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# Both Sides of the Barbed Wire: Lives of German Prisoners of War and African Americans in Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, 1944-1946

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Both Sides of the Barbed Wire:  
Lives of German Prisoners of War and African Americans in Camp Claiborne, Louisiana,  
1944-1946

A Thesis

Submitted to the Department of History  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
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in  
History

by

Claire DeLucca

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**Abbreviations**

- POW ..... Prisoner of War
- PW..... Prisoner of War
- OPMG..... Office of the Provost Marshal General
- PMG ..... Provost Marshal General
- ASF ..... Army Service Forces
- WAC ..... Women’s Army Corps
- Y.M.C.A. .... Young Men’s Christian Association
- SS ..... Schutzstaffel
- SA ..... Sturmabteilung
- NAACP..... National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

## **Abstract**

Located outside of Alexandria, Louisiana, Camp Claiborne was temporarily home to more than 500,000 U.S. servicemen and women during its short existence. Thousands of German prisoners of war also were held for more than two years in a section of the camp. Racial problems stemming from the policies of Jim Crow South and the blatant inequality eventually led to an African American mutiny within the camp. The events from 1944 to 1946 at Camp Claiborne provide insight into the mindsets of white Southerners and the generation of African Americans who would influence the major civil rights victories in the following decades.

Camp Claiborne; World War II; German Prisoner of War; African Americans; Mutiny; Louisiana

## Introduction

As the World War II generation dies, so will their stories – unless they are preserved. The history of German prisoners of war (POWs) experiences in America will disappear, too. Typically, many American History units taught in schools do not mention the presence of German POWs held in the United States. Until starting this thesis, I was unaware that a relative of mine had been a German POW held in a Kentucky camp. Much of my resulting research centered around understanding what life may have been like for a German POW interned in Louisiana. I, like many other young Americans, was unaware that more than 370,000 prisoners from the German armed forces were held in camps scattered in nearly every state in the union during WWII. While not all prisoners from the German armed forces were from the German Reich, all were generally referred to as “German POWs” by the U.S. Army. The German Army drafted men from conquered territories, some of whom would be captured as POWs by the Americans, if they were lucky.

In Drew Pearson’s syndicated weekly column, “The Washington Merry-Go-Round,” for example, we read: “When the arrogance of German prisoners becomes unbearable, an East Coast MP [Military Policeman] remarks, ‘I suppose you know you’re being shipped to Russia from here.’ Issued in German, this threat quiets them quickly reports Drew Pearson. They beg to be kept in ‘the wonderful United States.’”<sup>1</sup> Since the United States was one of fifty-three signatory states of the Geneva Convention, all prisoners of war had to be treated according to the agreed upon articles. The United States generally followed these guidelines, with the notable exception

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<sup>1</sup> “As We WERE SAYING..,” *Alexandria Daily Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), Nov. 3, 1944.



of the intentional sequestering of the crew of U-boat 505 to prevent German knowledge of American possession of a German enigma machine and codes.<sup>2</sup>

In the United States, the Office of the Provost Marshal General (OPMG), a part of the War Department, housed and cared for the POWs. While held in American camps, enlisted POWs were required to work. Often, POWs worked the jobs in the agricultural sector vacated by men going off to war and to the war industry's factories. The Geneva Convention protected officers from having to work. The officers could choose to work or to devote their time to educational and recreational interests.

Meanwhile, African American members of the U.S. military faced very different conditions in the same camps and towns. Officially, the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940 outlawed discrimination on the basis of race or color when selecting and training service members. However, African Americans still had to endure segregation and discrimination on military bases and in everyday life in the South. The roughly one million African American servicemen and women were fighting for two victories: one against fascism abroad and another against racism at home, which the African American newspaper the *Pittsburgh Courier* termed "the Double V Campaign."<sup>3</sup>

The experiences of these two groups of people, German POWs and African American servicemen and women, at Camp Claiborne in rural Louisiana reveal a lot about the time period, the people of rural Louisiana, and southern mentalities. The South was home to a large number of the German POW camps due to the need to fill agricultural jobs vacated by men joining the

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph M. Scalia, "History, Archaeology, and the German Prisoner of War Experience in Rural Louisiana: The Ruston Alien Internment Facility, 1943-1945," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 38, no. 3 (1997): 309-27.

<sup>3</sup> Ronald Takaki, *Double Victory: A Multicultural History of America in World War II* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2000), 31.

service or African Americans finding better jobs in the growing war industry. Louisiana alone had forty-four POW base and branch camps scattered across the state and took some of the earliest German POWs in 1943 from Erwin Rommel's *Panzerarmee Afrika*.<sup>4</sup> This thesis will examine the conditions experienced by the German POWs and African American servicemen and women at Camp Claiborne in Louisiana from 1944 to 1946.

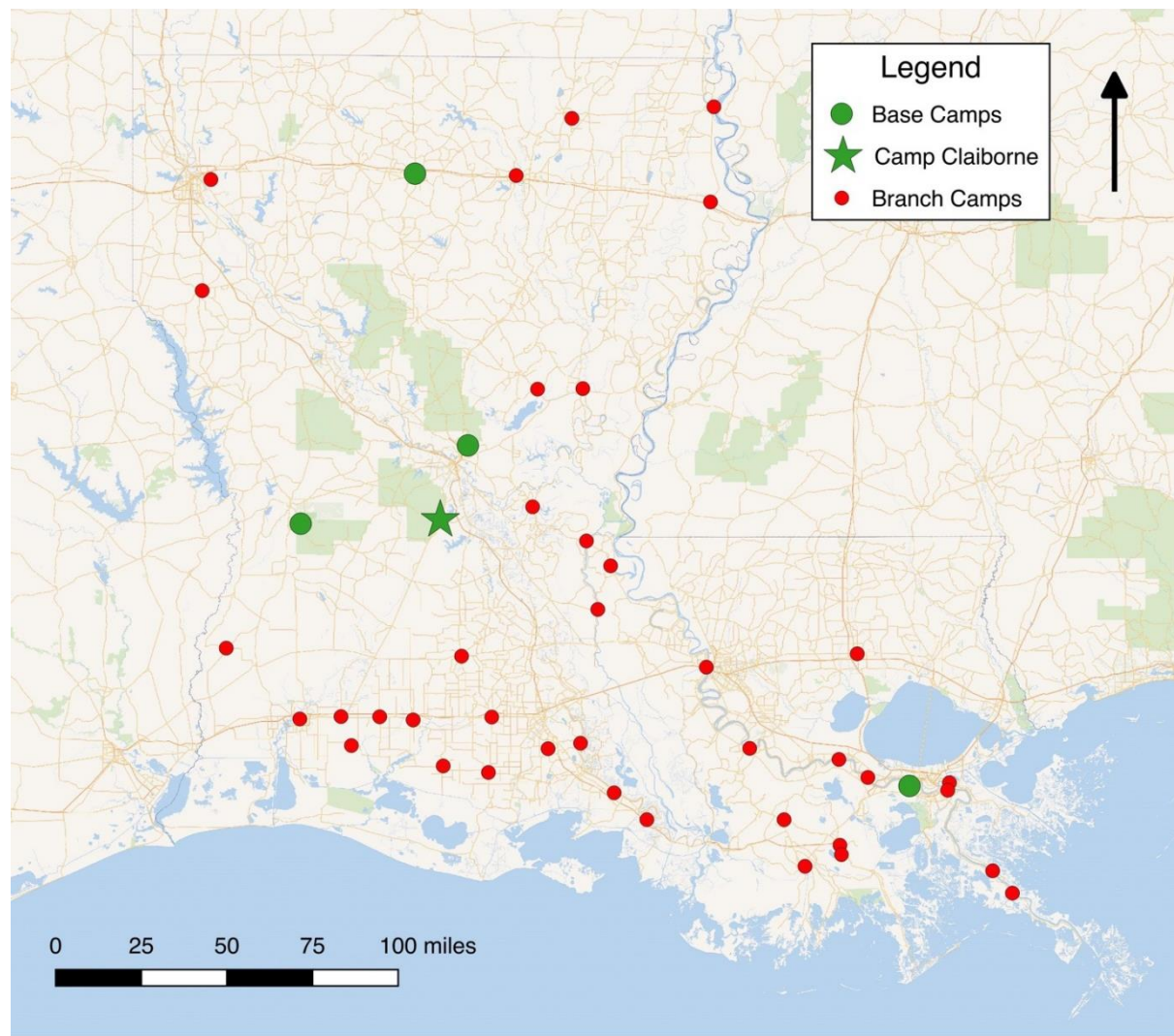


Figure 1. Map of Louisiana Prisoner of War Camps.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> James Linn, "The Pelican State Goes to War: Louisiana in World War II," Special Exhibit at The National WWII Museum.

<sup>5</sup> Base map courtesy of openstreet maps. Camp locations from Matthew J. Schott and Rosalind Foley, "Bayou Stalags: German Prisoners of War in Louisiana," (Lafayette: Southwestern University, 1981). Five temporary branch camps listed in *Bayou Stalags* could not be located and do not appear on the map. Current street map used to orient readers.

## Review of Pertinent Historiography

Since World War II ended, novels such as *Summer of My German Soldier*, about a love affair between a POW and an American girl, have added to conflicting popular and historical narratives about German POWs. Stories have been passed down the generations about the German POWs who were held and worked in the United States – some stories factual, others not.

Historians continue to work to correct misconceptions and myths about German POWs that exist. Some historians focus on the labor performed by the German POWs in the agricultural and lumber industries.<sup>6</sup> Using archival records that detail payments made by farmers to the Army for prisoners' labor, historians have been able to estimate the positive effect of their labor on the American war-time economy. These labor accounts usually include the testimony of the employer and co-workers on the work ethic and quality of work of the German POWs.

Other historians, such as Arnold Krammer who is considered the expert on German POWs, have looked into the social aspects of POW life.<sup>7</sup> In *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, Krammer addresses virtually every aspect of the camps and what life was like for the German POWs until their repatriation. Since the book's focus is not on one specific camp or state, Krammer begins by using the members of the captured German units of the *Afrikakorps* to show the processes of transporting POWs and their experiences traveling from the theater of war to the camps. From the time of the POWs' arrivals in the camps, Krammer's book explores all aspects of life in camp including the educational, religious, and recreational activities offered to POWs.

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<sup>6</sup> See David W. Clarke, "The Utilization of P.O.W. Labor in Louisiana During World War II: A Comparison of Wehrmacht P.O.W. Labor Productivity With That of Prewar Civilian Agricultural Labor" (master's thesis, University of New Orleans, 1994). Also, Ronald N. Brady, "The Use of German Prisoners of War in Louisiana's Agricultural Labor Force, 1942 – 1946" (master's thesis, University of New Orleans, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Arnold Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America* (New York: Stein and Day, 1979). This is one of the most widely read and respected works about German POWs in the United States during WWII.

Krammer includes the reactions of some POWs to the camps as well as the tales of escape from the camps. Krammer examines in special depth the struggle of the American camp administrators to maintain control in camps where the ardent Nazis tried to control the other POWs and punished anti-Nazi POWs. In addition, he includes the attempts of the Special Projects Division to reeducate the POWs to support democracy when they returned to their home countries.<sup>8</sup> Since the publication of Krammer's book, the topic of prisoner reeducation has garnered more and more attention. Despite being published nearly forty years ago, Krammer's book remains one of the most important works on German POWs - but on a national level with some attention on Louisiana camps.

One of the newest aspects of the scholarship of German POWs in the United States is the recording of German inmate conversations. The Americans recorded the conversations of German generals and ordinary German POWs at the secret *Temporary Detention Center* at Fort Hunt, Maryland.<sup>9</sup> Each of the 3,451 POWs held in this secret camp was carefully chosen for potential information he might be able to provide about war plans, war production, or other vital information. The transcripts reveal the uncensored thoughts of German POWs when they spoke with each other. These conversations prove that soldiers and officers had knowledge of the Holocaust and of willing participation in war crimes.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the German POWs were given *Morale Questionnaires* periodically to survey their opinions. These surveys show that

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<sup>8</sup> For more on the reeducation programs, see Ron Robin, *The Barbed Wire College: Reeducating German POWs in the United States During World War II*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). For a Louisiana camp study see Bruce J. Blank, "Camp Plauche: Germans under the Huey P. Long Bridge" (master's thesis, University of New Orleans, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> Günter Bischof, "Bugging the German Generals: British and American Eavesdropping on German POWs During World War II," in *Museum Man: Essays in Honor of Gordon H. "Nick" Mueller*, ed. Günter Bischof and Coleman Warner (New Orleans: University of New Orleans Press, 2014), 279-299. For more on treatment of German generals, see Derek R. Mallett, *Hitler's Generals in America: Nazi POWs and Allied Military Intelligence*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky), 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Bischof, "Bugging the German Generals," 289-290.

belief in a Nazi victory decreased over the course of 1944. The intelligence gathered by spying and surveying German POWs was not only important to the war effort but also important to understanding the mindset of the POWs.

Historians, such as Robert Billinger, Jr., have furthered the study of German POWs by writing the histories of the camps and POWs in individual U.S. states, namely Florida and North Carolina. Billinger's work portrays German POWs as a diverse group. In his articles on Camp Blanding, Billinger writes about the German perspective of the camp.<sup>11</sup> In December 1943, staunch Nazi supporters attacked "traitors" with clubs, and this behavior appeared in POW camps across the country in the beginning. These fights ultimately led to the segregation of POWs by ideology. Troublemakers would be removed from the camp and sent to different camps. For example, in the case of Camp Blanding, four POWs were transferred to the disciplinary camp in Alva, Oklahoma. Furthermore, Billinger includes the situation in which the POWs of Camp Blanding were shown the newsreels of liberated concentration camps. The POWs were so moved by what they saw that they collected nearly \$6,000 to send to the survivors of German concentration camps.

Joseph Scalia provides the Louisiana equivalent of Billinger's camp study.<sup>12</sup> Scalia notes that the U.S. War Department designated Camp Ruston as an "anti-Nazi" camp.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Camp Ruston secretly held the crew of the captured U-boat (U-505) separate from other POWs

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<sup>11</sup> Robert D. Billinger, Jr., "The Other Side Now: What Blanding Prisoners of War Told the Wehrmacht," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (1994): 75. See also Robert D. Billinger, Jr., "With the Wehrmacht in Florida: The German POW Facility at Camp Blanding, 1942-1946," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 58, no.2 (1979): 160-73. These two articles led Billinger to publish a book in 2008 about the German POWs experiences in Florida, *Hitler's Soldiers in the Sunshine State: German POWs in Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000). For an extensive look at the camps of North Carolina, see Robert D. Billinger, Jr., *Nazi POWs in the Tar Heel State* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Scalia, "History, Archaeology," 309-27.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 314.

to prevent news traveling to Germany of the capture of German encryption codes.<sup>14</sup> This is one of the few cases when the United States intentionally violated the Geneva Convention by sequestering the U-505 crew. In his review of Camp Ruston, Scalia writes a positive depiction of POW experiences. He includes few negative comments from interviews with locals about the prisoners or their work ethic. He writes of the education programs at Camp Ruston, but his explanation of the education programs, in contrast with the re-education programs, is inadequate. Scalia's article gives readers a better understanding of what Camp Ruston was like and in turn what other anti-Nazi camps may have been like.

In another study of German POWs in Louisiana, Matthew Schott argues that German POWs and African Americans had good relationships.<sup>15</sup> Schott begins the article with stories from the memoir of a German POW, Herbert Kuhnle. In an effort to challenge preconceived notions, Schott paraphrases Kuhnle's "desire to be 'brown' like the African-American natives."<sup>16</sup> Kuhnle meant that comment in admiration of the plantation's African American supervisor, John. In addition, Schott notes that many former German POWs argued that African Americans were "prisoners like us."<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, some POWs argued that Germany's racial laws were "more benign and less hypocritical than America's."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 313. For more about the unusual inmates of Camp Ruston, see Scalia's *Germany's Last Mission to Japan: The Failed Voyage of U-234* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2009). This book is about U-boat 234's capture after the German surrender in 1945 and the internment of one of the crew at Camp Ruston.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew J. Schott, "Prisoners Like Us: German POWs Encounter Louisiana's African-Americans," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 36, no. 3 (1995): 277-90. See also Matthew J. Schott, "Bayou Stalags of the Deep South: The POWs' "Good War" Providence" (unpublished manuscript, Edith Garland Dupré Library, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Lafayette, Louisiana, 1994).

<sup>16</sup> Schott, "Prisoners Like Us," 278.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 280.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 284-285.

In addition, Schott argues that white Louisianans treated German POWs better than African American citizens. For example, Schott includes the story that rice planters in Louisiana “treated POWs to a seafood supper and prostitutes.”<sup>19</sup> Needless to say, African Americans received no such positive rewards. Also, due to Jim Crow laws, German POWs were able to use white bathrooms, while their African American guards had to wait outside the bathroom door.<sup>20</sup> The POWs also had the ability to fraternize and blow kisses to American girls, lounge at truck stops, and raise the Nazi flag at the camp without fear of punishment. A camp guard and a local Catholic chaplain corroborated the rumors of sexual relationships of POWs with women, black and white. However, Schott insists that these relationships were rare.<sup>21</sup> Schott includes that many African Americans resented the better treatment of German POWs by white Americans, as evidenced by a letter Schott received. To get a better understanding of relations between the African American soldiers and the German POWs, Schott could have also tried to interview more of the African-Americans soldiers who were stationed in Louisiana to get their perspective of relations with the German POWs.

Another of the few works that addresses the better treatment of German POWs than African American soldiers is Matthias Reiss’s book *“The Blacks Were Our Friends” : German Prisoners of War in the American Society 1942-1946*.<sup>22</sup> Reiss addresses many of the typical topics of POW studies such as the labor of POWs; however, he makes observations that normally go unmentioned. Reiss states that German POWs who participated in the reeducation program, meant to democratize POWs, were quick to point out the poor treatment of African Americans

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 283.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 285.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 289.

<sup>22</sup> Matthias Reiss, *“Die Schwarzen waren unsere Freunde” : Deutsche Kriegsgefangene in der amerikanischen Gesellschaft 1942-1946* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2002).

and Native Americans were not much different than their treatment of the Jews. Furthermore, Reiss, using evidence from a New Mexico farmer, argues that POWs were not paid as much as American workers.<sup>23</sup> Next, Reiss uses an African American newspaper, *East Tennessee News*, to show the concern that the cheap labor of German POWs would take jobs away from African Americans.<sup>24</sup> However, these concerns did not worsen the relationships between African Americans and German POWs. Reiss uses interviews with former POWs who speak fondly of African American coworkers since all experienced the same difficult conditions in the fields.

Importantly for this thesis, Reiss includes in the footnotes the testimony of an African American soldier, Sergeant Edward Donald, stationed at Camp Claiborne.<sup>25</sup> In this testimony, Donald reports that German POWs were “given freedom of movement and had access to facilities denied black American soldiers. They [German POWs] were given passes to town when black soldiers were confined to the area and did not have their privileges.” Reiss also analyzes an article published on April 28, 1944, in *Yank, The Army Weekly*, a magazine published by the U.S. military during World War II. The article tells of an incident involving African American soldiers traveling from Camp Claiborne to Fort Huachuca, Arizona. The African American soldiers were upset to see that German POWs were allowed in the train station’s restaurant while the African American soldiers were forced to go to the kitchen.<sup>26</sup> These two examples represent how African Americans across the United States were asked to die for their country and yet received worse treatment than the enemy received in the United States.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 238. German POWs were paid twenty-seven cents per hour while the normal pay was fifty cents per hour.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 259. Sgt. Donald’s testimony was published in Mary Penick Motley’s *The Invisible Soldier: The Experience of the Black Soldier, World War II*.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 219-220.



However, the racial problems of Camp Claiborne are much more complicated and not addressed by Reiss.

Within the scope of race relations, historians have looked at specific units which spent part of their training at Camp Claiborne. For instance, Joe Wilson, Jr., whose father was in the 761st Tank Battalion stationed at Camp Claiborne, devoted a chapter of his book to many first-hand accounts of the unit's experiences while there.<sup>27</sup> However, the unit was transferred to Camp Hood, Texas in September 1943, and the move ends Camp Claiborne's part in his book. Additionally, a few memoirs of African Americans who were stationed at Camp Claiborne for part of their service have been published.<sup>28</sup>

For other historians, Camp Claiborne holds a much smaller role in their coverage of Louisiana and southern race relations. The Lee Street riot on January 10, 1942, has received the most attention. The riot involved soldiers from both Camp Claiborne and Camp Livingston and made headlines across the country, including *The New York Times*.<sup>29</sup> Other historians have addressed the situation at Camp Claiborne by short inclusions in larger African American unit histories or in the civil rights history of Louisiana. For example, Adam Fairclough's *Race & Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* discusses the Camp Claiborne mutiny of August 1944. However, he focuses on the charges brought against the mutineers and

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<sup>27</sup> Joe Wilson, Jr., *The 761<sup>st</sup> "Black Panther" Tank Battalion in World War II: An Illustrated History of the First African American Armored Unit to See Combat* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1999).

<sup>28</sup> Harry B. Dunbar, *A Brother Like Me: A Memoir* (Wilmington, DE: Queenhyte Publishers, 1995). See also Truman K. Gibson, Jr. and Steve Huntley. *Knocking Down Barriers: My Fight for Black America* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> William M. Simpson, "A Tale Untold? The Alexandria, Louisiana, Lee Street Riot (January 10, 1942)," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 35, no. 2 (1994): 133-149.

minimizes the mutiny to a rampage.<sup>30</sup> In addition, Maggi Morehouse's account of racial problems at Camp Claiborne includes the mutiny. However, a few inconsistencies in her timeline and details of the account raise questions.<sup>31</sup> A comprehensive study of the events of the later years at Camp Claiborne not limited to a singular group of people or event, like the mutiny, follows.

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<sup>30</sup> Adam Fairclough, *Race & Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1999). See also Greta De Jong, *A Different Day: African American Struggles for Justice in Rural Louisiana, 1900-1970* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). Also, Phillip McGuire, *Taps for a Jim Crow Army: Letters from Black Soldiers in World War II*, Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1983. For a study of the South, see Kari A. Frederickson, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932-1968* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

<sup>31</sup> Maggi M. Morehouse, *Fighting in the Jim Crow Army: Black Men and Women Remember World War II*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000.

## Setting the Stage: Establishment and Early Use of Camp Claiborne

Camp Claiborne, originally known as Camp Evangeline, was located twenty miles south of Alexandria, Louisiana. After the war, the buildings and grounds of Camp Claiborne were sold or demolished. Part of what was Camp Claiborne is now managed by the U.S. Forest Service. However, at its height, Camp Claiborne stretched across 3,100 acres and had 684 buildings and 7,000 tents. Before American involvement in World War II, Camp Claiborne had been a U.S. Army base and was chosen to be one of the locations for the major training operations called the Louisiana Maneuvers in 1940 and 1941. The most famous American generals of WWII, from Patton to Eisenhower, took part in the Louisiana Maneuvers.<sup>32</sup>

Many units, including African-American units, trained at Camp Claiborne before and during WWII. It was at Camp Claiborne that the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division was activated on August 16, 1942 and trained for war. Less than two years later, the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division parachuted into France ahead of the D-Day Normandy invasions, putting the first Allied boots on the ground in occupied France. Similarly, in 1942, Camp Claiborne was also the site of the reorganization of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division. The 82<sup>nd</sup> would see action in Sicily and Italy before jumping in the D-Day invasion. Both the 101<sup>st</sup> and the 82<sup>nd</sup> moved from Camp Claiborne to Fort Bragg, North Carolina to complete their training.<sup>33</sup>

On April 1, 1942, the 761<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion was activated at Camp Claiborne where it would train for nearly a year and half before transferring to Fort Hood, Texas. General Patton specifically requested the 761<sup>st</sup> for combat in France and later Germany and Austria. This unit

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<sup>32</sup> Steve Culpepper, "England AFB not First Base to Feel Pinch," *State Times Advocate* (Baton Rouge, LA), April 14, 1991.

<sup>33</sup> 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division (Air Assault) Public Affairs, "101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division (Air Assault) Week of the Eagles," *U.S. Army*, last modified May 12, 2012, [https://www.army.mil/article/80190/101st\\_airborne\\_division\\_air\\_assault\\_week\\_of\\_the\\_eagles](https://www.army.mil/article/80190/101st_airborne_division_air_assault_week_of_the_eagles).

made history for being the first African American armored unit in combat for the U.S. Army and for spending 183 continuous days on the front lines. The 761<sup>st</sup> helped liberate more than thirty towns and four airfields.<sup>34</sup> The members of this unit were awarded about 300 Purple Hearts, sixty-nine Bronze Stars, eleven Silver Stars, a Medal of Honor, and a Presidential Unit Citation.<sup>35</sup>

In July 1943, the first women began to work at the Army Service Forces Training Center at Camp Claiborne. Naturally, this change was made to allow the male engineers to perform “more warlike duties.” One of the first women to work in the offices of the headquarters was Elizabeth Coker, who first began working for the War Department in December 1940.<sup>36</sup>

While Camp Claiborne was intended to serve as a U.S. Army base, it also performed other functions. From late 1943 to 1946, Camp Claiborne housed countless German prisoners of war (POWs). Furthermore, a small number of Italian POWs ended up at Camp Claiborne despite the fact that it was originally intended to confine only members of the German military.<sup>37</sup> The camp operated in three sections: the white American section near the front entrance, the African American section near the swampland, and the section for prisoners of war separate from the Americans.

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<sup>34</sup> Charles W. Sasser, *Patton's Panthers: The African-American 761<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion in World War II* (New York: Pocket Books, 2004).

<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth M. Collins, “Come Out Fighting: The First African-American Tankers in Combat,” *Soldiers: The Official U.S. Army Magazine*, last modified February 23, 2015.

<http://soldiers.dodlive.mil/2015/02/come-out-fighting-the-first-african-american-tankers-in-combat/>

<sup>36</sup> “Vet Woman Employe [*sic*] at Claiborne Year,” *Alexandria Daily Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), Aug. 9, 1944.

<sup>37</sup> “Prisoner of War Will Be Transferred,” *The Shreveport Times* (Shreveport, LA), Oct. 13, 1943.

## German Prisoners of War

On November 5, 1943, the first prisoners of war (POWs) arrived at Camp Claiborne. Originally, the camp was a temporary branch camp of Camp Polk, which was another dual Army base and POW camp approximately fifty miles west of Camp Claiborne.<sup>38</sup> The Eighth Service Command, located in Dallas, Texas, oversaw Camp Claiborne, along with all the other camps in Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. The Office of the Provost Marshal General (OPMG) oversaw all of the POW camps in the nine service commands across the United States.

On January 17, 1944, the Assistant Provost Marshal General designated Camp Claiborne as a permanent POW camp. The POW compound at first had a capacity of 864 prisoners.<sup>39</sup> However, by May 1945, the capacity of the camp increased to 1,620 POWs, but it was not filled to capacity.<sup>40</sup> POWs who ended up in Camp Claiborne, or any camp, did not necessarily stay in the same camp for the entirety of their captivity.

Prisoner of war camps across the country were routinely inspected by officials of the Office of Provost Marshal General. Neutral representatives of Switzerland and third-party organizations, such as the International Red Cross and the Young Men's Christian Association (Y.M.C.A.), also regularly inspected the camps and monitored the treatment of the POWs across the country. At the time of the Swiss legation's visit in late May 1944, there were around eighty

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<sup>38</sup> Report of Inspection of Prisoner of War Camp, Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, August 18, 1945, Pg 1; PMG Inspection Reports Claiborne, La.; Box 2657; Subject Files, 1942-1946; Record Group 389 [RG 389]; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD [NACP].

<sup>39</sup> Memorandum For Requirements Division, Army Service Forces, January 17, 1944; Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, Construction; Box 1420; Subject Correspondence Files Relating to the Construction of and Conditions in Prisoner of War Camps, 1942-1947; RG 389; NACP.

<sup>40</sup> Weekly Report on Prisoners of War, May 23, 1945, Pg. 2; POW – Weekly Report on POW's; Box 1848; Subject Correspondence Files Relating to the Internal Security Program, 1941 – 1946; RG 389; NACP.

enlisted men, three officers, and a warrant officer on duty at Camp Claiborne guarding 735 POWs.<sup>41</sup> However, the number of American personnel was not static. A later inspector from the OMPG reported ninety guards for 1067 prisoners. Of these ninety guards at the time of inspection in February 1945, only three had heard of the Geneva Convention. To remedy this problem, the Assistant Executive Officer, Lieutenant Stephen Zalawaksi, held two classes to teach the guards about the treatment for the POWs stipulated in the Geneva Convention.<sup>42</sup>

The grounds of the POW camp were described as very uneven terrain, which would become muddy after rain.<sup>43</sup> In a report from May 1945, Y.M.C.A. inspector Olle Axberg said, “Camp Claiborne is a rather extensive U.S. Army camp of which only a small part is the PW [prisoner of war] section. When the prisoners moved in from the African campaign, this camp had the appearance of a desert. One can readily see that all concerned have worked hard to beautify the place, with a striking result.”<sup>44</sup> For example, in April 1944, the POWs planted a seven-acre vegetable garden. In addition, the prisoners bought grass seed and small evergreen trees with the prisoner of war fund. The POWs also constructed many foot bridges over drainage ditches which ran through the camp and drained in the surrounding area.<sup>45</sup> In 1944, average annual rainfall totals for the surrounding region was sixty-eight inches, therefore a proper drainage system and small bridges would be important.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Report of Visit of Dr. R. Roth of the Legation of Switzerland to Prisoner of War Camp, Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, May 29 and 30, 1944, Pg 1-4; Other Inspection Reports Claiborne, La.; Box 2657; Subject Files, 1942-1946; RG 389; NACP.

<sup>42</sup> Field Service Camp Survey, February 14, 1945, Pg 1-11 255, Camp Claiborne, Louisiana; Box 1611; Decimal Files, 1943-1946; RG 389; NACP.

<sup>43</sup> Report of Visit to POW Base Camp, Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, May 8, 1944, Pg 1.

<sup>44</sup> Report of Visit to Prisoner of War Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, May 24, 1945, Pg 1; 255, Camp Claiborne, Louisiana; Box 1611; Decimal Files, 1943-1946; RG 389; NACP.

<sup>45</sup> Report of Visit to POW Base Camp, Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, May 8, 1944, Pg 1.

<sup>46</sup> Report of Visit of Dr. R. Roth, May 29 and 30, 1944, Pg 2.

Within the stockade, there were fifty-two barracks, four lavatories, four recreation buildings, three mess halls, one canteen building, and four buildings used for supply and administrative purposes.<sup>47</sup> The POWs' compound was surrounded by a double barbed wire fence that was approximately seven feet tall. To watch over the prisoners in the stockade, the camp was equipped with four guard towers. POWs could be brought from the stockade to one of the post's theaters for movies or to put on theatrical or orchestral performances.<sup>48</sup>

The majority of the POWs' barracks were drab-looking buildings of frame construction covered with tar paper and accommodated fifteen to seventeen prisoners. In April 1944, the Field Liaison Officer inspecting the camp, Captain D.L. Schwieger, observed that the POWs slept on canvas cots and suggested replacing the cots with steel folding cots. In addition, he observed seventeen to nineteen men in some of the barracks making them quite crowded. Captain Schwieger suggested evenly distributing the prisoners with approximately fifteen in each.<sup>49</sup> The barracks were reported to have gas heaters; however, the barracks most likely did not have air conditioners as they were not widely available during the war.<sup>50</sup> The temperatures at Camp Claiborne were uncomfortable because the extremes ranged from thirty-two degrees Fahrenheit in winter to 102 degrees in the summer.<sup>51</sup>

Another problem arising from the climate of Louisiana is mosquitoes. At one time, there were thirty cases of malaria reported within the POW camp. The prisoners who contracted this disease were treated and cured at the POWs' infirmary, but ultimately transferred to a camp in a

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<sup>47</sup> Report of Visit of Dr. R. Roth, May 29 and 30, 1944, Pg 2.

<sup>48</sup> Report of Visit to POW Base Camp, Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, May 8, 1944, Pg 1-3; PMG Inspection Reports Claiborne, La.; Box 2657; Subject Files, 1942-1946; RG 389; NACP.

<sup>49</sup> Report of Visit to POW Base Camp, Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, May 8, 1944, Pg 1-2.

<sup>50</sup> Report of Visit to Prisoner of War Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, B. Frank Stoltzfus, January 30, 1945, Pg 1; Other Inspection Reports Claiborne, La.; Box 2657; Subject Files, 1942-1946; RG 389; NACP.

<sup>51</sup> Report of Visit of Dr. R. Roth, May 29 and 30, 1944, Pg 2.

northern state. The POW's infirmary handled everyday accidents. When working outside the camp, a member of the sanitary personnel carrying a medical pouch accompanied the prisoners in case of snake bites or accidents.<sup>52</sup>

One death was reported at Camp Claiborne when a POW was accidentally electrocuted.<sup>53</sup> On June 12<sup>th</sup>, 1944, Will Weber was working in the laundry when he was electrocuted by an extractor machine.<sup>54</sup> A funeral was held for him, seen below, and he was allowed a military burial in accordance with the international regulations.



Figure 2. SC 333716. June 15, 1944. German Prisoners of War Collection 151, Edith Garland Dupré Library, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Lafayette, Louisiana.

The Geneva Convention required that captors adequately clothe the POWs. However, some POWs at Camp Claiborne restyled their clothing until camp officials put a stop to the

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<sup>52</sup> Report of Visit of Mr. Paul Schnyder of the International Red Cross Committee to Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, May 27, 2944, Pg 1-5; Other Inspection Reports Claiborne, La.; Box 2657; Subject Files, 1942-1946; RG 389; NACP.

<sup>53</sup> Report of Visit of Mr. Emil Greuter to Prisoner of War Camp, Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, January 17, 1945, Pg 3; Other Inspection Reports Claiborne, La.; Box 2657; Subject Files, 1942-1946; RG 389; NACP.

<sup>54</sup> "Prisoner Killed at Camp Claiborne by Electric Shock," *Alexandria Daily Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), Jun. 13, 1944.



practice. Each prisoner would be charged for any shortage or damaged clothing found during clothing checks. POWs who were registered interpreters at Camp Claiborne wore white bands in addition to their typical issued clothing.<sup>55</sup> Each article of clothing was painted with a “P” and “W” on the back or on shirt sleeves and pant legs. These markings prevented prisoners of war from being mistaken for Americans. Below is a photograph of typical clothing the prisoners wore at Camp Claiborne.

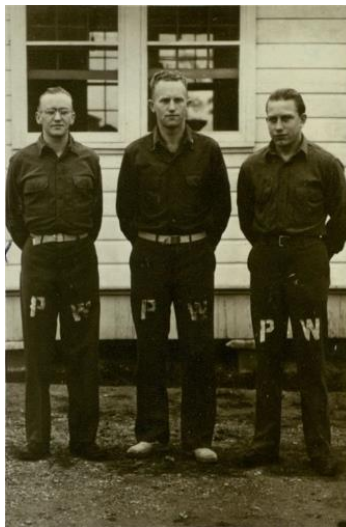


Figure 3. *Camp Claiborne, 1945*. 1945. German Prisoners of War (Matthew Schott Papers) Collection 151B, Edith Garland Dupré Library, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Lafayette, Louisiana. From left to right, the German prisoners of war held at Camp Claiborne are Gerhard Möckel, Paul Fuhrmann, and Paul Schmidt.

Prisoners of war assembled twice a day to be counted. Enlisted POWs went to work at the U.S. Army’s section of Camp Claiborne. In May 1944, eighty-five percent of prisoners were reported to be working outside of the stockade on what was described as “essential work.”<sup>56</sup> Unlike the cases shown in many other POW camps, the majority of jobs for the POWs of Camp Claiborne were on the attached U.S. Army base. For example, the prisoners worked in shifts at

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<sup>55</sup> Captains William J Bridges and Robert Mess, Ltr ASF, Office of The Commanding General, August 18, 1945; PMG Inspection Reports Claiborne, La.; Box 2657; Subject Files, 1942-1946; RG 389; NACP.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-3.

the post's laundry from the morning until 1:00 a.m. Other positions included shoemakers, carpenters, locksmiths, mechanics, bakers, gardeners, and other jobs that utilized the prisoners' skills. The POWs also worked in the kitchen, the dining rooms, and in the administrative offices. At Camp Claiborne, the prisoners were paid eighty cents for a day's work.<sup>57</sup> The POWs were able to use their earnings to purchase items from the canteen such as beer, newspapers, and other merchandise.<sup>58</sup>

Under the Geneva Convention, POWs were not allowed to work in war-related fields. However, there was an infraction of this rule at Camp Claiborne. The prisoners made target frames used in training tank destroyer units at the post. During an inspection in late April 1944, Captain D.L. Schwieger alerted the Camp Commander, Captain Harold Barker, and Post Commander, Colonel Landon Lockett, to this oversight and they both agreed to take corrective action.<sup>59</sup>

When not working, Camp Claiborne's prisoners had a large variety of outdoor and indoor leisure activities in which they could participate. For example, in an U.S. Army inspection report of the camp, Captain William F. Raugust noted the POWs enjoyed soccer, handball, gardening, wood carving, pool, and ping-pong. Musically inclined prisoners formed a twenty-piece band and a mandolin octet. In addition, the German POWs formed a theater group of twenty who regularly performed comedies and light dramas at Camp Claiborne.<sup>60</sup>

In February 1945, a quarter of Camp Claiborne's 1,067 POWs were enrolled in classes offered through the educational program. The twenty-three courses at the camp were sponsored

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<sup>57</sup> Report of Visit of Mr. Paul Schnyder, May 27, 1944, Pg 1-5.

<sup>58</sup> Report of Visit to POW Base Camp, May 8, 1944, Pg 3-4.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., Pg 3-4.

<sup>60</sup> Memorandum for Director, Prisoner of War Special Projects Division, February 28, 1945, Pg 1-2; 255, Camp Claiborne, Louisiana; Box 1611; Decimal Files, 1943-1946; RG 389; NACP.

by Southwest Louisiana Institute, Lafayette, Louisiana, known today as University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Of the twenty-three classes, eight were offered in English. In addition, the POW library reportedly had 1,000 books. Interestingly, it was reported that fifteen percent of the books were removed because they were on the objectionable list.<sup>61</sup> A Swiss inspector noted that one of the books to be removed from Camp Claiborne was Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, which likely was a personal item hidden by a POW.<sup>62</sup>

An article published in June 1945 by Peter Edson, a Newspaper Enterprise Association columnist, provides a plausible explanation of how objectionable books may have been included in POW camps like Camp Claiborne. Edson reports that the German government sent technical and scientific books "filled with doctored Nazi propaganda" to the libraries of smaller American colleges and universities. These books were not immediately recognized as tools of Nazi propaganda and were some of the many books donated to POW camp libraries.<sup>63</sup>

In addition to the books in the library, prisoners of war could buy newspapers and magazines from the canteen. While there was no newspaper published by the POWs of Camp Claiborne, reportedly due to lack of "sufficient talent," prisoners still had many options of newspapers and magazines available in the canteen. The selection included the *New York Times*, *Life*, *Time*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Fortune*, *Readers Digest*, *Newsweek*, *Liberty*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*, among others.<sup>64</sup> Beginning March 6, 1945, the Prisoner of War Special Projects Division published a national POW newspaper, *Der Ruf*. This POW newspaper was available in POW canteens and allowed prisoners to read articles from camp newspapers

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-3.

<sup>62</sup> Report of Visit of Mr. Emil Greuter, January 17, 1945, Pg 1-3.

<sup>63</sup> Peter Edson, "German War Prisoners Learn American Ways Under Army Educational Program," *NEA Daily News-Magazine* (New York, NY), June 18, 1945; 000.76 General #6; Box 1597; Decimal Files, 1943-1946; RG 389; NACP.

<sup>64</sup> Field Service Camp Survey, February 14, 1945, Pg 4-6.

throughout the country. This paper was part of the attempts to re-educate the German prisoners and to show the American, democratic way of life as the optimal choice for German and European reconstruction.

An inconspicuous part of the reeducation program was the films shown to the POWs at Camp Claiborne. In late May 1944, the Swiss representative visited the camp and reported that films were shown several times a week within the stockade. The POW Camp Commander, Captain H.H. Barker, recommended the POWs be allowed to attend films at Camp Claiborne because that was “the best means of indoctrinating POWs and that no opportunity should be lost of showing them moving pictures depicting the American way or life.”<sup>65</sup> While there had been a rule that POWs could not leave the stockade to watch films, Captain Baker asked Post Commander Lockett, to allow the POWs to leave the stockade for films. Colonel Lockett approved and brought the suggestion to Eighth Service Command.<sup>66</sup> During a later visit in January 1945, a different Swiss representative commented that movies were shown seven nights a week, almost too frequently. Furthermore, he asserted that there had been no censorship of the movies shown until Lieutenant Stephen Zalewski was appointed to Camp Claiborne and took the role of Recreation Officer. Interestingly, the representative also claimed that the POWs “seem suspicious and feel that undue influence is being brought to bear to force American ideals and ideas upon them.”<sup>67</sup> Unfortunately, the Swiss inspector’s report says nothing more about re-educating the POWs.

In the three years Camp Claiborne operated as a POW camp, a variety of German POWs were interned at the camp, including infantry, artillery, anti-aircraft, paratrooper, and Panzer

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<sup>65</sup> Report of Visit of Dr. R. Roth, May 29 and 30, 1944, Pg 1-3.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>67</sup> Report of Visit of Mr. Emil Greuter, January 17, 1945, Pg 1-3.

armored divisions. In addition, some POWs were from the *Sturmabteilung* (SA) in various regiments, *Schutzstaffel* (SS) Panzer Division, *Kampfgruppen*, and the Hermann Göring Parachute Panzer Division. The majority of prisoners were enlisted; however, some officers were also interned at the camp.<sup>68</sup> In terms of foreign nationals held as German prisoners of war at Camp Claiborne, one report noted that there were thirty-three prisoners from Czechoslovakia, forty-seven from Austria, and twenty-four from Poland. In addition, there were two from France, two from Italy, one from Lithuania, one from Romania, and one from the Free City of Danzig.<sup>69</sup>

While Camp Claiborne was not specifically intended for the POWs who exhibited extreme Nazi beliefs, ideologically-motivated incidents still occurred at the camp. In April 1945, Private Nikolaus Weber, a POW from Luxembourg, felt endangered because of his anti-Nazi political beliefs. Private Weber was placed under special observation for at least two weeks, and Camp Claiborne's Commanding Officer, Major Henry Draper, personally investigated the case. Major Draper reported to the Office of the Provost Marshal General (OPMG) that Private Weber was really an anti-Nazi. Draper also reported Weber was not a homosexual, a thief, nor of objectionable character. Draper believed that Weber was truly in danger and was not trying to receive a trip.<sup>70</sup> On May 14, 1945, the OPMG ordered that Private Weber should be transferred to Camp Butner, North Carolina before May 29, 1945.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Detention Rosters: Camp Claiborne, LA, October 27, 1945; Code #146 Camp Claiborne, LA; Box 2587; Subject Files, 1942-1946; RG 389; NACP.

<sup>69</sup> Report of Nationals of Countries Other Than Germany Held as German Prisoners of War; Box 3; Folder 3-08: Reports Camp Claiborne; German Prisoners of War (Matthew Schott Papers) Collection 151B; Edith Garland Dupré Library, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Lafayette, Louisiana.

<sup>70</sup> Report of Investigation of Pvt. Nikolaus Weber, 81G-45448, May 2, 1945; Camps – General: Camp Claiborne, Louisiana; Box 2477; Subject Files, 1942-1946; RG 389; NACP.

<sup>71</sup> ASF, Office of the Commanding General, Washington 25, D.C., May 14, 1945; Camps – General: Camp Claiborne, Louisiana; Box 2477; Subject Files, 1942-1946; RG 389; NACP.

Furthermore, in April 1945, confidential POW informants alerted American camp personnel at Camp Claiborne that three German POWs captured in Africa had spoken in the POW barracks about an attack. These informants said that when V-E [Victory Europe] Day arrived, the attackers would overpower the prison guards, take the weapons, and try to kill as many Americans as possible. Before being captured, the attackers would commit suicide. Since the camp officials were warned before V-E Day, they were able to prepare and prevent any uprising. In addition, there was fear that other German POWs in camps across the nation might be planning the same or a similar plan.<sup>72</sup> The Director of Personnel Security Division in the OPMG notified all the camps of the potential plans and suggested that all POW camps segregate the POW camp leaders and spokesmen.<sup>73</sup>

One of the topics inspiring much gossip and many misconceptions was the escape of the prisoners of war. Between 1944 and 1946, nine prisoners reportedly escaped from Camp Claiborne according to articles in the *Alexandria Daily Town Talk* and *The Shreveport Times*. The majority of escapes took place in 1944 with only two occurring in 1946.

On January 1, 1944, Franz Helm, a nineteen-year-old prisoner who reportedly could not speak English and spoke Viennese German, was reported missing.<sup>74</sup> The following day, Helm was captured in Reeves, Louisiana, roughly sixty miles southwest from the camp.<sup>75</sup> Next, on February 29, 1944, two unnamed POWs escaped after attending a movie. The two prisoners in

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<sup>72</sup> Memorandum for the Officer in Charge, April 19, 1945; POW: V-E Day Plans, Camp Claiborne, LA; Box 1848; Subject Correspondence Files Relating to Internal Security Program, 1941-1946; RG 389; NACP.

<sup>73</sup> V-E Day Plans of German Prisoners of War at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, April 9, 1945; POW: V-E Day Plans, Camp Claiborne, LA; Box 1848; Subject Correspondence Files Relating to Internal Security Program, 1941-1946; RG 389; NACP.

<sup>74</sup> "Hunt German War Prisoner," *The Shreveport Times* (Shreveport, LA), Jan. 2, 1944.

<sup>75</sup> "Escaped Claiborne German Prisoner of War Captured," *The Alexandria Daily Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), Jan. 3, 1944.

their twenties hid under the stage and later snuck out. Around one in the morning, an American worker returning home from a shift in the camp's laundry picked up the escapees walking down Highway 163 about seven miles from the camp and returned them to the camp.<sup>76</sup> Several months later, Ulfred Meiser and Erwin Hans Freymann escaped from Camp Claiborne by cutting through the fence on June 11, 1944. The two twenty-one-year-olds were apprehended in Shreveport the following day after they rode the train there from Alexandria. Meiser, who spoke English, admitted that they escaped to "'have a good time' and not with the idea of trying to get back to Germany."<sup>77</sup> Meiser and Freyman were disciplined under Article of War 104 with seven days extra fatigue duty. In addition, the American guards were reportedly admonished.<sup>78</sup> A few weeks later, Franz Sorgenfrei, a twenty-four-year-old prisoner, escaped on August 5, 1944.<sup>79</sup> Four days later, a thirty-year-old prisoner, Hans Sailer, also escaped from Camp Claiborne.<sup>80</sup> Sorgenfrei was apprehended in Many, Louisiana, about eighty miles northwest of Claiborne. Sailer was caught on August 15, 1944 in Merryville, Louisiana, which is about seventy-five miles southwest from the camp.<sup>81</sup>

There is nothing definitive to determine what, if anything, happened to prevent German POWs escaping between August 1944 and January 1946. A general increase in security at Camp Claiborne may have occurred after the trouble at the U.S. Army base in August 1944.

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<sup>76</sup> "2 Nazi Prisoners From Claiborne Escape, Captured," *The Alexandria Daily Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), Mar. 2, 1944.

<sup>77</sup> "2 German PW's From Claiborne Are Captured," *The Alexandria Daily Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), Jun. 13, 1944.

<sup>78</sup> Prisoner of War Escape Report; Box 3; Folder 3-08: Reports Camp Claiborne; German Prisoners of War (Matthew Schott Papers) Collection 151B; Edith Garland Dupré Library, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Lafayette, Louisiana.

<sup>79</sup> "Franz Sorgenfrei, Nazi PW, Escapes From Claiborne," *The Alexandria Daily Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), Aug. 7, 1944.

<sup>80</sup> "German Prisoner at Camp Claiborne Escapes, Sought," *The Alexandria Daily Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), Aug. 9, 1944.

<sup>81</sup> "Escaped Nazi PW is Apprehended," *The Alexandria Daily Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), Aug. 16, 1944.

Regardless, the next escapees were Josef Schingen and Gunter Schlitzger, who escaped together on January 9, 1946. Reportedly, both POWs could speak English.<sup>82</sup> Late the following day, the escaped prisoners returned to Camp Claiborne.<sup>83</sup>

In another case, Private Ivan D. McCarty, an American soldier, was sentenced in April 1945 to six months of hard labor “for drunkenness and for fraternizing with a German prisoner” at Camp Claiborne. The “fraternization” occurred when a drunk McCarty gave a drink to the prisoner who was at the mess hall. The prisoner was punished with a thirty-day sentence.<sup>84</sup>

While the exact date that the prisoners left Camp Claiborne is unclear, there are POW labor reports through February 15, 1946.<sup>85</sup> After the POWs were repatriated, they were given a paycheck for their labor while in captivity. However, one POW, Rudi Marker, wrote to his foreman from the mechanic shop at Camp Claiborne. Marker asked his foreman from Claiborne to cash the check, because he lived in Leipzig, the Russian occupation zone, where he was unable to cash it. Like many other POWs, Marker did not go straight home to his wife and daughter. He was transferred to the British and forced to work before being allowed to return to his family.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> “2 PWs Escape From Claiborne,” *The Alexandria Daily Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), Jan. 10, 1946.

<sup>83</sup> “2 PW Escapees Return to Camp,” *The Alexandria Daily Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), Jan. 11, 1946.

<sup>84</sup> “Soldier Sentenced for Giving Liquor to German Prisoner,” *The Shreveport Times* (Shreveport, LA), Apr. 21, 1945.

<sup>85</sup> Prisoner of War Camp Labor Report, February 16, 1946; Claiborne, Louisiana; Box 2506; Subject Files, 1942 - 1946; RG 389; NACP.

<sup>86</sup> “Former PW Here Says Soviets Won’t Cash U.S. Check,” *The Alexandria Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), Apr. 19, 1948.



## Struggles of Injustice: African American Service Men and Women

Because Camp Claiborne was home to both German prisoners of war and African Americans, one could not help but notice how the other was treated. For example, *Yank, The Army Weekly* published a poignant letter by an African American corporal who was in the process of being transferred from Camp Claiborne to Fort Huachuca, Arizona. Corporal Rupert Trimmingham tried to get a cup of coffee at a train station, but he was forced to go into the kitchen while the German POWs enjoyed the lunchroom with white Americans. This experience was likely the breaking point after countless incidents of discrimination that the Michigan native faced in the South. The corporal writes of the experience in the letter published in *Yank* and voices the questions that he says each African American soldier pondered.

Are these men [German POWs] sworn enemies of this country? Are they not taught to hate and destroy... all democratic governments? Are we not American soldiers, sworn to fight for and die if need be for this our country? Then why are they treated better than we are? Why are we pushed around like cattle? If we are fighting for the same thing, if we are to die for our country, then why does the Government allow such things to go on?<sup>87</sup>

In these evocative questions, Corporal Trimmingham addresses one of the greatest insults of southern Jim Crow policies. However, African Americans serving at Camp Claiborne also endured many other challenges during their service.

Training in the Deep South was a shock for some African Americans who had never been in the South before. Jim Crow laws were deeply engrained in southern society and racial tension bubbled under the surface. Stories of racially charged violence and deaths were reported, and African American soldiers were rightly troubled by the discrimination they faced in rural

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<sup>87</sup> Rupert Trimmingham, "Democracy," *Yank, The Army Weekly*, April 28, 1944, 14, The National WWII Museum, 1994.001.0882. This incident and this letter has been used many times in historical works including in Matthias Reiss's book "*The Blacks Were Our Friends*" *German Prisoners of War in the American Society 1942-1946*, noted in footnote 24. The letter has also inspired a short story published in the *New Yorker*, theatrical plays, and historical specials on television.

Louisiana. Racial problems at Camp Claiborne and the surrounding area erupted on January 10, 1941, in what would be called the Lee Street Riot. Many conflicting reports surround the events, casualties, and injuries as a result of this night in Alexandria, Louisiana.<sup>88</sup>

Throughout the war, the U.S. Army continued to use Camp Claiborne to train soldiers and engineers. On June 29, 1942, the Engineer Unit Training Center was established at the camp to replace the Army Service Forces Training Center previously at Camp Claiborne. The units trained here, many of which were African American units, could complete engineering jobs as well as serve as infantry when needed in the field.<sup>89</sup>

Between January and August 1944, there were numerous incidents that likely led to the mutiny of African Americans at Camp Claiborne. For example, some residents near the camp claimed their homes were invaded.<sup>90</sup> In addition, the body of Sergeant J.F. Henderson of Camp Claiborne was found mutilated on the railroad on May 14, 1944. The twenty-three-year-old African American from Russville, Kentucky was survived by his wife.<sup>91</sup> What led him to die on the railroad tracks is unknown; however, Henderson's death likely inspired a great deal of gossip.

In addition, Private James Robinson, an African American soldier from Brooklyn, New York, was killed at a night club in the nearby town of Ville Platte on August 6, 1944. According to the newspaper article, Robinson shot and critically wounded two members of his company,

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<sup>88</sup> For more on the Lee Street Riot see William M. Simpson, "A Tale Untold? The Alexandria, Louisiana, Lee Street Riot (January 10, 1942)," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 35, no. 2 (1994): 133-149.

<sup>89</sup> James P. Barnett, Douglas J. Rhodes, and Lisa W. Lewis "Remembering the Sacrifice: Historic Camp Claiborne, Louisiana," United States Department of Agriculture, last modified August 2015. [https://www.srs.fs.usda.gov/pubs/gtr/gtr\\_srs210.pdf](https://www.srs.fs.usda.gov/pubs/gtr/gtr_srs210.pdf).

<sup>90</sup> "Negro Sergeant Found Mutilated, Dead on Tracks," *The Alexandria Daily Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), May 20, 1944.

<sup>91</sup> "Negro Sergeant Found Mutilated, Dead on Tracks," *The Alexandria Daily Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), May 20, 1944.

Private James Tapp and Corporal Esterman Ross, while at the African American nightclub. The situation was broken up by two African American military policemen. Then Robinson took one of their revolvers and began to shoot again. The civilian officers arrived and Robinson allegedly turned the weapon on them, which prompted the chief of police to shoot Robinson.<sup>92</sup> Across the country, other news stories questioned the use of force by white police in other incidents, so Robinson's death may have been a topic of discussion and speculation at the camp.

Also in early August, allegations of rape or assault by African American servicemen began to cause problems in the community surrounding Camp Claiborne. First, on August 7, 1944, a white girl claimed she was attacked by an African American. Civilian police investigated the girl's claim, but "they doubted that an attack occurred in the city."<sup>93</sup> The following day, the wife of a white sergeant was home alone with her baby when she claimed that she was assaulted by an African American, whom she believed to be from Camp Claiborne. The family was living about a mile and half from the camp where her husband was working.<sup>94</sup> The third allegation came the following week from a sixty-year-old woman. On August 14, 1944, she said that an African American soldier attempted to assault her three miles west of Camp Claiborne on a highway. After her allegations, military police and the Sheriff's deputies searched for the alleged assailant.<sup>95</sup> These allegations were reported to the War Department, with one notable difference – the Southern Defense Command reported that the sergeant's wife was not simply assaulted as the newspaper reported but raped. This military report also said that the local civilians formed a posse and attempted to find the alleged attacker of the sixty-year-old woman. This group of

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<sup>92</sup> "Claiborne Negro Soldier Shoots 2, Killed by Police," *The Alexandria Daily Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), Aug. 9, 1944.

<sup>93</sup> "Second Criminal Attack by Negro Reported in Area," Aug. 9, 1944.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> "Claiborne MPs Continue Search for Assaulter," *The Alexandria Daily Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), Aug. 16, 1944.

civilians was unsuccessful in finding the attacker, but the local mob succeeded in stirring up already strained race relations.<sup>96</sup> Ultimately, Private Lee R. Davis, a nineteen-year-old African American, was arrested for stealing a car from his unit and was later identified by the sergeant's wife as her assailant. During questioning, Davis admitted to a number of crimes including the assault of the sergeant's wife and the attempted assault of the elderly woman.<sup>97</sup>

On August 16, 1944, a false rumor spread that four African Americans were attacked and shot by locals in the bivouac area. This rumor was likely regarded as true because of the posse reported outside the camp two days before looking for the assailant of the old white woman. By the evening of August 16<sup>th</sup>, a group of around 200 armed African American enlisted men assembled without instructions according to military documents. They insisted that they did not believe the Commanding Officer when he claimed the rumors were false. The enlisted men insisted on seeing to the safety of the four African Americans who were allegedly attacked. Once assured of their safety, the group returned to camp and returned the vehicles that they used. However, two hours after the vehicles returned, members of the 1328<sup>th</sup> Engineer Regiment stole ten vehicles, and the armed troops drove off. The next morning, the vehicles were returned and six members of the 1328<sup>th</sup> Regiment were apprehended for the theft.<sup>98</sup>

Three officers then tried to check on the weapons, but African American mutineers ordered them out of the building. The officers opened fire, wounding an enlisted man. However, the enlisted men outnumbered the officers and forced the officers to open a safe holding ammunition. The mutineers proceeded to beat anyone who attempted to approach the

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<sup>96</sup> Classified Message from CG, Southern Defense Command, Ft Sam Houston, Texas, to War Department No: 12353, August 25, 1944, Pg 1; Race Riots: Racial Situation, Camp Claiborne; Box 1789; Reports of Race Riots and Strikes, 1942-1945; RG 389; NACP.

<sup>97</sup> "Claiborne Negro Held on Criminal Assault Charge," *The Weekly Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), Sept. 30, 1944.

<sup>98</sup> Classified Message from CG, Southern Defense Command, August 25, 1944, Pg 1.

dispensary.<sup>99</sup> It is unclear how the mutiny was ended. Newspaper articles later alleged that the military police used tear gas on the mutineers.<sup>100</sup>

Ultimately, seven units at Camp Claiborne had to be disarmed. Twenty-five men believed to be the ring-leaders were apprehended and transferred to another camp. Additional military guards were sent to Camp Claiborne, and nearby units were alerted to standby as reinforcements, if needed. Meanwhile, the local civilians remained fearful of more disturbances.<sup>101</sup>

News of the mutiny spread quickly. For example, the day after the incident, a New York news syndicate contacted *The Alexandria Town Talk* inquiring about the situation and whether the city was off limits to soldiers because of African American riots. The journalist from Alexandria erroneously reported there were no riots and assumed that the interest was probably due to the fatal shooting of an African American at Camp Livingston on August 15<sup>th</sup> and the two African Americans injured in a “disturbance” on the 16<sup>th</sup>.<sup>102</sup> The Claiborne press relations office reported on August 17<sup>th</sup> that three men were wounded during an altercation. Shots had allegedly been “fired in the vicinity of the Negro soldiers’ service club area, after a ‘very few’ Negro soldiers had armed themselves from gun racks.”<sup>103</sup>

In a press conference held in mid-September, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson responded to questions posed by an article written in Indiana’s *The Washington Times-Herald* about the mutiny. Stimson responded by saying that an investigation was in progress. However,

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., Pg 2-4.

<sup>100</sup> “Stimson Denies Claiborne Riot,” *The Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), Sept. 23, 1944. These allegations were first printed in *The Washington Times-Herald* and reprinted in *The Chicago Defender*.

<sup>101</sup> Classified Message from CG, Fourth Army, Ft Sam Houston, Texas, to War Department No: 12352, August 25, 1944, Pg 1; Race Riots: Racial Situation, Camp Claiborne; Box 1789; Reports of Race Riots and Strikes, 1942-1945; RG 389; NACP.

<sup>102</sup> “New York Told Alexandria Quiet, No Negro Riots,” *The Alexandria Daily Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), Aug. 18, 1944.

<sup>103</sup> “Stimson Denies Claiborne Riot,” Sept. 23, 1944.

the numbers of troops involved were nothing like the 16,000 African American mutineers mentioned in the article. Furthermore, he said that the administration had not intervened in the investigation, contrary to the article's claim that the War Department was waiting for the presidential and congressional elections to pass before investigating.<sup>104</sup>

For eight days, nothing more was reported. Then, on August 29, 1944, the Eighth Service Command reported that an African American soldier of the 1328<sup>th</sup> Engineer Construction Battalion "was hit by a stray bullet while in the colored area," and by the following day that the "origin of the bullet [has] not yet [been] determined."<sup>105</sup> No further reports were filed on this incident, but it is unusual that no one on a busy Army base witnessed or reported knowing anything about the shooting.

Further trouble occurred on September 3, 1944, when First Lieutenant Hermit Bates killed Private Leonard T. Washington after Washington allegedly "assaulted two other white officers and was threatening Lt. [Lieutenant] Bates."<sup>106</sup> The shooting took place near the Turkey Creek bivouac area, which is southeast of Camp Claiborne. In an announcement by the OMPG, Private Washington, a twenty-six-year-old African American from New Orleans, "had been drinking and was disorderly. After he attacked two other officers, he was placed under arrest, but broke arrest...He was brought back to the bivouac area and it was then that he attacked Bates and was shot and killed."<sup>107</sup> Lieutenant Bates requested that the OPMG give him a safe place to stay, because he feared that African American troops would seek him out in retribution of their

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Memorandum for Record, Subject: Occurrence at Camp Claiborne, LA, August 30, 1944; Race Riots: Racial Situation, Camp Claiborne; Box 1789; Reports of Race Riots and Strikes, 1942-1945; RG 389; NACP.

<sup>106</sup> Interoffice Memorandum, September 4, 1944; Race Riots: Racial Situation, Camp Claiborne; Box 1789; Reports of Race Riots and Strikes, 1942-1945; RG 389; NACP.

<sup>107</sup> "Negro Soldier Killed by White Claiborne Officer," *The Alexandria Daily Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), Sept. 9, 1944.

friend's killing. Camp officials feared another camp riot, like the one that occurred little more than two weeks prior.<sup>108</sup>

After the mutiny, many of African American units were transferred from Camp Claiborne to other locations across the country. For example, two of the African American engineering regiments, the 1324<sup>th</sup> and 1325<sup>th</sup>, were being transferred from Camp Claiborne to Fort Huachuca, Arizona. While aboard the train, forty-three men were removed from a train for disorderly conduct on September 14, 1944.<sup>109</sup> In addition, in November 1944, the War Department ordered the transfer of the African American Women's Army Corps (WACs) stationed at Camp Claiborne. According to a *Cleveland Call and Post* article, the War Department was trying to find "a more suitable location" for the ladies of the WACs.<sup>110</sup>

Meanwhile, fourteen African Americans were charged and tried in court-martials.<sup>111</sup> Originally, twenty-seven African Americans had been arrested on August 16, 1944, after the mutiny.<sup>112</sup> One soldier, Private Leroy McGary, was given the death sentence, which had to be approved by President Franklin D. Roosevelt before the execution could take place. An Army announcement said that McGary was revealed to be "the leader of the mob that broke into a company supply room, taking rifles and ammunition."<sup>113</sup> Phillip Davis, Technician Fifth Grade, was sentenced to life imprisonment for holding two officers prisoner during the mutiny. For

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<sup>108</sup> Interoffice Memorandum, September 4, 1944.

<sup>109</sup> Memorandum for Record, September 16, 1944; Race Riots: Racial Situation, Camp Claiborne; Box 1789; Reports of Race Riots and Strikes, 1942-1945; RG 389; NACP.

<sup>110</sup> Harry McAlpin, "WACs to be Moved From Camp Claiborne, NNPA Learns," *Cleveland Call and Post* (Cleveland, OH), Nov. 2, 1944.

<sup>111</sup> "3 Negro Soldiers Convicted in Claiborne Riot," *The Alexandria Daily Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), Oct. 5, 1944.

<sup>112</sup> "27 Negro GIs Arrested After Claiborne Fracas," *The Alexandria Daily Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), Aug. 18, 1944.

<sup>113</sup> "2 Claiborne Negro Soldiers Found Guilty of Mutiny," *The Alexandria Daily Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), Sept. 26, 1944.

failing to attempt to suppress the mutiny, Sergeant Conway Price was given a nine-year sentence of hard labor.<sup>114</sup> For their roles in the mutiny, six others were sentenced to life imprisonment, two others were given thirty-year sentences, and three sentenced to twenty-five years. Only one man was acquitted of the charges. Furthermore, other soldiers were tried in lower courts for minor offenses in the mutiny. All cases were to be reviewed by the commanding general of the Eighth Service Command and the Judge Advocate General Department.<sup>115</sup> The New Orleans branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) wrote to Thurgood Marshall, who was the special NAACP council at the time, in protest of the Camp Claiborne trials. McGary was sent to Fort Sam Huston to await execution. About a month after his sentencing, McGary was granted a stay of execution.<sup>116</sup>

The mutiny was not the end of the problems for the African Americans at Camp Claiborne. After the mutiny, African American units had their weapons taken. Soldiers complained that the “no-discrimination order” pertaining to post exchanges, Army movie theaters, Army trucks, and Army buses had not been read or carried out. As *The Chicago Defender* wrote, morale was low and “Camp Claiborne is still seething with hate and Jim Crow despite recent War Department ‘assurances’ that all is well here.”<sup>117</sup> In addition, there continued to be allegations of theft and assault. For example, on September 11, 1944, Private Henry Boggs, an African American from Camp Claiborne, was arrested for allegedly molesting two women.<sup>118</sup> On November 2, 1944, another African American soldier, John Thompson, was arrested for

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<sup>114</sup> “Four Sentenced in Claiborne,” *The Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), Oct. 7, 1944.

<sup>115</sup> “3 Negro Soldiers Convicted in Claiborne Riot,” *The Alexandria Daily Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), Oct. 5, 1944.

<sup>116</sup> “Granted Stay of Execution,” *The Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), Oct. 21, 1944.

<sup>117</sup> John Le Flore, “All’s Not Well at Claiborne,” *The Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), Nov. 18, 1944.

<sup>118</sup> “Police News: Negro Arrested,” *The Alexandria Daily Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), Sept. 11, 1944.



allegedly attacking a white woman in the city at approximately four thirty in the afternoon.

Allegedly, Thompson had been drinking and “jumped on the woman,” before she broke his hold and called for help. Thompson was eventually arrested after he “forcibly entered” another man’s car.<sup>119</sup>

Through all the problems the African Americans faced, they still managed to succeed in completing their work assisting in the training of others at Camp Claiborne and improving the surrounding area. For example, local newspapers lauded the African American soldiers from Camp Claiborne for rebuilding the highway to Cocodrie.<sup>120</sup> Albert Spurlock, a member of the first class of African American officers in the Corps of Engineers who was stationed at Camp Claiborne with the 1311<sup>th</sup> Engineering Unit, said that the Army did not slight African American troops’ equipment as they were slighted in civilian public schools.<sup>121</sup>

Furthermore, African American women in the WAC were trained to be nurses and cared for white servicemen at the Camp Claiborne hospital. One nurse, Mabel Anderson, inspired a small change to occur at Camp Claiborne. She finished up a shift at the hospital and went to eat at the mess hall. There were a few white soldiers across the room, so Anderson decided to sit at one of the many empty tables for the white soldiers. At this point, white soldiers sat in the front of the hall, African American WACs in the middle, and African American men in the back. One of the attendants told her that she could not sit in the white section. Seeing that the tables were empty, Anderson responded that she did not see why she could not sit there but ultimately left without eating. The next morning, she was ordered to meet with the head of the mess hall, who

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<sup>119</sup> “Claiborne Negro Soldier Accused of Attacking Woman,” *The Alexandria Daily Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), Nov. 3, 1944.

<sup>120</sup> “Claiborne Negro GIs Bebuild [sic] Cocodrie Road,” *The Weekly Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), Sept. 2, 1944.

<sup>121</sup> Carol Farrow, “Albert Spurlock,” Albert Spurlock Collection (AFC/2001/001/29071), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, February 19, 2005.

tried to impress the rules on her. Anderson had the courage to argue that if she was good enough to treat the soldiers in the hospital, then she should be able to eat near them. She was dismissed, but the next day she noticed that the African American WACs were allowed to sit at the first tables while the white men were moved to the middle.<sup>122</sup> While this change may not seem like monumental since the mess hall remained segregated, this change demonstrates that the South and the military were not immovable in their thinking and policies. Others, like Mabel Anderson, continued to fight the injustices and continued to make small steps in military and civilian life.

Since WWII, the U.S. military and the South have changed drastically. Nearly three years after the dropping of the atomic bombs, President Truman officially integrated the U.S. Army with Executive Order 9981. Unfortunately, racial problems still exist. However, Albert Spurlock, an African American officer in the Corps of Engineers at Camp Claiborne, believes that the U.S. Army is “a good example of how integration can work” and that today the Army is “one of the best places in the world for a young black American that isn’t going to college.”<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> “Biographical Information,” Mabel B. Wright-Laney Anderson Collection (AFC/2001/001/66247), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

<sup>123</sup> Carol Farrow, “Albert Spurlock,” 2005.

## Conclusion

Today, not much remains of the former U.S. Army base and prisoner of war facility, Camp Claiborne. The base “was declared surplus to the needs of the war department effective January 4 [1946],” meaning the equipment and property would be sold or “disposed” by the government’s agency, Reconstruction Finance Corporation.<sup>124</sup> For example, thirty mess halls and twenty hospital units were transferred from Camp Claiborne to Louisiana State University to be converted into dormitories.<sup>125</sup> In 1947, the property reverted back to the Kisatchie National Forest. Today, only a few informational panels about Camp Claiborne remain near the former civilian administration and engineer’s buildings.

While living in Louisiana’s Camp Claiborne at the same time, African American service members and prisoners of the German military experienced different treatment. The African American soldiers trained at Camp Claiborne and throughout the country were willing to sacrifice their lives, if need be, to defend democracy in foreign lands. However, they received second-class treatment in their home country and in their Army. Meanwhile, the enemy, German POWs, received much better treatment in Louisiana and other American states. Two different codes outlined the treatment of these two groups, for African Americans the Jim Crow laws, and for German POWs the Geneva Convention. Officially, Jim Crow mandated “separate but equal” facilities for African Americans in the South; however, this was not the case at Camp Claiborne or in most of the segregated facilities in the South.

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<sup>124</sup> “Camp Claiborne Declared Surplus Effective Jan. 4,” *Alexandria Daily Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), Jan. 12, 1946.

<sup>125</sup> “30 Mess Halls to Go to LSU From Claiborne,” *Alexandria Daily Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), Sept. 14, 1946.

Before the United States entered the war, racial relations in the Jim Crow South were tense. African Americans were accused of crimes, threatened, and even lynched.<sup>126</sup> Camp Claiborne and the surrounding area were a powder keg waiting to erupt. Two of the results of the mounting tensions were large-scale, racially charged events that made national news. However, the Lee Street Riot and the Camp Claiborne Mutiny were just two of the many race riots and mutinies that happened across the country during the war.

After the war, a former German prisoner from Bavaria wrote back to a Camp Claiborne fireman that he would always remember “how fair and kind you all treated us, so that we brought home the best impression of the people in Louisiana.”<sup>127</sup> However, this was likely not the case for the African Americans who lived through segregation, the Lee Street riot, and the Camp Claiborne Mutiny.

While racism was rife in the South during the war, small harbingers of change could be seen. For example, Mabel Anderson inspired the change that gave African Americans WACs equal seating in Camp Claiborne’s mess hall. Small steps, like Anderson’s, showed that the Army and the entire South could change if those in positions of power were open to reason.

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<sup>126</sup> Takaki, *Double Victory*, 29.

<sup>127</sup> “German PW Favorably Impressed by Stay Here,” *Alexandria Daily Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), Jul. 25, 1947.

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