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## History Matters: Few know of World War II massacre in Salina

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The sound of machine-gun fire jolted the young lieutenant from his cot. He stumbled outside, trying to make sense of the pandemonium that greeted him. Screams and moans carried clearly through the night as the chattering gun stopped. Glancing up at the guard tower, he saw smoke rising from the gun barrel.

He looked in horror at the riddled tents of German POWs. He shouted to the guard to cease fire - too late - and to come down.

"Send up more ammo!" the guard shouted back. "I'm not done yet!"

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Walking past the Fort Douglas Military Cemetery two weeks ago, I witnessed a wreath-laying ceremony by men in uniform. Wondering why someone was celebrating Veterans' Day two days late, I introduced myself and ran into a problem. The group was chatting among themselves in German.

The uniforms, which I had thought were American, were German Air Force. Capt. Fritz Goothuis, the liaison officer at Hill Air Force Base, explained that the stone monument in the southwest corner memorializes German POWs who died in Utah.

With the help of Goothuis, the Internet and old copies of the *Salt Lake Telegram*, I pieced together some of the local history of POWs. Utah was home to about 7,000 Italian and 8,000 German POWs from 1944 to '45. The Germans, most of them tough veterans of Rommel's Afrikacorp, were kept in a dozen compounds, most in the northwest corner of the state.

Utah was also the site of a prisoner massacre.

In July 1945, 250 German POWs were in Salina to help with the harvest. They were housed in wooden floored tents watched over by three guard towers.

Beyond the occasional hard-core Nazis who carved swastikas into peaches, the Germans were mostly well behaved. A farmer's three-year-old girl once wandered in among the laboring Germans. The farmer found that she'd been picked up and was held by a prisoner. Alarmed, he asked for the girl. The German at first refused to surrender the child. Then the farmer saw the man had tears in his eyes and realized "he had a child of his own back home that he thought he would maybe never see again."

On July 7, after a full day of work in Salina's beet fields, the Germans were marched back to their compound. Following the evening meal, they went to their tents to sleep.

At midnight, the guard changed. Pvt. Clarence V. Bertucci climbed into the tower nearest the camp commander's office. Bertucci, a native of New Orleans, had a record of minor infractions of military discipline, but nothing serious.

Bertucci waited a few minutes for the previous watch to find their beds. Then he opened an ammunition box containing a belt of 250 bullets, slapped the belt securely into the tower's machine gun, and swung the loaded weapon toward the tents of sleeping POWs.

Thirty seconds after pulling the trigger the belt was exhausted.

Nine POWs were killed. The wounded were taken to the Salina hospital where it's remembered that blood flowed out the front door. One prisoner, nearly cut in half, would survive six hours.

Bertucci went quietly with a soldier who was ordered to bring him down.

Asked why he had gunned down the prisoners, he expressed a hatred of Nazis. He showed no remorse at a later hearing. The Army declared Bertucci insane and committed him to a mental institution.

Criminal under any circumstances, these killings were especially senseless. Germany had surrendered two months before. The Germans picking beets in Salina were the sons of a defeated nation in U.S. Army custody waiting to be shipped home.

The local papers didn't dwell on the tragedy. News space was taken up with fresh stories of Nazi atrocities just coming to light. News of the killings never made it to Germany where the populace was still picking through the ruins of their homes. The families wouldn't be informed until 1948 about what happened in Salina.

Two of those who were wounded returned to Utah in 1988 to witness the rededication of the German War Memorial. It was on Nov. 13, the second Sunday of the month when Germans commemorate *Volkstrauertag*, their national day of mourning.

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*Pat Bagley is the editorial cartoonist for The Salt Lake Tribune.*

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