

Mercyhurst students excavate POW site on Fort Hood

By Christine Luciano

Rachel Chovan cuts through the wooded and jungle like areas of North Fort Hood. Each step forward Chovan swings her machete and clears the area of a former World War II Prisoners of War camp.

Chovan is one of several archaeology students from Mercyhurst College, in Erie, Pa. who came down to Fort Hood this summer to excavate a POW camp that was built in May 1943.



“When we came here, you could only catch glimpses of the concrete foundation,” said Judy Thomas, archaeology instructor from Mercyhurst. “It was in the dense wooded area and took two weeks to clear the site.”

Thomas stands in one of the internal roads leading into compound two. She walks down a walkway lined with limestone gravel leading to an unknown building being excavated by her students.

“We do not know the function of the building because it is not normal POW layout,” Thomas said. “The Army had a standard layout, but we have a building where there shouldn’t be a building.”

Thomas thought there was a possibility that the unknown building was built when the POW camp had later become a detention facility. However, her documentation research showed that to be false.



“I have aerial photographs that show that the building was here in May 1943,” Thomas said.

In the normal POW camp layout there was a set of barracks, latrines and mess halls, with barb wires dividing each of the three compounds.

Based on the foundation slab Thomas will be able to identify what function it served. “The only buildings that got concrete would have been the ones that got a lot of use,” Thomas said. “It would have been the mess halls, store rooms, and latrines, but not the barracks.”

Thomas explained that the barracks themselves were wood constructed on small short piers with a tarp paper exterior.

The barracks were developed on three compounds at the North Fort Hood site to hold up to 3000 prisoners. While the POW camp operated for a year, the POWs were put to work outside the fence line.

“The POWs worked for the farmers, the loggers, the miners, and whatever the industry was that had lost so many men to our Army,” Thomas said. “The POWs earned money and were able to use a portion to buy stuff like soda, lotion, cigarettes.”

According to Thomas’ research, Camp Hood’s POW camp held 2700 German POWs during its one year of operation.

So why were German POWs flown all the way over to Texas?

Thomas explained that after WWI the Geneva Convention stated that prisoners had to be placed in the same climate as they were captured. Although the Germans were from colder climate areas, they were captured in Africa and placed in Texas.



“There were hundreds of thousands of Germans from the Afrika Corps that were captured in Africa,” Thomas said. “Because of what was stated in the Geneva Convention, they were placed in Texas.”

Close to 500,000 POWs were sent to the U.S. Texas had twice as many POW camps because of the large numbers of Germans from Africa. In the following year, in May 1944, the POWs were sent back to Europe.

“When they were sent back, many were sent over and did duty for a year or so in helping rebuild Europe before they were allowed to go home,” Thomas said.

Sixty years later, Thomas and her students are excavating one of the few remaining POW camps that have not been bulldozed over.

“It’s important to come look at these sites because they are vast disappearing,” Thomas said. “It has also now been over 50 years since the war and we are beginning to lose people who have memories of the actual going ons.”

“This is a bit of national heritage that needs to be documented,” Thomas said.

Thomas plans to continue the excavation next summer and make this a multi-year project.

“Mercyhurst has been here several years working with Fort Hood’s Cultural Resources Management Branch,” Thomas said. “Through a cooperative agreement Fort Hood allows Mercyhurst to conduct its field schools and in return Mercyhurst excavates where the Cultural Resources Management Branch does not have the time or the personnel to fully excavate a site.”

Thomas and her archeology students will continue researching in the archives, advertise in publications, and contact the American Red Cross Geneva Convention to find photographs and Soldiers who were at the POW site.

“It would be great if someone came out and said ‘I was a guard’ or even if one of the Germans that never went back home and stayed here, got married, and started a family.”

The Cultural Resources Management Branch is interested in any photos, memorabilia, or personal experiences from the POW camp. Contact Karl Kleinbach at (254) 288-0427.