

# Penal Institutions in the European Theater of Operations

*By Master Sergeant Patrick V. Garland (Retired)*

*During the 1942–1945 U.S. involvement in World War II, a total of 66,993 U.S. Army Soldiers received general courts-martial,<sup>1</sup> thus prompting the need for confinement facilities for those personnel who had violated military laws and regulations or committed crimes against others. The facilities, which were located throughout various theaters of operation, consisted of guardhouses, stockades, military police detention centers, and disciplinary training centers (DTCs). This article describes the DTCs—what they were, where they were located, how they were used, and who operated them.*

**D**TCs were used to house prisoners who had been sentenced by court-martial to serve more than 4 months' confinement. According to a September 1945 report issued by the provost marshal of the European Theater of Operations, 9,072 general prisoners were confined in DTCs from 1 January 1944 to 31 May 1945; 1,851 of them were eventually restored to duty.<sup>2</sup>

The 2913th DTC was established at the old Shepton Mallet Prison located in Somerset, England, in 1942. In addition to its use as a confinement facility for individuals who had been sentenced to prison, the 2913th DTC was also used as a training facility for other prisons. Lieutenant Colonel James P. Smith, 707th Military Police Battalion, was named the first commandant of the facility.<sup>3</sup> When possible, prisoners of the 2913th DTC were rehabilitated and restored to service. In October 1943, an orthopedic shoe repair program was instituted at the prison. The shoe repair services were beneficial to the Medical Department and were also valuable in the rehabilitation of inmates.<sup>4</sup> Incurable prisoners were sent back to the United States, and those who were sentenced to death were executed. Eighteen U.S. military Service members were executed at the 2913th DTC in England.

Another DTC was established at the Atlantic Base Section, Casablanca, Morocco, North Africa, on 8 January 1943. The facility was designated as the 6677th (or, alternatively, the North Africa Theater of Operations) DTC, and the first inmates were 179 prisoners transferred from the Atlantic Base Stockade in April. The original staff consisted of 18 officers and 179 others; however, due to the rapid increase in prison population, the staff was soon augmented by troops assigned from the Atlantic Base Stockade guard force and the 2661st Stockade Company (Provisional).<sup>5</sup> In April 1944, the North Africa Theater of Operations DTC was moved to Oran, Algeria; by January 1945, it had followed the Fifth U.S. Army to Pisa, Italy, where it became known as the Mediterranean Theater of Operations DTC. More than

1,600 prisoners were transported from Algeria to Italy during the move; shortly thereafter, thousands of additional prisoners were received from stockades already existing in Italy. Soldiers of the 342d Military Police Escort Guard Company augmented the Mediterranean Theater of Operations guard force.<sup>6</sup>

One notable prisoner who was confined in the facility at Pisa was the once-admired American poet Ezra Pound, who was indicted for treason by the United States in July 1943.<sup>7</sup> In the eyes of most Americans, Pound was "guilty of 'giving aid and comfort' to the enemy. . . . And to compound the matter, he continued his broadcasts attacking the United States and its support of 'the coming of Zion' until he was arrested in Genoa [Italy] in 1945 and sent to [the Mediterranean Theater of Operations DTC]."<sup>8</sup>

Annex 1 of the 2913th DTC was established at Bourton-on-the-Hill, Moreton-in-Marsh, Gloucestershire, England, under the provision of General Order 69, Headquarters, Southern Base Section, on 3 November 1943; the facility was to be staffed with four officers and 72 enlisted Soldiers and was to be commanded by Captain James W. Doyle, Corps of Military Police.<sup>9</sup> The site—which was originally established as a prisoner of war compound, but had not yet been used—was modified to house U.S. military prisoners, and training commenced. From 1 March to 30 June 1944, prisoners produced nearly 30,000 skids, which were used to handle cargo during the Normandy Invasion in France. During that same time period, 1,309 prisoners were released from confinement and returned to duty status.<sup>10</sup>

On 3 June 1944, Annex 1 of the 2913th DTC was deactivated by General Order 82, Headquarters, Southern Base Section, and Annex 1 of the 2912th DTC was activated at the same location. (It appears that the Shepton Mallet Prison had also been redesignated as the 2912th DTC some time earlier.)



**Delta Base DTC, France**

It was not long after the invasion of Europe that DTCs were required in the new forward areas. In addition to the Mediterranean Theater of Operations DTC in Italy, there were at least three DTCs established in France—Delta Base DTC (located outside of Marseille), Loire Base DTC (located outside of Le Mans), and Seine Base DTC (located outside of Paris). Security military police from the battle-tested 796th Military Police Battalion were assigned to Delta Base DTC, while other members of the 796th were assigned to the 2913th DTC, where they dealt directly with prisoners inside the facility.

With the exception of the Shepton Mallet Prison, each of the DTC facilities consisted of a “tent city” enclosure. The main compound was designed to enable the segregation of prisoners based on their status, as determined by psychiatric evaluations teams. Prisoners were divided into groups consisting of—

- Those who were considered suitable for rehabilitation.
- Those who were incorrigible.
- Those who warranted solitary confinement.
- Those who were condemned (and, therefore, clad in distinctive black uniforms).

There was also sufficient land available for the rigorous, and often harsh, training that the prisoners would undergo.

Upon their arrival at a DTC, the prisoners received a booklet outlining what was expected of them during their confinement. The booklet that was distributed at the North Africa Theater of Operations DTC contained a welcome statement in which the commandant pointed out that each prisoner had, in effect, deprived his country of two Soldiers—the prisoner himself and someone to guard him. The commandant went on to explain that the prisoner must, therefore, complete the work of two men if he expected to be restored to duty.

Former First Sergeant Fred Waggett, Company B, 796th Military Police Battalion, recalls his days at Delta Base DTC, stating:

*Upon arrival at the Center, a man was told exactly what he could do and what he couldn't do—and in this case, it actually meant that he had no choice but to do as he was told, when he was told, and how he was told. Every minute of his time was regulated; and an infraction of a rule, however slight, was punished.*

*“Speak only when I speak to you, and you are not to initiate a conversation with any of the staff” [was] an important fact that the prisoner had to abide by. Any violation of this rule would, at least, initiate the “Toes and Nose Rule,” whereby a prisoner would be obliged to stand, facing a wall, in the “at attention position,” for a given period of time, with his nose and toes touching a wall. When he addressed anybody on the staff, regardless of rank, they were to be treated as if they were a commissioned officer, with only the proper “Yes, Sir” or “No, Sir” response, if warranted. In fact, a member of the staff could not be spoken to **unless** that staff person either initiated the conversation (seldom done) and/or was [a] staff [member] able to make any conversation other than to issue an order.*

*Picture the entire prisoner population in what is almost a regimental formation on the parade ground, surrounded by a track that was used to punish or to make a man realize that he had to conform to the rules. Several trips around that, without stopping, at “double time,” wearing a full field pack, took the starch out of any would-be problem makers.*

*The prisoners had no creature comforts of any sort that I recall. Some nights, 4 hours of sleep was a lot. There was a hole in the ground somewhere near the rear that a prisoner might be put in for having committed a*

serious violation of [regulations]. It had a steel plate cover like those you see on the roadways today to cover holes. . . .

There was a hospital where you could go if you had a really, really good reason—such as you were **at Death's door**. You did not “ride the sick book” here.

One or more of those buildings where they ate had tables that were approximately chest-high, and the men ate as they walked from the serving end of the table to the other end, where they exited; and their tray had better be empty—or else. The end of the line was overseen by staff, and no excuses for not having finished the food were accepted. You could have a reason, but there was no such thing as an excuse. One man complained bitterly about the rations, so he was given all the **raw ingredients** for that day's chow and [was] dismissed from the mess hall and had to return to his quarters to eat what he now had—raw chow!

The perimeter had a double barbed-wire fence about 20 feet high, with guard towers about every 50 yards or so, and [was] manned by guards with .30 [-caliber machine guns]. In between the fences, there were guard dogs and their handlers. I understand that nobody was ever able to find a way out except through a transfer to [the U.S. Disciplinary Barracks at Fort] Leavenworth [Kansas] or having finished the allotted time.<sup>11</sup>

“Top” Waggett's recollections are substantiated by a report that was produced by Colonel Julien C. Hyer of the theater judge advocate general's office following an inspection visit to Delta Base DTC. With regard to the prisoners, Colonel Hyer stated, “Their clothing and equipment are uniform, well-preserved, and worn with strict exactness. The retreat and review held each afternoon—rain or shine, 7 days a week—might be equaled at [the U.S. Military Academy at] West Point, but hardly excelled. The food is excellent—definitely above the regular mess level. [The] entire plant is clean and well kept, and there is no atmosphere of a prison about the institution.”<sup>12</sup>

Following the Japanese surrender in September 1945, the War Department announced the inactivation of all rehabilitation centers as soon as possible. A single DTC was established at Würzburg, Germany, to replace those that had been operating in Italy and France. Prisoners who had not yet completed their rehabilitation programs were allowed to continue their courses and, upon successful completion, were returned to Army service.<sup>13</sup>

By December 1945, prisoners began to be shipped home by the hundreds. They traveled on heavily guarded liberty ships that had been modified for the transport of prisoners of war. According to the 6 January 1946 issue of *The Delta Stage* newspaper, “This past week, the second group of prisoners was sent on its way to U.S. prisons from the Delta Disciplinary Training Center. Some 400 sailed, under heavy guard, on the John Pillsbury liberty [ship].”<sup>14</sup> By the summer of 1946, most prisoners had been shipped home; consequently, the DTCs—with the exception of the Würzburg facility—were closed.

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#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup>Department of the Army (DA) Pamphlet (Pam) 27-100-55, *Military Law Review*, Vol. 55, Winter 1972, p. 40.

<sup>2</sup>“Statistical Returns of General Prisoners—Office of the Theater Provost Marshal,” European Theater of Operations, September 1945.

<sup>3</sup>“Shepton Mallet (HM Prison),” *Absolute Astronomy*, <[http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Shepton\\_Mallet\\_%28HM\\_Prison%29](http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Shepton_Mallet_%28HM_Prison%29)>, accessed on 17 November 2011.

<sup>4</sup>Rex L. Diveley, M.D., and Mather Cleveland, M.D., Sc.D., “Orthopedic Surgery and Rehabilitation,” *Surgery in World War II: Activities of Surgical Consultants*, Vol. II (Chapter 6), Office of the Surgeon General, 1964, p. 467.

<sup>5</sup>John R. Patton, “6677th Disciplinary Training Center,” *Trading Post Magazine*, April–June 2011, pp. 23–27.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Derek Alger, “Ezra Pound—Traitor/Poet,” *History News Network*, George Mason University, <<http://hnn.us/articles/654.html>>, accessed on 29 November 2011.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>“History of 2913th Disciplinary Training Center, 15 September–15 December 1943,” National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

<sup>10</sup>“History of 2913th Disciplinary Training Center, March–June 1944,” NARA, 1 July 1944.

<sup>11</sup>Personal communication with former First Sergeant Fred Waggett, date unavailable.

<sup>12</sup>“The Military Offender in the Theater of Operations, Annex 4,” report of the visit of Colonel J.C. Hyer to the Delta Base DTC, Digital Library, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, date unavailable.

<sup>13</sup>A.B. MacCormack and V.H. Evers, “Statistical Study of 24,000 Military Prisoners,” date unavailable.

<sup>14</sup>“Redeployment Slows to Crawl,” *The Delta Stage*, Marseille, France, 6 January 1946, p. 1.



*Master Sergeant Garland retired from the U.S. Army in 1974. During his military career, he served in military police units and criminal investigation detachments and laboratories. At the time of his retirement, Master Sergeant Garland was serving as a ballistics evidence specialist at the European Laboratory. He remained in this career field until retiring from civilian law enforcement in 1995.*