

Midnight Massacre (1945)

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The **Midnight Massacre**^[1] occurred just after midnight on July 8, 1945, when an American soldier, Private Clarence V. Bertucci, killed nine German prisoners of war and wounded twenty others at a camp in Salina, Utah. It is remembered for being "the worst massacre at a POW camp in U.S. history," and the ensuing conviction of Bertucci made him one of only three American soldiers prosecuted during World War II for killing Axis prisoners. It was also notable for having occurred two months after the German surrender and the end of the war in Europe.^{[2][3]}

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Background

During World War II, Utah was home to some 15,000 German and Italian prisoners that were distributed across several camps. Camp Salina was a small, temporary branch camp that was occupied from 1944 to 1945 by about 250 Germans, most of whom were from Erwin Rommel's elite Afrikakorps. It was a simple complex; forty-three tents with wooden floors, an officer's quarters, and three guard towers around the perimeter. Unlike many other American prison camps, which were built in isolated areas, Camp Salina was located within the small town of Salina, at the eastern end of Main Street. The Germans had been sent there to help with the harvest, and, according to Pat Bagley of the *Salt Lake Tribune*, they were well-behaved and friendly to the locals.^{[4][5]}

Private Bertucci was born in New Orleans in 1921. He dropped out of school at sixth-grade, and then joined the United States Army in 1940. After five years of service, including one tour to England with an artillery unit, Bertucci seemed to be incapable of being promoted and also had a "discipline problem." According to later testimony, he was unsatisfied with his tour and said that he felt "cheated" out of his chance to kill Germans. He was also quoted as saying, "Someday I will get my Germans; I will get my turn." Apart from overtly expressing his hatred of Germans, Bertucci did not show any indications of what he was planning on doing in the days before the massacre.^{[5][6]}

Massacre

<div style="text-align: center;">Midnight Massacre</div>	
Location	Salina, Utah, United States
Date	July 10, 1945
Target	German prisoners of war
Attack type	Mass murder, POW massacre
Weapons	.30 caliber M1917 Browning machine gun
Deaths	9
Non-fatal injuries	20
Perpetrator	Clarence V. Bertucci

On the night of July 7, 1945, Private Bertucci was out drinking, although he stopped at a cafe on Main Street to have some coffee and speak with a waitress before reporting for guard duty back at the camp. After the midnight changing of the guard, Bertucci waited for the previous watch to go to bed, then he climbed up the guard tower nearest the officer's quarters, loaded the .30-caliber M1917 Browning machine gun that was mounted at the position, and then opened fire on the tents of sleeping Germans. Moving the gun from left to right, and then back again, Bertucci hit thirty of the forty-three tents before being removed from the tower by another soldier. Bertucci was quoted to have said "Get more ammo! I'm not done yet!"^{[4][5][6]}

The firing only lasted about fifteen seconds, long enough to fire 250 rounds of ammunition, and Bertucci is reported to have been taken into custody without any resistance. Six of the Germans were killed outright, three later died in Salina's hospital, and twenty others were wounded. One of the prisoners was "nearly cut in half" by the machine gun fire, although he managed to survive for six hours. It was said that "blood flowed out the front door" of the hospital.^{[4][5][6]}

A barely legible copy of the *Piqua Daily Call* says the following:

“ Clarence V Bertucci was under mental observation today [July 10] after... he sprayed gun bullets on a group of [prisoners] while they slept[,] killing eight and wounding 20 because he just didn't like Germans[,] Col[.] Arthur J[.] Ericsson[,] man for the branch prisoners camp near here[,] reported that Bertucci had been unable to account for his shooting [on] Sunday night[,] during which he fired a mounted gun from the guard tower[,] where he was on duty[,] Ericsson quoted Bertucci as [saying] that on several occasions he had been tempted to turn the tower gun on the prisoners and was not at all sorry for what he had done. He just didn't like [German]s. [T]he colonel said [n]o other reason was given[,] Bodies of the eight dead [pris]oners were taken to Brigham[,] Utah. (sic)^[7]

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A July 23, 1945, article from *Time* follows:

“ When he was home from England on a furlough last year, slight, dark-haired Private Clarence V. Bertucci relaxed with his family on Dryades Street in New Orleans. But when he left he mystified his kinfolk with a legend he penciled on the doorsill: "Live & let live." One evening last week Private Bertucci, stationed at Salina, Utah, abandoned his motto. First he had a few beers in town. He chatted with some Salina girls, stopped off at a cafe for coffee, strolled out to the temporary camp at Main Street's east end, where 250 German prisoners of war slept. A cooling breeze rustled through the tents and the dusty town. At midnight Private Bertucci climbed a tower, relieved the guard. Below him lay the silent tent-city whose occupants, next morning, would be out in the fields, thinning beets. A .30-caliber machine gun pointed into the sky. Private Bertucci picked up a belt of cartridges, carefully threaded it into the gun. He had never been in action, but he knew how to work a machine gun. He lowered the muzzle and, aiming carefully, pressed the trigger. Methodically he swept the 43 tents, from left to right and back again. Screams and strangled shouts came from the tents. Above the screams, Private Bertucci heard an officer shouting at him. A corporal panted up to take Bertucci off the tower. As the Army buried

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A photograph of Private Clarence V. Bertucci from a July 10, 1945, edition of the *El Paso Herald-Post*.

eight prisoners at Fort Douglas last week, and treated 20 more for wounds, Bushnell General Hospital psychiatrists examined Private Bertucci. Ninth Service Command officers admitted that Bertucci's record already showed two courts-martial, one in England. His own calm explanation seemed a little too simple: he had hated Germans, so he had killed Germans.^[8]

Aftermath

After Bertucci was taken into custody, he was completely unrepentant about what he had done: As far as he was concerned, the killings were justified because the victims were German. Following his placement in a local hospital for a psychiatric assessment, the military was forced to deal with the "political fallout." The killing of nine prisoners by an American soldier was a "public relations disaster" during what should have been a time of celebration. Despite the absence of any significant evidence of mental impairment, Clarence Bertucci was declared insane by a military panel and sent to a New York mental hospital. There is little information available on what happened to him afterward or how long he spent in hospital. He died in 1969.^[6]

The victims, who were between twenty-four and forty-eight years old, were buried with full military honors at Fort Douglas Cemetery. They were dressed in khaki American uniforms, but there was no Nazi flag on the caskets because there wasn't one available at that time. The wounded soldiers were sent back to Germany when they were deemed healthy enough for the journey. A statue called the German War Memorial has been placed at the cemetery. In 1988, the German Air Force funded the refurbishment of the statue. A ceremony was held on Volkstrauertag, the German national day of mourning, and two of the prisoners who were wounded in 1945 attended.^{[4][6][9]}

See also

- Allied war crimes during World War II
- List of massacres in Utah
- Military history of the United States during World War II
- United States home front during World War II

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