad involved in PW transportation. On 16 March 1943, the Pennsylvania Railroad began issuing explicit company interpretations of each War Department procedure for the modification, availability and operations of Pennsy passenger cars and locomotives to serve in a common prisoner-hauling pool. One such interpretation, issued by the Chief of Motive Power, demonstrates precisely how the windows of each P70 coach used for PW haulage must be modified for security reasons to prevent their being opened more than 5" above the sash. *Hagley Museum & Library.*

II. Just One More Prisoner of War Passage

From late 1942 through V-E Day, there were 336 trans-Atlantic convoys and other movements by which prisoners of war were transported from the active theaters of operation to the continental United States.²³ There were over two thousand railroad movements hauling PWs from the initial ports of embarkation to U.S. prisoner camps, with thousands more smaller movements as PWs were shifted within the “Zone of the Interior.” The procedure for transporting PWs began awkwardly and lacked coordination, but as the war continued and the flow of prisoners ballooned, experience refined the operation into remarkable efficiency.

Each of these PW passages from Theater of Operation to domestic prisoner camps followed general PMGO guidance, yet each stood unique in small aspects. The following account, tracked in significant detail, describes just one of these convoy and rail passages. It was one of a steady stream into the U.S. during the spring of 1945, when a westbound “UC fast convoy,” returning in ballast from the United Kingdom, was arriving into the New York Port of Embarkation with German prisoners of war every 3.5 days.²⁴

30 March – 2 April 1945

It is Friday, 30 March 1945. The German *Wehrmacht* is being remorselessly destroyed on two fronts. German cities are being pulverized, day and night, by American and British bombers. Though the war in Europe will officially end in less than 40 days, soldiers and civilians are daily dying by the thousands, and an endless flow of German prisoners of war march westward to the rear, most considering themselves fortunate indeed to have been captured by the Americans.

In the months since the invasion of Normandy in June 1944, more and more Allied ships from the ceaseless eastbound convoys are being routed directly into the newly-liberated French ports so that replacement troops and supplies can more quickly be rushed to the front to keep pressure on the enemy. Once unloaded, the ships are immediately routed to the U.K. to form westbound convoys headed back to America, only to do it all again.

In the French port city of Le Havre, the huge 24,000 ton former liner SS *Conte Biancamano*, now troop transport *U.S.S. Hermitage* (AP-54), has just completed disembarking over 5,000 U.S. officers and men which she has carried from New York. But even as the GIs are moving to the sprawling American “cigarette camps” outside the city before being sent east to the front, 2,802 German prisoners of war from one or more of 16 temporary PW collection pens near Le Havre are being trucked to the docks. With their U.S. Army MPEG detachment of four officers and 110 men,²⁵ each prisoner files aboard *Hermitage* and passes below decks to one of the thousands of three- to five-tiered canvas bunks. On each bunk is a blanket and a life jacket which doubles as a pillow.²⁶

78 miles west of Le Havre, at the ruined port city of Cherbourg, the much smaller U.S. Army Transport *Lakehurst*, an 8,000 ton vehicle transport ship which just completed the unloading of GIs, tanks and mechanized artillery, is now embarking “248 German prisoners, and 24 guards.”²⁷ And nearby in the harbor, the 7,900 ton ammunition ship SS *Ocean Mail*, which recently delivered ordnance from New York to Antwerp, is completing the loading of “500 German (enlisted) prisoners of war,” accompanied by their MPEG detachment.²⁸ While the conditions on liners and troop ships were spartan and often cramped, the accommodations for PWs aboard merchantmen and Liberty ships were even more crude. After filing on the deck of such a vessel, the prisoners were generally assigned to one of the freighter’s cargo holds, to remain there for the duration of the voyage either in hammocks fastened to the bulkheads, or directly upon the deck of the hold.²⁹ One former *Luftwaffe* paratrooper (*Fallschirmjäger*) recalls that, upon boarding the Liberty ship that was to transport him and fellow prisoners to the U.S., each PW was issued two wool blankets, and then ordered to climb down the vertical ladder into a hold just vacated by new Army tanks. The prisoners were told that they would sleep on the hold’s deckplates, and the blankets could be used as they wished either as a covering or a cushion.³⁰

Early the following morning, Saturday, 31 March, *Hermitage* departs, sailing the short passage north across the English Channel from Le Havre to the docks of Southampton, England, where, from that city's transit PW camp, an additional 152 German ambulatory prisoners are transferred aboard.³¹ With loading completed, *Hermitage* then navigates into the anchorage outside Southampton known as the Solent to join *Lakehurst* and *Ocean Mail*. The three ships now hold a total of 3,702 German prisoners of war, plus their escort guard detachments. These ships, together with 14 other empty vessels lying in the Solent, were under steam awaiting imminent sailing orders. The ship's masters had not long to wait.

By afternoon, *Hermitage*, the command ship for what was officially designated "fast convoy UC-62A," was underway along with its 16-ship Solent Section, steaming west through the English Channel into the gray Atlantic. Almost immediately a dense fog slowed the passage, and not until two days later, 2 April, was the convoy joined west of Cornwall by the additional 24 ships of its Irish Sea Section sailing out of Liverpool. Now Convoy UC-62A was complete, comprising four troopships, 13 freighters, and 24 tankers, along with their naval shepherds; a U.S. Navy destroyer and 5 destroyer escorts.³² One of the newly-joined cargo ships of the Irish Sea Section was SS *Santa Cecilia*, a 6,500 ton freighter that, on or about 30 March, had loaded from the docks of Cardiff, Wales,³³ 483 German prisoners of war from the British Army's Island Farm PW Camp at Bridgend.³⁴

2 April – 10 April 1945

Flanked by their naval escorts, the 41 ships of UC-62A steamed relentlessly at an average speed of 13.18 knots³⁵ through heavy seas on their 3,540 mile passage toward New York City. Plowing west through the brutal North Atlantic, each vessel continually altered its position in a tight choreography known as zigzagging in an attempt to thwart the few remaining German U-boats still on patrol. But for this early spring convoy, it was the hostile weather that had the power to create hazards almost as deadly as from German torpedoes. Fog is always a mariner's nightmare, and the threat of deadly collision presented a menace to the convoy throughout the passage.

The Voyage Report of the U.S. Navy's Armed Guard detachment aboard *Santa Cecilia* summarized the convoy's unremitting 11-day journey in a taciturn, seafaring way: "Routine voyage – weather poor, with moderate gales, much rain. Dangerous fog 18 hours out of destination."³⁶ But one not sufficiently familiar with sailing the North Atlantic in early springtime would have strongly disagreed with any suggestion of "routineness" on this passage. One naval historian, writing on the grim nature of the Battle of the Atlantic, stated: "The convoys struggled through the gales and heavy seas, which brought a rise in the number of weather-damaged ships, sometimes causing merchantmen to break up and sink without trace."³⁷

And what of the prisoners during the voyage? At least once per day, weather permitting, the captives were allowed on deck for 90 minute periods to get fresh air and stretch their legs.³⁸ But prisoner's diaries record contending day by day with continual seasickness; the bites and itching of lice which had plagued many of them at the front, and had often not been sufficiently eradicated at the French holding camps; poor shipboard ventilation; the claustrophobia from too much time confined below decks; and always the constant, fearful irony that a U-boat's torpedo could bring their survival through years of war to a horrible end.³⁹ For most, the strongest memories of their ocean voyage were the smells below deck, caused by too little fresh water for washing, too few toilets for too many men, and the sour stench of seasickness.⁴⁰

11 April 1945

Fog slowed the ships as they entered the Lower Bay of New York Harbor, and the shrill blasts of fog horns were continuous through the mists. At 1:30 p.m. EWT (Eastern War Time), the Commodore aboard *Hermitage* officially terminated the convoy, releasing each ship to act independently in making its way to its designated dockage or anchorage assignments.⁴¹ PWs were often allowed to congregate on deck for their first view of the United States, and it was usually this first view of New York City that overwhelmed their senses.

One German prisoner, in circumstances remarkably similar to the arrival of convoy UC-62A on 11 April, recalls his impressions of the spectacle that was New York Harbor:

“It was foggy that morning, but as the sun rose and the skyline of the city came into view, we all spoke at once in surprise that the huge skyscrapers and the Statue of Liberty were still standing. The Propaganda Ministry had told us that *Luftwaffe* air raids had leveled New York and other major American cities.”⁴² It was apparent that this had all been a lie.



The North River and Upper Bay, New York Harbor. Looking southward in this pre-WWII image by the Victor Dallin Aerial Survey Co. of Philadelphia, the North (Hudson) River flows toward the Upper Bay of New York harbor. Manhattan Island extends along the left of this image, while on the west bank the docks and train yards of Hoboken and Jersey City, New Jersey, are spread below. With its 1,800 wharves, piers, and docks spread along the waterfronts of two states, the New York Port of Embarkation was by far the world's best and biggest natural harbor. The majority of German PWs sent to the United States during WWII entered through the NYPE. The Port's sheer vibrancy made a profound first impression on those who had been told by Nazi propagandists that the city had been destroyed by the *Luftwaffe*. *Dallin Collection, Hagley Museum & Library.*

At 3:54 p.m. EWT, *Hermitage* cleared the anti-submarine nets which stood guard across the Narrows (which the Verrazano Narrows Bridge now spans), and sailed into the Upper Bay, passing the majestic Statue of Liberty at 4:28 p.m., and mooring at Pier 84, North River [at the foot of 44th Street, Midtown] at 5:50 p.m.⁴³ *Lakehurst* was ordered to an unrecorded pier on the Manhattan waterfront.⁴⁴ The two remaining PW-laden ships, *Ocean Mail* and *Santa Cecilia*, were directed to drop anchor in Liberty Anchorage,⁴⁵ just north of the “Lady of Liberty” off Bayonne, New Jersey.⁴⁶

By 7:45 that evening, Wednesday, 11 April, all ambulatory prisoners and other “protected personnel”⁴⁷ aboard *Hermitage* had been disembarked, and were en route to the expansive Halloran General Hospital on Staten Island.⁴⁸ All remaining able-bodied prisoners aboard *Hermitage* and the other three ships, along with their escort guard details, were ordered to remain aboard for one final night, until disembarkation the following morning.

As darkness fell upon “Gotham,” the prisoners’ amazement grew. All of Europe had been blacked out since the start of war in 1939. Yet here in America, life appeared as if the world was perfectly normal. The energy was palpable. One German prisoner recalls his emotions:

“It had grown dark, and what a spectacle now greeted our eyes. Everything was lit up as brightly as day, with neon advertising signs blinking on the skyscrapers before us. There was an amazing amount of loud traffic noises in the streets. It was overwhelming to us, since we had been used to only darkness at night. None of us slept that night; we stayed on deck as long as the guards allowed and enjoyed this unusual spectacle.”⁴⁹

Another prisoner bitterly contrasts what his senses were taking in with what would then be occurring in Germany:

“The wharf, the city, everything is brilliantly lighted. Hundreds of lights are reflected in the water. These people here have no idea what war means. Back home they may be sitting again in air raid shelters.”⁵⁰

12 April 1945

The morning of Thursday, 12 April, dawned with dense fog shrouding the Upper Bay. But as the mists began to burn off, disembarkation orders were issued to transfer the remaining 4,185 PWs from the ships of UC-62A to their reception processing.

The Army Quartermaster Corps had constructed a cavernous PW receiving center on Pier 84, North River Terminal,⁵¹ located adjacent to today’s USS Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum at Pier 86. The remaining PWs aboard *Hermitage*, *Lakehurst*, *Ocean Mail*, and *Santa Cecilia* were disembarked either to dockside, or by harbor ferry from the anchorages, and transported under guard either to the Pier 84 facility or to a smaller receiving center in Communipaw, a section of Jersey City, New Jersey.

Carrying their few personal possessions, the German prisoners found themselves at “a reception area inside an enormous tin-covered warehouse built right on the dock.”⁵² The prisoners were generally in rough condition: streams of men, by this stage of the war often very young or very old, with long, unkempt hair, many with unshaven faces, in filthy and often tattered gray-green uniforms and caps, and boots of many varieties. Many of the prisoners continued to wear their long, heavy, and still mud-spattered woolen *Wehrmacht* overcoats.⁵³

It was always the U.S. Army’s intention that prisoners of war confined within the holding pens in the theaters of operation be thoroughly deloused before shipment to America. But as the war ground on, and the flow of prisoners mushroomed, the holding camps became over-crowded, and the policy was not rigorously enforced. As a result, prisoners were commonly infested with lice upon their arrival at U.S. ports.⁵⁴ War Department guidance was therefore very firm that, upon arrival at any U.S. disembarkation point, and before transshipment by rail to any destination camp, all prisoners of war were to be immediately disinfected and then administratively processed.⁵⁵

Under the eye of military police, the prisoners were again searched, divided into groups of 50, and herded into large rooms. With regimented if immodest efficiency, each PW was handed two large mesh bags and two receipt tags, ordered to strip naked, and told to place all clothing into one bag; and leather boots, belts, wallets,

and personal papers into the other.⁵⁶ The bags were sent to delousing chambers, after which the uniforms were laundered.⁵⁷ The prisoners filed to long shower rooms with hot water, and each was issued a bar of strong soap and a clean towel.⁵⁸ Most German soldiers had not taken a hot shower for months, and amidst billows of steam, a thorough washing to remove both grime and lice was the most human of pleasures.

The prisoners were then sprayed with the pesticide DDT, and those with long hair received rough haircuts. Doctors provided brief medical examinations to assure that lice were gone, skin diseases controlled, and smallpox and typhoid inoculations provided.⁵⁹ The PWs were then re-assembled to await the return of their bags of disinfected items and, once received, dressed in their now clean and louse-free uniforms.

Despite efforts to process prisoners in the European collection pens or onboard ship, many PWs still arrived in the United States either partially or wholly unprocessed.⁶⁰ After fingerprinting, the issuance of serial numbers if not already assigned, and the compilation of personal information from each prisoner, the PWs were moved to large holding rooms, generally given a meal, and there awaited their rail transport orders. Sometime around midday of 12 April, hundreds of these newly-processed prisoners were marched to waiting harbor ferries for a three-mile trip down the North River to a Pennsylvania Railroad freight yard in Jersey City to await the continuation of their journey into captivity.

The *Clevelander* to New York

While thousands of newly arrived German prisoners were spending a final, sleepless night in New York harbor, a 29-year-old Pennsylvania Railroad fireman assigned to the Philadelphia Division was awakened about 1:45 a.m., 12 April 1945, by a shrill telephone ringing at his home in Mechanicsburg, PA. It was a PRR crew clerk telling the fireman, Eugene Steffy, to report to the Harrisburg yard office for a 3:25 a.m. “sign up.” Steffy had joined the Pennsy in 1942, and, with little seniority, was now bidding for jobs on what was called the fireman’s passenger extra list. That meant that the Harrisburg crew clerk could call him at home anytime, night or day, with orders to report on a “short call,” meaning that Steffy was required to be at the yard within 1½ to two hours after the call was received. In this early morning call, the clerk’s message was cryptic and succinct: “3:25 for 2nd 38.”⁶¹

One of the Pennsylvania Railroad’s much-traveled passenger trains was the *Clevelander*: official designation, train #38. It departed Cleveland, Ohio, every evening at 8:00 p.m. and arrived at Pennsylvania Station, New York City, 12 hours later. During the war, however, passenger travel was so congested that frequently there were far more ticketed passengers for a particular train than scheduled capacity available. Pending permission from the wartime Office of Defense Transportation, the railroad would often create a second train, an “extra,” to carry the overflow passengers. This extra train was called the second section, and would follow only moments behind the original train, making the same station stops as the first. Thus, the second section of the *Clevelander* was called 2nd 38.

Steffy drove the several miles through spring darkness to Harrisburg Yard and signed his time slip at the office at 3:25 a.m. He then traveled the short distance to the engine house on Maclay Street, where he met the engineer with whom he would work that day. Harold Duncan also worked on the passenger extra list, but was attached to the Pennsy’s New York Division. Gene and Harold had worked together before, and the men walked companionably together to the inspection pit where they climbed aboard the sleek GG1 electric locomotive #4819. After completing all routine checks, the enginemen waited patiently in the engine’s cab for eastbound 2nd 38 to arrive into Harrisburg Station at around 4:30 a.m. The *Clevelander*, and its trailing extra, had each traveled through the night under steam power. Upon arrival into Harrisburg station, #4819, attached to the overhead electric catenary, replaced the steam locomotive and was coupled to the extra passenger consist. Moments later, 2nd 38 was eastbound in the pre-dawn darkness en route to New York City.

The *Clevelander* made a brief station stop at the small but important railroad town of Paoli, located 19 miles west of Philadelphia, just before first light at 6:02 a.m. Two hours later, the train arrived at Pennsylvania Station, New York City, at 8:10 a.m.⁶² Once all passengers had de-trained, Harold and Gene pulled their empty consist through the East River tunnel to the enormous Sunnyside coach and electric engine yard in the borough of Queens. After the enginemen had climbed down from GG1 #4819, Gene recorded in his timebook that he had signed off at 8:55 a.m. Railroad rules required that before an engineman could be called to “sign on” for a return trip, he had to be off-duty for at least two hours of rest.

The Meadows Yard

About 11:00 a.m. the Sunnyside crew clerk instructed the now-rested Duncan and Steffy to report to the Meadows engine yard in South Kearny, New Jersey, by 1:00 p.m. to pick up a locomotive slated to haul a MAIN [Military Authorization Identification Number] troop train west to Harrisburg. The Meadows engine house serviced steam locomotives for both freight and passenger service. The Sunnyside clerk provided the enginemen no other details of the next assignment, or the location of the MAIN consist.



Hudson & Manhattan Railroad right-of-way through Journal Square, Jersey City. Even though the PRR had built dedicated freight tracks north of the Bergen Hill Cut to connect the Meadows freight yards with those of Harsimus Cove, this bypass was not used by the enginemen on K4s #8373 on 12 April 1945 to join with the PW consist. Instead, the signals guided the engine through the congested, third-rail interlocking which passes under Journal Square Plaza, Jersey City, and used by the Hudson & Manhattan transit trains. Eleven years later, K4s #1453 is shown moving slowly on the right-of-way: exactly the journey Steffy had described from the Meadows to the Cove. Despite the passage of time, the scene evokes Mr. Steffy’s description: “very congested . . . adjacent 3rd rail . . . H&M passenger cars in abundance.” *The John Dziobko, Jr. Collection.*

As directed, Duncan and Steffy arrived at the Meadows crew office, signed their time slips at 1:00 p.m., and were told the details of their assignment. They were to pick up engine #8373, a 4-6-2 Pacific K4s “Lines West” locomotive with a stoker-equipped tender. They were to back the engine and tender the five miles east from the Meadows yard through Jersey City to the PRR freight yard at Harsimus Cove on the North River, directly across from Lower Manhattan. The signals would direct them to a pre-positioned consist of passenger coaches within the freight yard to which they would couple. Once the cars were loaded with authorized military personnel, #8373 would haul that MAIN train to Harrisburg. Their briefing completed, the enginemen walked to the nearby locomotive, completed their routine checks and awaited the signal to move off the engine track toward the “Cove.”⁶³

The Meadows to Harsimus Cove

K4s #8373 began its reverse crawl east through Jersey City around 2:00 p.m., the small 9,000-gallon tender making rear visibility relatively easy. Even though there were separate freight tracks north of the Bergen Hill Cut that would have bypassed the congested, third-rail interlocking through Journal Square used by the Hudson & Manhattan transit trains,⁶⁴ that was not the route by which the signals guided the enginemen that day. So, with bell sounding, and eyes focused on signals, the locomotive crept eastbound at about 15 miles an hour.



Harsimus Stem Embankment and the PRR Freight Yard, Jersey City. Diagonally bisecting this image, the Harsimus Stem Embankment, an elevated stone conduit 100 feet wide and six blocks long, facilitated the east - west linkage through downtown Jersey City between the Meadows classification yard in South Kearny with the Harsimus Cove Yard on the North River. Also in view along the River is the PRR’s massive Harborside Terminal and, across, the skyline of Lower Manhattan. *Jersey City Public Library.*

Meeting The Passenger Consist in the Cove

The Harsimus Cove freight yard extended across a half-mile frontage on the North River, from Pier M, with its complex of coal wharves and slaughterhouses at the northern end, to the PRR's Exchange Place commuter station on the south. Following the signals through the labyrinth of the Cove's classification yard, #8373 closed with the waiting consist of thirteen P70 heavyweight coaches lined up near the river in the center of the freight yard, near Pier J.⁶⁶ The coaches were old-style P70s, with their spartan seating arrangement for 88 passengers, which by the beginning of the war had been almost completely relegated to branch line service. The cars stood in the open, with no platform or other passenger amenities. Interestingly, in an unexplained deviation from standard War Department policy for such MAIN trains, Steffy specifically recalled the absence of the required baggage car that would normally have been coupled at the front-end of the consist.



Pennsylvania Railroad Harsimus Cove Yard, Jersey City, NJ. In this 1955 image, the Yard is virtually unchanged from its wartime appearance: the central portion of the Harsimus Cove freight yard spreads out along the North River, from Pier F (from right to left) to Pier K. The right-of-way leading to Pier J was the location of the pre-positioned passenger consist used to haul German prisoners of war westbound on the afternoon of 12 April 1945. *Adapted from an image in the Pennsylvania State Archives.*

As the engine and tender closed on the waiting consist, several trainmen, undoubtedly the three-man PRR crew of conductor, brakeman, and flagman assigned to accompany the MAIN train on its journey west, stood ready. The jobs of coupling, air connection, and brake testing were completed routinely. While the conductor and his crew checked the mechanical aspects of the cars, soldiers were also busily examining the coaches, loading food (either sandwiches or Army rations)⁶⁷ and water aboard, and making final adjustments to the boarding plan. Once the Pennsy conductor declared this MAIN train mechanically ready for travel, he informed the military train commander who, in turn, gave orders to his soldiers that the passengers should begin loading onto the train. [A note of explanation: by railroad practice, the conductor is responsible for all aspects of "his" train, and is considered the "boss" of that train. However, on all MAIN trains, War Department regulations required the

assignment of a military officer, usually an Army lieutenant, as the individual held accountable for the military passengers, their baggage, and many other details of the journey to its conclusion. This officer bore the title of Military Train Commander.⁶⁸ Not surprisingly, turf battles between the railroad conductor and the military train commander occurred frequently.]

It was now just after 3:00 p.m. No other passenger consists were evident in the freight yard. With a length of 80 feet each, the thirteen P70 coaches extended over 1000 feet from the riverfront to the locomotive's cab. But fireman Steffy vividly recalled looking back toward the river, with the silhouette of Lower Manhattan's skyscrapers, and describes what he saw next:

"The dispatcher at the Meadows had told us that we had a MAIN train, but we didn't realize that they were POWs until we saw those poor fellas coming from the boat. The guards were well-armed, and we saw them move the prisoners toward the cars. Looking at them, I remember thinking that the Germans were really 'scraping bottom'. I noticed the prisoner's haggard appearance, and the poor condition of the uniforms they were wearing. There was nobody dressed alike - just any which way.

"They marched the prisoners to the train, loading them into the last 3 or 4 cars, and then apparently marching them through the train toward the front. None of them approached close enough to board the cars nearest to the engine."⁶⁹



German prisoners board a train at a U. S. Port of Embarkation. *Wehrmacht* soldiers had long been accustomed to rail travel in poorly-heated, 50-man boxcars. So, after arriving at an American Port of Embarkation and completing their in-processing procedures, German prisoners, here shown in an undated Signal Corps image boarding old heavyweight steel coaches and guarded by American MPs, were amazed to travel into captivity in relative luxury. *National Archives and Records Administration.*

Steffy's description mirrors PMGO procedures for loading PWs for a trans-shipment. By channeling prisoners into rail coaches nearest the boat docks, and filling the cars internally from back to front, opportunity for escape is minimized and fewer guards are required.⁷⁰ Though these old-style P70s had an 88-passenger capacity, it was military policy to fill three seats for every four available when conducting long-haul PW transport. Soon each of the first 12 cars contained about 66 German prisoners, plus generally two armed guards per car who would rotate in shifts throughout the journey. As we shall learn, the last car held a somewhat different manifest.

By 1945, because of the small number of PW escape attempts during the transport phase of captivity, coupled with the critical need for shifting more MP personnel to the theaters of operation, the PMGO had significantly reduced the authorized ratio of escort guards used to oversee PWs in their rail journey to the camps.⁷¹ Considering relief requirements for what would be a several day journey, the MPEG section was approximately 55 enlisted and NCO personnel, plus the officer acting as train commander. This reduced ratio of guards to prisoners, compared to earlier in the war, was statistically justified, for by this time all but the most hardcore prisoners felt lucky just to have survived, and the desire for escape was generally uncommon. That said, ever since 18 September 1944, when a German PW being escorted from a harbor ferry to a train at nearby Exchange Place station was shot by a guard while trying to escape in front of startled commuters,⁷² most prisoner transfers had been quietly shifted to open, less-public freight yards like the Cove.

For the prisoners, the last 24 hours since they arrived in New York Harbor had etched surprising and often emotional impressions on these men hardened by war and ideology: the first sight of the Statue of Liberty in the ironic context of their lack of freedom; the largest seaport in the world not only undamaged by war, but seeming to thrive on it; and the highly efficient and generally respectful treatment by Americans toward their enemies. But, for many prisoners, the greatest amazement was directed at the trains which were to afford the men their first vision of heartland America.

Throughout the years of war in Europe and Russia, *Wehrmacht* soldiers had long been accustomed to the German military practice of shifting combat units in spare, 50-man boxcars.⁷³ So it was in the context of their military experience that one PW recalls consternation and confusion when he and fellow prisoners are ordered to load onto their first train in America:

“It was clear to us that we would be loaded in a boxcar and sent to the interior of the country somewhere. A train with large passenger coaches pulled in. I said, “My God! What kind of a train is that?” I could not imagine that the train was for us. All of a sudden the guard, an American, stood up and said, ‘Come on, let's go, go in.’ For us that was the most unlikely thing possible, that prisoners would travel in such coaches . . . The first ones who were shoved into the car said, ‘Back, back, those are upholstered coaches. Certainly they are for the guards.’ So those ahead rushed back and those at the back rushed forward. The guards could not understand. It was clear to the Americans that we were to go into the train, and it was clear to us that we would go by boxcar, not in passenger coaches.”⁷⁴

Only after the prisoners comprehended that it was *they* who would be transported in these “luxurious, first-class railcars,” with upholstered seats, did they obediently follow their guard's orders.

Another prisoner recalls his experience:

“. . . three men [occupied] four seats, leaving the fourth seat empty. The windows were designed to be opened only a crack. At either end of each car was a toilet and a washroom, and in the aisle a water cooler on each side with ice water and paper cups. The seats were very comfortable. The sentries hardly had room to stand [one at each end of each car]. We [grew to] pity them having to stand guard in [mind-numbing] two-hour shifts at the door, and having to keep an eye on us when we went to the toilet.”⁷⁵

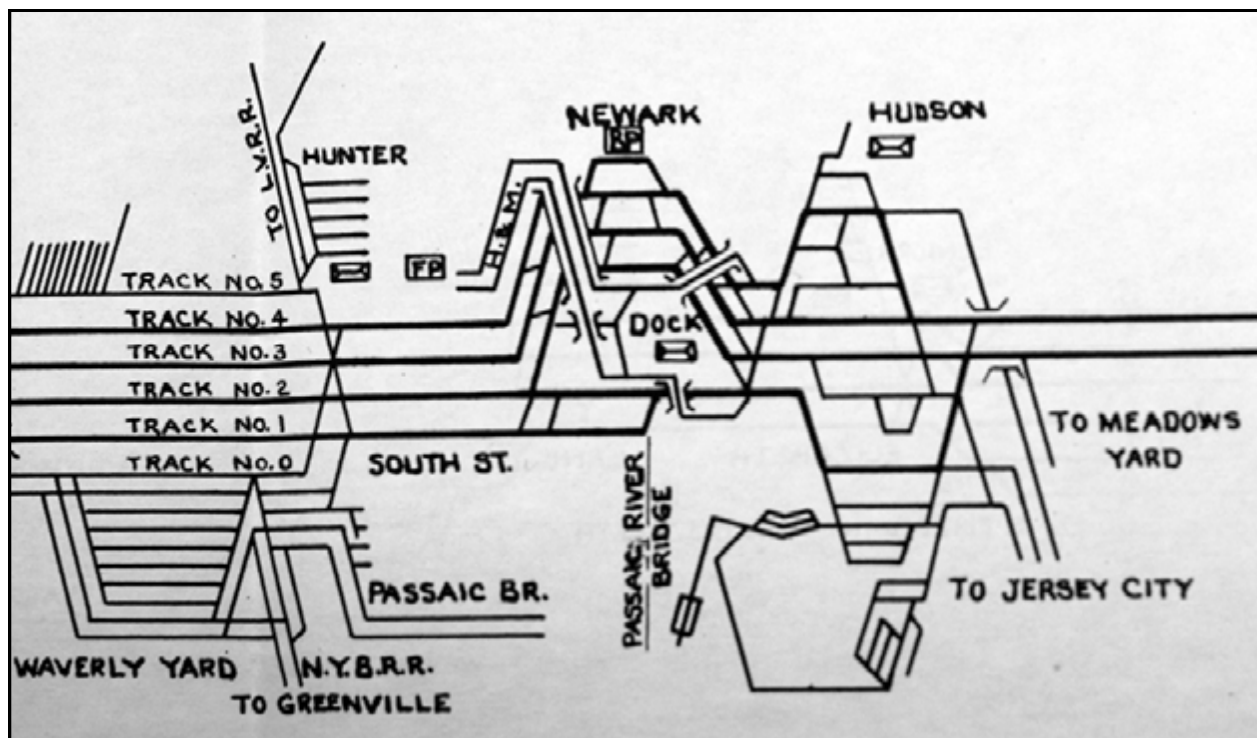
Soon after the prisoners were seated, a German-speaking American entered each coach in turn to read the five rules of travel that would be strictly enforced during the next several days:

1. You will stay in your seats in this coach until we reach our destination.
2. You will eat and sleep here.
3. You will raise your left hand when you must go to the toilet, and wait to be recognized by the guard.
4. You will raise your right hand when you want a drink of water, and only one will be permitted out of his seat at a time.
5. Who feels sick should indicate to the guards by raising both hands.⁷⁶

Departure from Harsimus Cove for Philadelphia

The time was now approaching 4:30 p.m. With the train secured, and almost 850 German prisoners of war plus their MPEG detachment aboard, engineer Duncan was finally given clearance to begin the journey west out of the Harsimus railyard. The train's next destination was Harrisburg, and that was all the railroad crew was told, or needed to know. The prisoners were of course told nothing of their final destination. One former prisoner recalled his impressions, years later, of his departure from Jersey City:

“The windows were . . . just a hand's breath open, but we were able to see many things of the New World, of ‘God's Own Country’. So many different impressions in just one day. I was sucking them like a thirsty sponge.”⁷⁷



Portion of 1945 Track Chart for the PRR's New York Division. Shown is the extremely complex portion of trackage and interlockings extending from approximately Mile 6 to Mile 12 of the New York Division's Main Line connection from Penn Station, New York City (to the right) west toward Philadelphia. One can follow the PW train's route from Jersey City as it junctions with the Main Line at Hudson interlocking, then slowly passes west through Newark Station until given a *Clear* at the Hunter interlocking tower. Locating this 1945 Track Chart & Profile for the New York Division Main Line with Mr. Steffy at the Pennsylvania Archives in Harrisburg in 2010 brought him particular satisfaction, because it outlines the exact track configuration which he described. *Pennsylvania State Archives*.

The prisoner of war train made its slow crawl over the nine congested miles of track from the Cove to the Hudson interlocking, the junction with the New York Division's multi-track main line to Philadelphia and beyond.⁷⁸ Once the train reached the Hudson tower, and then passed through Newark Station westbound toward Philadelphia, K4s #8373 was directed to the inside #3 track three miles west of Newark at the Hunter interlocking. The speed limit now opened up to 70 m.p.h., and as Steffy recalled, "Hunter is where we really started to 'railroad'." Roaring over the track pans at Rahway and Bristol allowed the train to "scoop water" to replenish the tender's reservoir.

This passage out of Jersey City onto the New York Division Main Line brought the prisoners an eye-opening reality far different from the distorted claims of Nazi propaganda. Unlike Germany, where by this time virtually every city had been devastated by bombing and shelling, the passing urban landscape here was unscathed, and manufacturing plants were churning out an unprecedented flood of materials. But, as described in one prisoner's entry, it was the seemingly countless civilian automobiles that brought astonishment to many PWs:

"Curious to us were the large numbers of cars and trucks on the roads and parked near factories and other large commercial buildings. At first we thought we were passing automobile plants. But very soon we were surprised to see large numbers of cars even in the fields, orchards, and in parking lots. We knew then that many Americans could afford to own an automobile. Obviously, the distance between the continents was greater than just miles."⁷⁹

While the enginemen had not been specifically advised that their train had an expedited priority, it was evident that the railroad was well aware of the War Department's policy that PW trains were to be considered "special movements." As #8373 roared non-stop from Hunter, track #3 was clear and nothing held them up. Nothing, that is, until the train approached North Philadelphia.

Incident at North Philadelphia

The Philadelphia Division's Main Line between North Philadelphia station and the interlocking referred to as the "Zoo" (adjacent to the Philadelphia Zoo) was one of the most congested pieces of right-of-way on the entire Pennsylvania Railroad. At any time between those two points, one might see freight coming off the "High Line," passenger trains approaching from Washington or from the west, and commuter trains crossing-over on the Chestnut Hill line at North Philadelphia. Add to this the sheer volume of wartime traffic, and a busy evening "rush hour," and even the government's special handling regulations could be derailed. This would be such an evening.

Several miles northeast of North Philadelphia, the cab signals within #8373 changed from *Clear* (full allowable speed) to *Approach Medium* (begin reducing speed), and soon again to *Approach* (reduce to medium speed and be prepared to stop at the next signal). A moment later the signal changed yet again, now indicating that this MAIN train, carrying hundreds of Hitler's veterans in full combat uniform, was actually going to make a surprise stop at the North Philadelphia passenger station.

Any schedule deviation of a PW train was unwelcome, because the security risks increased markedly. The conductor immediately notified the Military Train Commander of this unexpected stop, who in turn ordered armed "screen guards" to prepare to immediately exit the train for the duration of the stop to prevent potential escapes.

The train pulled alongside the long station platform, adjacent to the inside #3 track, to await what turned out to be the cross-over of a Chestnut Hill Local. As the train came to a halt, MPs with weapons at the ready quickly stepped out of several vestibule doors to stand on the platform facing the train. The crowd of waiting civilian passengers upon the platform, startled by the sudden appearance of armed soldiers, would have looked more carefully at what had been presumed to be a "normal passenger train," only to see, through the large coach windows, hundreds of German soldiers in gray-green uniforms looking back at them. The time was approxi-



K4s arriving at North Philadelphia station. During World War II, North Philadelphia was a principal station stop for all PRR north-south passenger service, as well as all east-west trains routed through the congested Zoo interlocking. This heavily-used station, located on North Broad Street at Glenwood Avenue, was the unscheduled stopping point for the PW MAIN train hauled by K4s #8373 on the evening of 12 April 1945. Looking north in this 1955 image, with the platform and adjacent trackage looking virtually identical to its wartime appearance, K4s #5351, hauling a train from New Jersey, makes an early evening station stop. *Adapted from an image in the Frank Tatnall Collection.*

mately 6:00 p.m., the height of the rush hour. This unplanned delay would be short, just a few moments. But in those several minutes, an announcement would change everything.

A PRR car inspector walked hurriedly along the raised platform toward the locomotive. Approaching the cab, he excitedly asked the enginemen if they had heard the news? *“The President is dead !”* Only someone who has experienced hearing such a startling announcement can understand the personal shock, and momentary uncertainty, that Harold Duncan and Gene Steffy, and all Americans, felt upon hearing the news of Franklin Roosevelt’s passing during this time of war. At 4:35 p.m. on Thursday, 12 April 1945, 63-year-old President Franklin Roosevelt died suddenly of a massive cerebral hemorrhage at his retreat in Warm Springs, GA. The White House announced his death to the nation at 5:48 p.m. EWT,⁸⁰ just moments before #8373 pulled into North Philadelphia station. The car inspector hurried down the platform, continuing his duties and no doubt sharing his grim news with passengers and MPs alike. And on this beautiful, warm spring evening, it is almost assured that at least several of the windows in each passenger coach had been raised by the prisoners to their allowable limit to let in fresh air. A surprising number of German soldiers had some fluency in English, and it would have taken only one prisoner, overhearing the car inspector’s monumental news, to create an explosion of speculation from one end of the train to the other.

North Philadelphia to Harrisburg

Within a very few moments after stopping at North Philadelphia station, the prisoners' journey across America resumed as the signal again instructed the engineer to continue. The screen guards returned inside their cars, and the train proceeded south across the Schuylkill River, and west through the New York-Pittsburgh tunnel. Passing out at the west end of the "Zoo Junction" at 40th Street, south of Fairmount Park, the train merged onto the westbound Philadelphia Main Line, and was soon shifted onto the inside #3 track at Overbrook on its run toward Harrisburg.⁸¹

It is a good uphill pull from Overbrook toward the 521' elevation at Paoli, but one neatly done by the K4s locomotive. The cab signals once again showed *Clear*, and the speed limit on #3 track was 60 m.p.h. The train roared west through Philadelphia's famed Main Line, and Steffy clearly recalled seeing American flags being adjusted to half staff from his fireman's seat. #8373 passed through Paoli at about 6:45 p.m., just over twelve hours since Duncan and Steffy's eastbound passage. Tired workers leaving owl-eyed MP54 commuter cars, and local residents sitting down to their dinners, would have had no idea that at that very moment hundreds of German combat veterans were passing through town. That was exactly what the War Department intended.

The westbound train continued non-stop, the tender again scooping water "on the run" from the Atglen waterpan five miles west of Parkesburg. The authorized passenger speed limit was now 75 m.p.h. In 1991, in an article about his wartime service published in the PRR Technical & Historical Society's *Keystone*, Steffy recalled:

"... as we roared through Leaman Place nearing the bottom of Gap Hill, I caught Harold's eye as he smiled and said, 'Maybe I'd better pinch her down a bit for the curve at Gordonville.' Yes, those POWs were getting quite a ride."⁸²

In the nine miles of track from Atglen, Chester County, through Smoketown, Lancaster County, are a series of eight curves, two of them significant 4-degree "limiting curves." Leaman Place is a tiny community 47 miles east of Harrisburg, where today the Strasburg tourist railroad intersects with Amtrak's right-of-way. The stretch of rail where "those PWs got quite a ride" extends 1.5 miles west beyond the Route 30 overpass at Leaman Place. Eighteen years after his *Keystone* article, Mr. Steffy remarked to this author: "The left-leaning Gordonville Curve was a rather mild forty minute curve with no speed restriction in the time table. We were allowed 75 mph, but I'm quite sure that as we came down toward Paradise we were going more than that." Duncan's use of a little air brake emphasized safety first.

As the train roared through the peaceful evening in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, Steffy recalled: "It wasn't yet dark when we went through Leaman Place. There was still daylight." Early in World War II, President Roosevelt had instituted year-around Daylight Saving Time, called "War Time," and on that spring evening the sky was exceptionally clear, allowing for excellent visibility. On 12 April 1945, sunset in the city of Lancaster was recorded at 7:40 pm EWT.⁸³

The PW train passed through Harrisburg station a bit after 8:00 p.m. and entered the train yard at what was one of the most hectic periods of the day. The heaviest flow of regularly-scheduled westbound passenger service from Penn Station, New York, departed each afternoon under electric power. But the electric grid, the catenary, which provided current to electric locomotives like the GG1, ended in Harrisburg. So every one of those passenger trains arriving at this time of the evening required an engine change from electric to steam before they could continue their journeys toward the Midwest.

Though this MAIN train was arriving under steam, both an engine and a crew change were scheduled. After being signaled to a siding, armed MPs exited the train on either side as flank guards. A utility man "cut off" #8373 from the thirteen P70s with little delay. Enginemen Duncan and Steffy moved their locomotive and tender away, awaiting space at the pit—and their sign-off. A new engine crew stood by in their locomotive for



PRR K4s locomotive heads up a consist of P70 passenger coaches. This image of Pennsy K4s #5417 hauling a commuter train for the New Jersey shore in February, 1954, is instructive when recalling the MAIN train hauling German PWs nine years earlier. On the afternoon of 12 April 1945, when a consist of thirteen P70 coaches led by K4s #8373 pulled out of the PRR Harsimus Cove freight yard with 830 PWs aboard, a War Department procedure had not been followed. For reasons uncertain, the standard policy requiring a baggage car to be coupled between the tender and first coach was ignored for the first leg of the journey west. *The John Dziobko, Jr. Collection.*

coupling, and a fresh conductor, brakeman, and flagman prepared to join the train to begin the next leg to an undisclosed destination. Duncan and Steffy had completed a good day's work. But Gene's question lingered: "Where were those fellas headed?"

III. The Prisoner's Destinations

Now, after 65 years, this author believes the German prisoners on this train were routed to one of two camp destinations.

On 7 April 1945, four days before the arrival into New York harbor of convoy UC-62A, the PMGO had distributed *Immediate Action Order SPMGO (33) 253.91*, marked *SECRET*, providing the makeup and distribution of the convoy's German prisoners of war, and their intended camp destinations within the states of Arkansas, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Texas. The largest contingent of "able bodied" prisoners from the convoy, 1,922 *Wehrmacht* non-commissioned officers, were ordered for transportation into the custody of Prisoner of War Camp, Huntsville, Texas.⁸⁴ This author believes that about 792 of these NCOs had been loaded aboard the first 12 cars of the MAIN train that departed the Cove that afternoon of 12 April.



Interior of old-style, heavyweight P70 passenger coach. An example of a non-modernized Pennsylvania Railroad P70 heavyweight coach is #1006, today residing at the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania in Strasburg. Originally built in 1928 by the Standard Steel Car Co. as PRR #3433, it still retains its old-style walkover seating arrangement with a maximum capacity of 88 passengers. Yet, “spartan arrangements” are in the eye of the beholder, and many a German PW marveled at this example of American luxury. *Image provided by the author.*

By the end of the European war, over 600 prisoner-of-war camps had been constructed in all but three U.S. states.⁸⁵ Texas, with 70 camps, had twice as many as any other state and would hold approximately 10% of all prisoners held in the Zone of the Interior.⁸⁶ By April of 1945, Camp Huntsville had a capacity of 4,800 prisoners and was the third largest PW camp in Texas.⁸⁷ Beginning in mid-1943, and over the next two years, the Pennsylvania Railroad hauled scores of “prisoner trains” from the New York Port of Embarkation along the route to Huntsville Base Camp. The 1,800 mile journey took the prisoners through Paoli, Harrisburg, and Pittsburgh, and on to the St. Louis gateway. The consists were then coupled to motive power of the Missouri Pacific Railroad en route to Texarkana, TX; then via the Texas & Pacific Railroad to Longview, TX; and finally to the camp’s nearest railhead, Riverside, TX, on the International–Great Northern right-of-way.⁸⁸ Once the prisoners had detrained, the coaches were urgently “deadheaded” back to Jersey City or Sunnyside Yard for servicing and imminent use for a PW “haul” from another fast convoy.⁸⁹

But this author also believes that the last coach heading west out of the Cove the afternoon of 12 April contained an additional 50 specially-selected PWs chosen by the Army’s Intelligence Department (G-2) for priority handling at another destination. *Immediate Action Order 253.91* directs 45 Army personnel and five Naval personnel be chosen by G-2 from among the convoy’s German prisoner complement and sent immediately “to the custody of Prisoner of War Camp, Pine Grove Furnace, Pennsylvania.”

Pine Grove Furnace Prisoner of War Interrogation Camp was located deep within the Allegheny Mountain Range 18 miles southwest of Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and served as a secret facility specifically used by Army

Intelligence. The camp had a capacity of 1,500 PWs and each prisoner sent to the camp would generally remain for only a few weeks of detailed interviewing before being transferred on to a permanent camp assignment.⁹⁰ Upon arrival in Harrisburg Yard that evening of 12 April, the 50 specially-selected prisoners were de-trained from the trailing P70 coach under heavy guard and marched to several waiting Army buses that transported them and their camp guards the 32 miles over winding, mountainous roads to remote Pine Grove Furnace Camp in eastern Cumberland County.

Six and a half decades later, "Mother Nature" has completely enveloped the 200-acre former site of Pine Grove Furnace Prisoner of War Interrogation Camp, and little evidence remains today.

The usual consist of a MAIN train hauled by a single K4s was 14 cars. Based upon the requirements cited in the 1943 PRR guidance entitled *Instructions for Furnishing and Preparing Equipment for the Movement of Prisoners of War*, this author believes that a modified baggage car, or kitchen car, was coupled in front of the leading passenger coach before the engine change in the Harrisburg yard. This addition would not only have enabled the preparation of hot food for both prisoners and escort guards during the three-day journey, but would have provided much-needed storage space for prisoner's bundles and other gear.⁹¹ The last P70 coach, vacated by the special prisoners bound for Pine Grove Furnace Camp, almost certainly remained connected to the original consist all the way to Riverside, Texas for use by the off-duty escort guards and the train crew.

As the transfer of the 50 "special" PWs was being completed, frenzied activity continued that evening in the Harrisburg Yard to prepare this MAIN train for the swift continuation of its passage. The replacement engine and tender was now coupled to the baggage car, the additional supplies and perishable food had been loaded aboard, and the crew change effected. Soon, the signal directed the "PW train" out of the yard. Crossing the Susquehanna River over the Rockville Bridge, the train thundered west into the night through the PRR's Middle Division.

IV. End of Internment and Repatriation

The war in Europe ended on VE Day, 8 May 1945, less than a month after convoy UC-62A's arrival in New York. Each prisoner's natural preoccupation about when he might return home now became an obsession. But few German PWs could have guessed that once hostilities had ended, most would continue to provide their labor in the United States for up to an additional year. And then, after finally sailing from America for what they presumed to be their voyage home, the majority would instead serve additional months or even years in post-war cleanup in England, France, or Belgium before at last being allowed to return to a ruined Germany.

By 1946, as the agrarian and manual labor assignments of the German prisoners of war came to conclusion, some 292,000 PWs⁹² were transported by rail from around the country, tens of thousands again passing unnoticed through Paoli, to Camp Shanks, NY. By then a virtually unused Army transit installation, Camp Shanks was located 12 miles north of Midtown Manhattan near the Hudson River in the shadow of today's Tappan Zee Bridge. As the prisoners arrived, they were processed awaiting their imminent return to Europe by ship.

On 22 July 1946, the last contingent of German PWs departed the United States. The *New York Times* related the closing scene of the little-known saga of Axis prisoners of war in America during World War II:

At 3:00 p.m., with the final 1,388 German prisoners of war aboard, the harbor vessel began pulling away from the pier near Camp Shanks. The boat's destination was the Brooklyn Army Base, a short sail downriver, where the prisoners would board an ocean-going transport departing that evening. The prisoners were noticeably silent and undemonstrative, waving an indifferent farewell. The camp's wartime mission was now finally completed. Observing the scene, Col. Harry W. Maas, commanding officer of Camp Shanks, was heard to utter a fervent "Thank God, that is over!"⁹³

V. Acknowledgments

Over the 65 years since the end of World War II, a host of books have been written about American PW camps. In each, however, the tale of a prisoner's arduous journey from battlefield capture to arrival at a camp in Alabama or Mississippi or Michigan is surprisingly brief, with few details. There has never been a book written on the subject of prisoner of war transportation during World War II. Telling the story of the transportation of hundreds of thousands of PWs has been like constructing an intricate puzzle in which many of the pieces have gone missing. Most of the WWII operating files of the Army Transportation Corps and the Pennsylvania Railroad have not survived. More and more of the participants are gone. But, as a result of years of primary research, and dozen of hours of interviews with actual participants, a more complete account of this remarkable story can be told.

This story could not have been accurately told without the support of many people, all of whom are owed a great debt of gratitude. Among these are: Kathy West, Historian at the Military Police Corps Regimental Museum, Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri; Jerry Donnellan, Director, Camp Shanks WWII Museum, Orangeburg, New York; Bonnie Marie Sauer, Archivist, National Archives at New York City; Daniel Gross, "researcher *par excellence*" at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland; Cynthia Harris, Manager of the *New Jersey Room*, Jersey City Public Library; Bronislaw Kielbasa, Historian of the USS Hermitage (AP-54) Association; Kurt Bell, railroad historian and former archivist at the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania in

Strasburg; Dr. Joseph F. Meany Jr., State Historian of New York Emeritus; Christopher T. Baer, Assistant Curator, Manuscripts & Archives Department, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington; Brett M. Reigh, archivist at the PA State Archives in Harrisburg; Robert Johnson, former Archivist of the Pennsylvania Railroad Technical & Historical Society (PRRT&HS); Ernst Rinder, former German prisoner of war; Carl Landeck, Historian of the Philadelphia Chapter, PRRT&HS; and Dr. Arnold Krammer, Professor of History, Texas A&M University, College Station. Also to James Brazel and James Ray.

But there is one individual whose experiences proved catalytic in my telling of this story. In 2005, while researching the vital role of the Pennsylvania Railroad during the Second World War, I was introduced by railroad historian Dan Cupper to Mr. Eugene Steffy. Gene had lived many of the stories that I wished to tell, and during that first visit, he briefly related with such vividness the 1945 incident described above in which, as a PRR engineman, he hauled a trainload of German prisoners of war from New York to Harrisburg.



German PWs arrive at Camp Shanks, NY, Spring, 1946.

Though World War II had been over since May 1945, most German prisoners of war in America remained in captivity in mostly agrarian and manual labor assignments into 1946 before being returned to Europe. In this useful photograph taken by the Army Signal Corps in the spring of 1946, another trainload of German prisoners arrives at the now-under-used Army transit base known as Camp Shanks, NY, north of New York City. Several post-war characteristics are in evidence with these PWs: the polyglot of German and American uniform parts and headgear; the "P" and "W" stenciled onto most replacement uniforms; and the mandatory removal of the swastika and all other vestiges of the Nazi regime from any German uniform. *Camp Shanks Museum.*

Gene had ended his account by reflecting: “I just did my job . . . and there were many things I didn’t have the need to know . . . but I always wondered about those fellas. Where were those prisoners coming from, and where were they headed?” I suggested that if he and I worked together, perhaps we could expand his single story to tell the larger narrative of WWII prisoner of war transportation in a way that would answer his, and my, questions. Over the months and years of our working together, this lightly-told story began to expand far more than we expected.

When my manuscript was publicly presented to the Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society on November 21, 2010, Gene was in attendance and actively participated in answering questions from the large audience. But less than three months later, on 9 February 2011, my friend Gene Steffy, a man of remarkable energy and keen intellect, passed away after a short illness. We have lost a remarkable railroader whose knowledge and experience was unsurpassed. More importantly, he was a good man and I miss him greatly.



Eugene Steffy stands before K4s #3750 at the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania, October 8, 2008.
Roger Thorne.

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