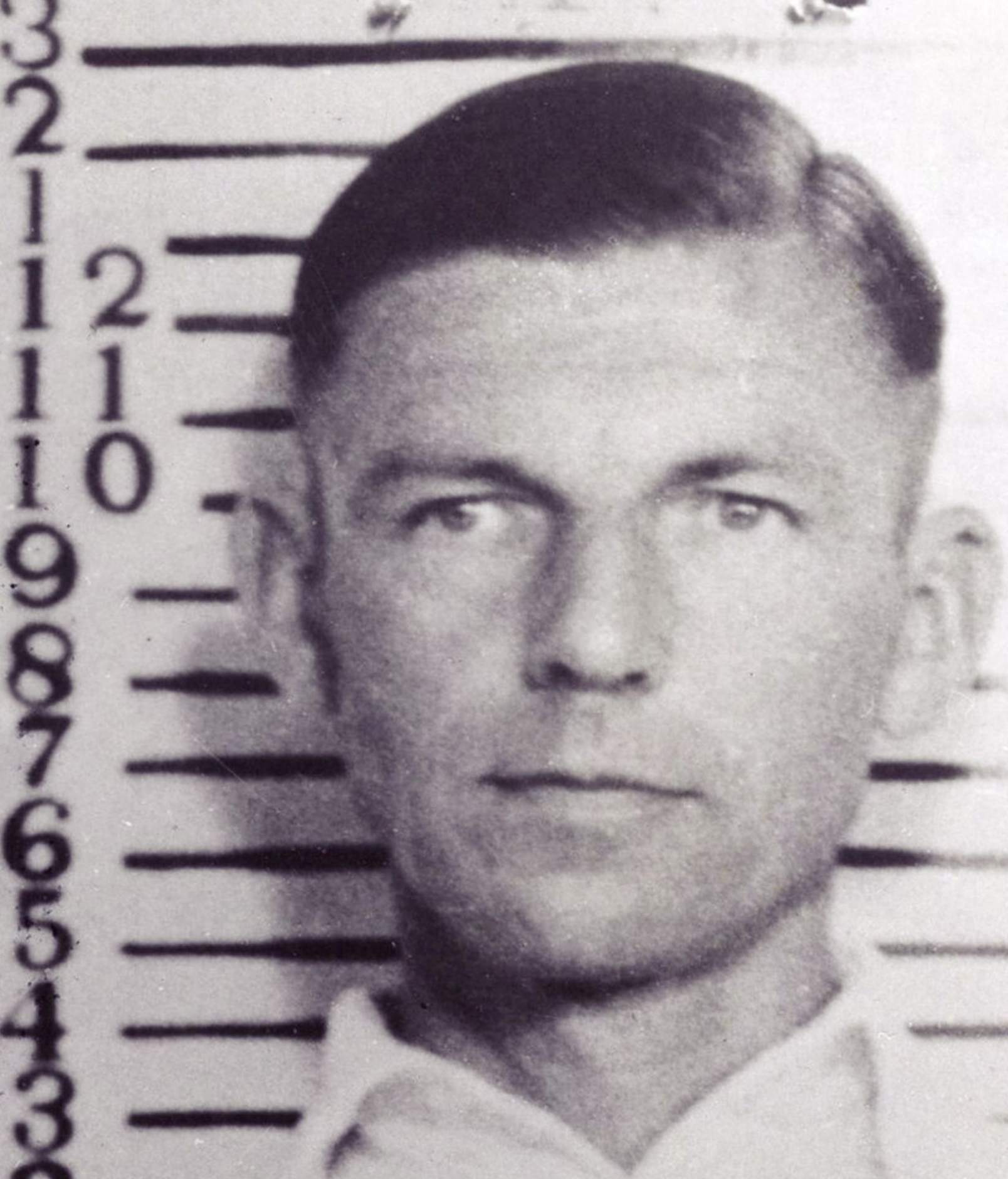


NAZIS ON THE MESA

Christmas Eve 1944 brought terrifying tidings to Phoenix, Arizona: some of the most fearsome POWs on American soil had tunneled out of their nearby prison.

by Christopher Warner



Background: Forty-three years old in 1944, Jürgen Wattenberg was the oldest U-boat captain in the German navy. His age and comportment brought him the full respect of the POWs under his command in Camp Papago near Phoenix, Arizona.

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TWO DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS 1944, as a beleaguered German army trudged through the snow near Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge, a delicate rain began falling 5,000 miles away in the Arizona desert. There, under the cover of darkness, a couple dozen German POWs led by battle-hardened U-boat commanders escaped prison through a tunnel they had dug. Authorities sent out the FBI, bounty hunters, bloodhounds, and Native American scouts. Arizona was witnessing the largest manhunt in its history.

Among the escapees were some of the most notorious Nazis in Allied captivity. Their leader, and the mastermind of the escape plan, was Captain at Sea Jürgen Wattenberg. This tall, stoic 43-year-old had only a brief stint as a U-boat commander before being captured, but he sank 14 Allied ships. US officials had long suspected he would try to escape prison, possibly with the help of pro-Axis operatives in Mexico and South America. The suspicion didn't inspire many precautions, however, and now Wattenberg and his comrades were on the loose.

Camp Papago Park, on the outskirts of Phoenix, took its name from the regional indigenous tribe Tohono O'odham ("Desert People"), also known as the Papago. The camp had originally been designated an army training center but eventually was made part of a massive national network of more than 500 POW camps set mostly in rural areas throughout the country. The 3,000-acre facility was well chosen for its newer purpose, situated in a harsh Sonoran expanse where the extreme conditions and population of venomous creatures presented as much a deterrent to escape as did the staff of 300 armed guards.

Wattenberg was a prisoner of considerable importance, according to reports from the Office of Naval Intelligence. Shortly after his capture, officials at Fort Hunt, an interrogation facility near Washington, DC, had found him to be popular among his men and "strongly pro-Nazi," defiantly invoking his Geneva Convention rights to refuse cooperation with his captors. They noted that the conning tower of his sub, *U-162*, displayed a grey shield and a black sword pointing upward, the same design that appeared on the title page of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.

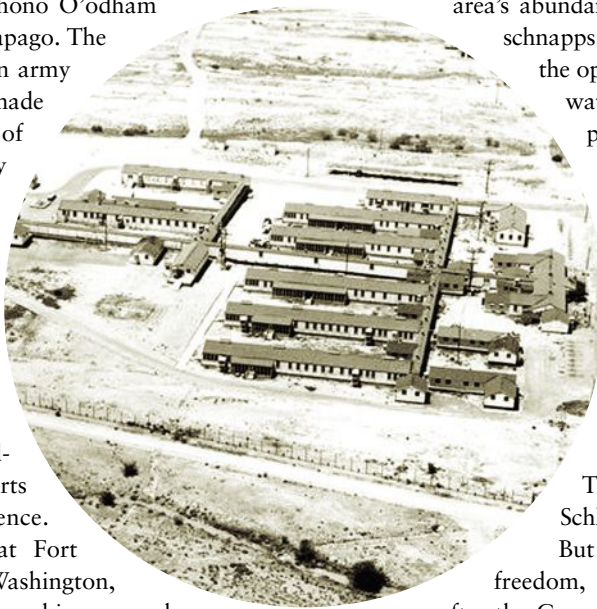
Beginning in January 1944, army brass transferred several thousand German POWs to Camp Papago as the flow of Axis prisoners to the States increased. The camp became known as Alcatraz in the Desert as its inmate roll call turned into a Who's Who of renegades and escape artists from other lockups, each hell-bent on making his stay in Arizona a short one. Wattenberg complemented an impressive roster of well-decorated U-Boat commanders highlighted by Captain Lieutenant Friedrich "Fritz" Guggenberger, recipient of the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross, Germany's highest military award. Prior to capture in June 1943, Guggenberger had sunk 17 Allied ships and was honored in a lavish ceremony in Germany that Hitler personally attended.

At Papago, unlike at most POW camps, inmates were not required to work. Those who did work earned 81 cents per day in scrip that they could use to purchase items from the canteen, such as beer and sandwiches. These men provided much-needed manpower for local farms and helped to process 90 percent of the region's cotton.

In spite of the camp's reputation as a destination for difficult POWs, its environment was lax, in some ways like a country club. Horseback riding, swimming, and movie screenings counted among the amenities. Homemade stills turned pilfered pickings from the area's abundant citrus groves into a steady supply of schnapps. Prisoners even enjoyed the attentions of the opposite sex; local women would gather to watch the well-muscled foreigners toil and play in the hot sun. (One of the guards recalled, "They would tease the POWs by sunbathing..., which was just asking for trouble.") In the book *PW: First-Person Accounts of German Prisoners of War in Arizona*, author Steve Hoza sums up the prisoners' relatively lucky situation: "They were grateful..., and treated so well. German POWs in Russia had a death rate of 53 percent. In America, it was less than 1 percent." The prisoners dubbed their desert oasis Schlaraffenland—"land of milk and honey." But pleasant captivity was no substitute for freedom, and planning for escape began shortly after the Germans' arrival, with the aid of an unlikely

source. The camp's new commander, Colonel William S. Holden, had recently implemented a policy that was the first of several critical blunders in his short tenure. Hoping to contain the influence that the most incorrigible, escape-prone inmates had on the others, Holden quarantined them all in the same barracks, designated Compound 1-A. In doing so, he unwittingly established a 24-7 prisoner think tank with the singular focus of escape. 1-A also happened to be situated in a blind spot of the nearest guard tower. Captain Cecil Parshall, the camp's provost marshal, pointed that problem out, but Holden made no changes.

There in 1-A the short-tempered Captain Lieutenant Jürgen Quast-Faslem spent most of his days brooding and plotting a breakout. In the book *The Faustball Tunnel*, author John Hammond Moore writes that Quast-Faslem came up with the idea to build a volleyball court as an excuse to redistribute dirt—dirt unearthed from a tunneling effort. Holden approved the use of shovels and rakes for the project.



COURTESY OF THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

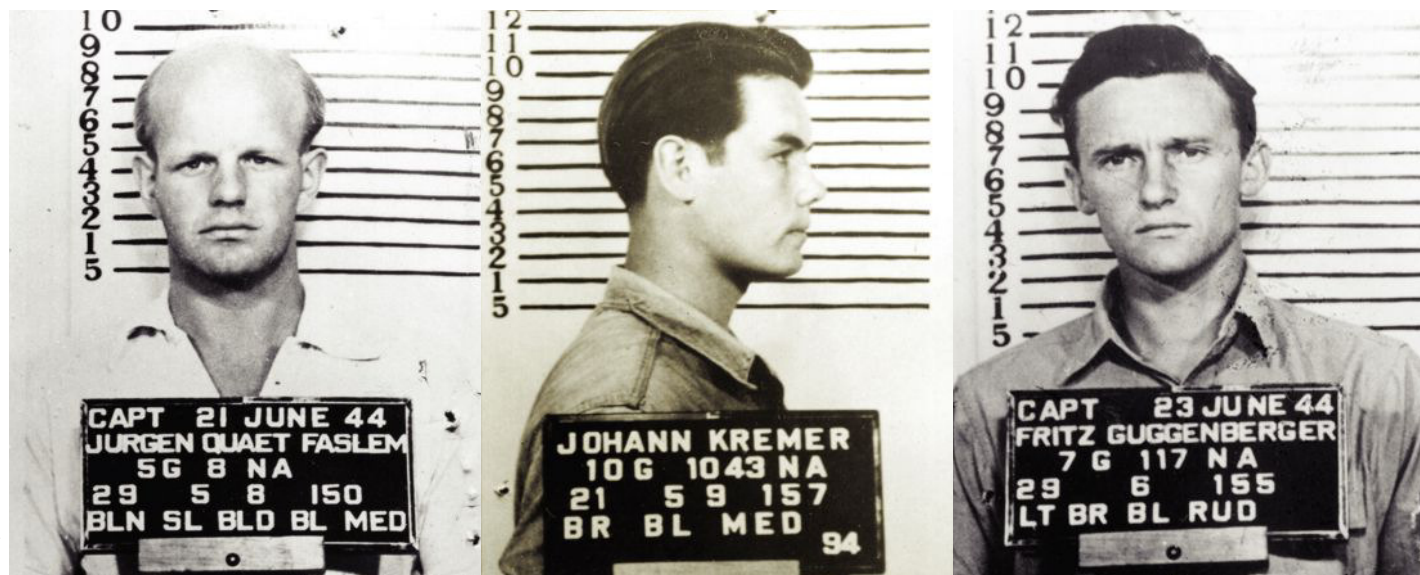
Digging began in early September 1944 with Wattenberg presiding over a mock groundbreaking ceremony for the volleyball court just outside Building T-508, a bathhouse located 10 feet inside the camp's outer fence. Wet clothes were hung from a line to create cover from the guard towers on the opposite side of the camp. Under the guise of taking a shower or doing laundry, POWs entered the bathhouse only to slip out through loosened planks on one wall. Then they descended a shaft that led to a 2.5-foot-diameter tunnel 16 feet below the surface. A string of lightbulbs plugged into an electrical outlet in the bathhouse provided illumination—as well as the occasional shock due to frayed wires.

Crews of three men dug at night, working in 90-minute shifts, using shovels, spoons, screwdrivers, and any other tools at hand to remove soil made up mostly of caliche, a fossilized granite common to the Sonoran desert. Dirt was hauled in a cart taken from one of the shower stalls. U-199's Captain Lieutenant Hans-Werner Kraus, an engineer, used crude instruments to calculate that the tunnel needed to be 178 feet long, which would send it under two fences and a patrol road that encircled the camp. That amount of excavation proved to be very difficult. Typical daily progress was three feet or less.

Then there was a boat. Yes, stuck in the middle of the desert, the prisoners had the foresight to craft a collapsible boat. Officers Wolfgang Clarus, Wilhelm Günther, and Friedrich Utzolino set their sights on a path along waterways they had discovered on a stolen map: why hike miles and miles to freedom under a raging hot desert sun when they could float instead? The trio, later known as the Three Mad Boatmen, carved 18-inch struts from pieces of scrap wood to fashion a hull just narrow enough to fit through the tunnel. They covered the frame with canvas and treated the fabric with a tar sealant borrowed from a barracks roofing project. Then came a test. "One evening when it got dark," Clarus later recalled, "we simply dug a hole and filled it with water and put our boat in it. The ship floated beautifully. If it hadn't, I'm sure we would have all burst into tears."

BY MID-DECEMBER the prisoners had completed the tunnel—as well as the volleyball court and some well-manicured flower beds. After several successful trial runs, the U-boat commanders chose 25 men for the escape and divided them into teams of twos and threes. Wattenberg and his officers

RIGHT, CENTER & FAR RIGHT: NATIONAL ARCHIVES



The tunneling operation slowed considerably over the final 50 feet, due to several thick, stubborn veins of rock. The resulting extra time allowed Wattenberg to ponder strategy. Devising a plan to make it more difficult for the prison staff to keep track of his men, he instructed all his officers to boycott morning and afternoon roll calls. As hoped, the stunt enraged Holden, who restricted the rations of all violators. After 16 days of boycotting, the prisoners were offered a compromise. Though all men of all ranks were still required to be present for daily roll call at 9 A.M. and 4:15 P.M., they were now exempt on Sunday morning, and senior officers were required only to stand in their doorways during the count. Wattenberg had claimed a victory greater than he'd imagined. If he timed the coming escape right, the Sunday morning reprieve guaranteed an invaluable head start.

settled on a departure date of Saturday night, December 23, figuring prison staff would be distracted by holiday activities. Indeed, one of Holden's junior officers, a Lieutenant Watson, later described a cursory inspection that day: "I never saw Compound 1-A looking better. The men even had some rather attractive hand-made Christmas decorations hung up in their mess halls."

Each POW team prepared its own escape provisions, which included lightweight packets of bread crumbs that could be easily turned into basic sustenance by adding water or milk. Some men fashioned fake Nazi medals and badges from melted toothpaste tubes and traded them to camp guards for socks, chocolate, coffee, and other useful goods that could be stuffed into rucksacks.

On the afternoon of December 23, the prisoners staged another ruse, a raucous party erupting in Compound 1-B that pretended to

Opposite: Camp Papago was far enough from Phoenix to be surrounded by desert. And it wasn't just empty sand threatening mere dehydration to anyone who dared try to escape. Here hid a field guide's fill of venomous creatures. Above: Three POWs who had the nerve to challenge the conditions along with Jürgen Wattenberg were (from left) Jürgen Quaet-Faslem, Johann Kremer, and Fritz Guggenberger.

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celebrate the news of a recent offensive near Bastogne by Field Marshall Gerd von Rundstedt. Beer and homemade schnapps flowed freely, an accordion blared loudly, and a chorus of “Deutschland Über Alles” (“Germany over All,” the Nazi-preferred title of the German national anthem) rang through the camp. Adding to the revelry, and further mocking the Americans, prisoners launched a weather balloon displaying a Nazi naval flag. The guards initially feared a full-scale riot was about to unfold, prompting Holden to deploy teargas grenades.

Meanwhile, in Compound 1-A, a conspicuous calm should have worried camp officials. The German officers patiently waited for nightfall, listening to their favorite radio shows on local station KTAR one last time. They placed bets on whether they’d hear the Cole Porter classic *Don’t Fence Me In*, which had recently topped the charts—and become an unofficial anthem for POWs everywhere.

As darkness fell, and with Holden away for the holidays, the prisoners made their move, descending into the tunnel. Once outside, most of the teams dispersed southward toward the Mexican border, finding temporary shelter in barns, stables, and other structures along the way. Wattenberg, accompanied by *U-162* crewmen Walter Kozur and Johann Kremer, elected to stop only six miles north of Phoenix. They hid out in a cave next to the area’s most prominent landmark, Camelback Mountain, a curious choice.

DURING THE SUNDAY afternoon roll call, US Corporals Eugene Hoya and Frank Gebhardt discovered that several prisoners were missing from Compound 1-A. Provost Marshal Parshall began alerting authorities. The stern WWI veteran had been on the phone only a few minutes when he received a call from the local sheriff, who claimed that Herbert Fuchs, a 22-year-old U-boat crewman, had just turned himself in. Within minutes, Parshall took several more calls about escaped POWs, and by the time Holden returned to camp at 9 A.M., six had surrendered or been arrested. Still, 19 prisoners remained on the run, and army officials had no idea when or how they’d escaped.

Christmas Day brought a blizzard of embarrassing questions, and little cheer, to Camp Papago. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover demanded immediate answers. The possibility of an attack on nearby Boulder Dam and its vital power plant operations raised serious national security fears. A hit on a site like that would paralyze the energy-dependent aviation indus-

try based in Los Angeles while also demoralizing a citizenry already shocked by newspaper headlines such as “Search Underway for Escaped Nazis” and “Wily Germans Elude Chase.”

The army launched a massive search party and offered a bounty of \$25 a head. Local cowboys, ranchers, and Papagos joined in to canvas a wide area stretching to the Mexican border. Native American scouts stayed especially busy throughout the search, lending to the effort their renowned tracking skills and their familiarity with the area. If all these hunters didn’t stack the odds against the prisoners high enough on their own, there was also the threat of lethal dehydration in an unfamiliar environment infested with venomous rattlesnakes, coral snakes, gila monsters, black widows, scorpions, and tarantulas.

By January 10, only two three-man POW teams remained at large. One was the Three Mad Boatmen, which soon discovered that the Salt and Gila rivers, appearing so large and inviting on the map, were more mud than water. “We should have known that the Gila wasn’t much of a river,” Clarus said later. “Of course, everyone who lives in Arizona knows that.” Eventually, the disheartened trio abandoned its naval operation and resumed its escape on foot. A few days later, the three were back at Camp Papago, leaving Wattenberg and his crew as the remaining holdouts.

The manhunt continued, focusing along the Mexican border. Little did the Americans know that Wattenberg was watching them from high above in his Camelback Mountain lair. What followed next was his most audacious action yet. Prior to the escape, he had arranged with fellow prisoners who worked daily outside the camp to leave food and supplies in an abandoned car. The plan succeeded, but it didn’t push the envelope far enough for Wattenberg. He decided to have Kremer infiltrate a crew while it was out working and return to camp with it at the end of the day. There he would pick up information, newspapers, and additional food rations. Then he could either join another work detail to deliver his collection in person or send the items and intelligence out with other prisoners.

Remarkably, the subterfuge worked well until a surprise inspection exposed Kremer’s presence in camp. Later that night, Kozur left the cave to retrieve the usual delivery of provisions but instead found three American soldiers waiting for him. Exactly one month after their escape, every prisoner was back behind barbed wire with one glaring exception: Jürgen Wattenberg.

On his 44th birthday, and day 35 of his desert journey, Watten-

19 Germans Expected To Give Up When They Tire of Arizona Desert

By the Associated Press.

PHOENIX, Ariz., Dec. 27.—The next 36 hours may determine if there will be a quick roundup of 19 Germans still at large after a sensational escape from the Papago Park prisoner of war camp, an Army officer said today.

Six of 25 Nazi U-boat officers and men who fled through a 200-foot tunnel were recaptured Sunday night a few hours after the escape was discovered. None has been apprehended since.

The ranking escapee is Navy Capt. Jurgen Wattenberg, 43, former officer on the Admiral Graf Spee, scuttled German pocket battleship. He later was decorated by the Nazis for sinking a Brazilian freighter.

“Past experience would indicate most of the recaptures should come in the next day or two,” Maj. Eugene Tays, director of security and intelligence at the camp, said.

“It usually takes four or five days for them to become tired in their flight across the desert, then they surrender,” Maj. Tays declared.

Col. William A. Holden, camp commandant, said 12 of the 19 fugitives were first-rate submarine officers. Some speak English and are accomplished linguists.

Col. Holden disclosed yesterday that individual prisoners labored tediously many months excavating through rock a 200-foot escape tunnel from an outdoor coal box to an exit beyond the camp’s east fence. Col. Holden explained the rock is composed of crusts of calcium carbonate of varying degrees of hardness.

He denied that Guenther Prien, U-boat commander credited with sinking the British battleship Royal Oak, was a prisoner here. The report was blamed on a misunderstanding of an inquiry.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Above: Newspapers immediately sent reporters out to cover the sensational big prisoner escape and record-breaking manhunt.



COURTESY OF THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Some people thought Camp Papago was more like a country club than a prison. Their exhibit A captures the resident German POWs at leisure, shirtless, and mostly well suntanned. At the center, Captain at Sea Jürgen Wattenberg stands leader-like.

berg finished the last of his food, cleaned himself up, and hiked into Phoenix. Around 1:30 A.M. the lone remaining fugitive asked for directions from a street cleaner, who became suspicious of his accent and notified a policeman. Sergeant Gilbert Brady soon caught up with the tall stranger.

“Sir, could I see your Selective Service registration?” the Phoenix police officer asked.

“I left it at home.”

“Where is home?”

“I am a rancher in town for the weekend.”

“You may be a rancher but I want to know where you’re from?”

“Why, can’t you tell that I’m from Glendale?”

“Glendale, Arizona, or Glendale, California?”

“Glendale, back East.”

Brady had heard enough. He offered Wattenberg a cigarette and informed him they’d have to go to the police station. Appreciative of the generous gesture, the now-weary German inhaled deeply before offering a confession: “I am the ‘big shot’ you’re looking for.”

Upon return to prison, Wattenberg and the other escapees faced long interrogations, on top of a punishment of two weeks of restricted rations. The men offered up little information, describing the event as nothing more than good-natured mischief.

A threat of ill will, real and perceived, persisted at the facility until after the war ended. By then, grim news of Nazi atrocities

committed in places like Auschwitz and Dachau had been exposed, casting a long shadow on Germans everywhere. Could POWs in Arizona have had motives other than the mere desire for a harmless jaunt or to return home? Wattenberg’s son Earhart, a retired businessman who lives in Hamburg, Germany, recently offered an answer to that question for his late father: “The intention was clearly to escape to Mexico and from there back to Germany.”

LIKE ODYSSEUS, Jürgen Wattenberg eventually found his way home. He quickly adjusted to civilian life and became a successful executive for the Bavaria and St. Pauli Brewery. In 1985, he returned to Arizona along with other POWs to be the guest of honor at a ceremony marking the 40th anniversary of their escape.

Camp Papago has long since been replaced by urban sprawl spotted with playgrounds, an Elk’s Lodge, and the Phoenix Zoo. But not all signs of the camp and its inhabitants have disappeared. There’s a small military museum that features artifacts from the prison. The memory of Wattenberg and the other escapees lives on in the tangible form of an autographed wooden oar from that collapsible boat. ★

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