

Old World Cemetery

German POW's Buried In Bleak Northern Bush

By DON DELAPLANTE

MONTROCK

They are a long way from home.

The bodies of 17 German servicemen lie at rest in a small military cemetery on a snowy, windswept hill overlooking the Abitibi River a mile west of here. Through the uncertain tides of war, their destiny was death in a wild, rugged land, 4,000 miles from home.

Beneath their lonely graves the river winds down to the paper mill at Iroquois Falls, then onward toward James Bay. Little wisps of steam swirl upward from the swift water; otherwise the calm of the wilderness is unbroken. On the opposite bank the bushland sweeps unceasingly to the Arctic.

Buried in this remote forest plot are German soldiers, sailors and airmen who died during the Second World War at the Monteith prisoner-of-war camp 15 miles to the south. Of the hundreds of men imprisoned at the camp or employed in bush work across the north, only these 17 were left behind. Most of the 17 died from the after-effects of wounds received in battle.

Their resting place is enclosed by a birch fence. It was made by other prisoners who cared for the plot till they were sent back to Germany after the war. A birch archway, bearing the sign *Ruhe-stätte Deutscher Kriegsgefangener* gives entry to the area. Orderly rows of small spruce trees surround the plot.

The snow leading to the graves of these forgotten men was four feet deep and had been unbroken all winter when I arrived. The fence was engulfed almost completely and so was the line of wooden markers on the south side of the plot, for the winter wind from the north had swept a heavy drift across the hill.

The markers on the north side of the cemetery stood forth from the snow in a brave, pathetic little line. Sunlight struggled through the murky afternoon of late winter and fell upon the polished wood of their surfaces.

The memorials were remarkable; it was much as though one had stumbled into a tiny village cemetery in Germany, where the village wood-carver had wrought with loving care the plaques of the deceased.

Shouting their German identity defiantly to the alien wilderness, the markers were the work of some expert craftsman who had apparently been a prisoner at Monteith. Just who the artisan was is un-

known. There is no record of his name, for the POW camp has long since been converted to Ontario's northernmost jail . . . But it is unlikely there are half a dozen men in Canada today who could have done a similar job.

Each man's name was carved in bold, authoritative lettering — Johann Wagner, Fritz Schroder, Fritz Hochwoldt, A. Hartwig . . . Beneath were the dates of birth and death but places of birth were not mentioned. A few of the men had been in their late thirties when they died, but most were in their early twenties.

Above each name was a symbol representing the branch of the German service in which each served. A galleon sweeping across a rifted ocean marked the sailors and U-boat men. A two-pronged arrow heading into a sunset was on the graves of the airmen. An infantryman's helmet identified the graves of the soldiers.

Beneath the helmets on the soldiers' markers, swastikas were carved in the polished wood. . . . But the hated symbol was just pathetic here.

I dug away the snow from one of the buried markers on the south side. Here Oberfeldwebel Friedrich Guttner was buried. A remarkable carving of a sleeping soldier was exposed. I pushed back the snow and left the soldier sleeping.

The last of the German prisoners of war left Northern Ontario in 1946. During the war they composed a large portion of the workers in the forests. Men who showed an inclination to escape were kept in Monteith. Further north, near Hearst, a camp for incorrigibles was maintained.

There is a second German cemetery beside Highway 11, a mile and a half north of Kapuskasing. The men lying in it were prisoners of the First World War and were kept at what is now the Dominion Experimental Farm at Kapuskasing.

Care of both cemeteries is in the hands of the Canadian War Graves Commission.

Night was creeping up the slope from the river. You could no longer see the wisps of vapor rising from the water. The shadows lengthened across the hills on the far bank. With the night, there came a darkness which heralded spring.

As I went away I thought: These were our enemies. But the brotherhood of death has made them akin to our own Canadians lying in Europe. War is very bad, no matter which side you are on.

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CANADA
PRISONERS