INSIDE THE WIRE:
Aliceville and the Afrika Korps

by Randy Wall

Courtesy of Alabama Heritage

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The Palmetto State
GOES TO WAR
South Carolina and World War II

at the
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Today, as we mark the 50th anniversary of the United States’ participation in World War II, we pause to ponder this conflict which truly did affect most of the globe. Many of us are familiar with the battles and politics of the struggle. We are much less familiar with the fate of the millions of captured soldiers. Some North Americans have heard stories of the American, British and Russian prisoners of war who languished in Axis prisoner-of-war camps. But what do we know of the nearly 426,000 Axis soldiers who were incarcerated in the U.S?

This article, originally published by Alabama Heritage magazine in 1988, is being reprinted to accompany the South Carolina State Museum exhibition “The Palmetto State Goes to War: South Carolina and World War II,” December 7, 1991 to January 4, 1993. Although “Inside the Wire: Aliceville and the Afrika Corps” does not relate directly to the South Carolina prisoner-of-war camps, Aliceville resembled, on a larger scale, the 24 camps in the Palmetto State. The photographs and text give a detailed description of life for German prisoners of war in the Southeast.

The work, recreation and art of the German soldiers interned at Aliceville resemble those of prisoners in South Carolina camps such as Fort Jackson, Aiken and Bennettsville. The climate and terrain were similar, and the local residents had the same sorts of needs for prison labor. Unfortunately the lives of prisoners of war were not as well documented in South Carolina as they were in Ali¿èville. Until more photographs and more people (both German and American) who remember the camps can be found, Aliceville will be the best case study we have for understanding what prison camps were like in the Palmetto State.

Although the living conditions for Allied prisoners of war were very precarious, American officials gave Axis POWs comparatively good treatment because they feared retaliation against Allied POWs, particularly Americans, if they did not. Both sides were required by a 1929 Geneva Convention to treat prisoners of war humanely. Americans followed the convention almost to the letter, unlike their allies or the Germans. However, once Germany surrendered, the treatment of German soldiers in the United States worsened for several months.

There are a number of scholarly studies about prisoners of war on the national scene, but there are few general accounts readily available to the lay person. Consequently, the South Carolina State Museum would like to thank the staff of Alabama Heritage for allowing this piece to be reprinted. We particularly want to recognize the valuable assistance provided by Bonnie LaBresh, marketing director, and Guy Hubbs, assistant editor, as well as the permission of the author, Randy Wall, to reprint his work.

Fritz Hamer
Curator of History
INSIDE THE WIRE:

Aliceville and the Afrika Korps

by Randy Wall
The slow-turning fans above the soda fountain at Jones' Drugstore in Aliceville brought scant relief from the sultry heat. It was August of 1942 and the Corps had arrived—the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Everyone had seen them, with their tripods and transits, squinting down imaginary lines over on Doc Parker's land, near the dairy now operated by the doctor's son, Tom. The crowd at the drugstore argued endlessly about the significance of the Corps' presence. Perhaps a military base would be built. There was even the wild rumor that the land would be used to house captured Japanese soldiers. Finally, on September 24, the local paper released the news. Although details were sketchy, the paper confirmed the conjecture that had monopolized Aliceville gossip for six weeks: "The project will be an alien concentration camp."

It was then that the rumors began in earnest. The Japanese were definitely coming to Aliceville. Employees of the Algernon Blair construction firm, from Montgomery, knew nothing of the camp's future occupants and were unable to dispel the rumor. They were simply there to do a job.

Under the supervision of Major Karl H. Shriver, Corps of Engineers, the Aliceville camp was rapidly erected that fall, and the impact of the construction payroll on the community was immense. Up to $75,000 per week was pumped into the Aliceville economy, area rooming houses were filled to capacity, and in the weeks before
Christmas the town experienced nearly total employment.

The camp, with its 400 frame barracks, capable of housing 6,000 prisoners and nearly a thousand civilian and American military personnel, was activated on December 12, 1942. Yet no prisoners arrived, and the new barracks remained empty throughout the wet spring of 1943.

The normally tranquil Aliceville community (population 4,800) was anything but tranquil during the final weeks of May 1943, as the sprawling camp buzzed with activity and the town, once again, was inundated with rumors of new prisoners. The excitement reached a peak when word spread that the Aliceville camp was to become the home for members of German Field Marshall Erwin Rommel’s Afrika Korps. At last the town had an answer.

For British and Commonwealth forces, their crushing defeat of the Germans at El Alamein, Egypt, in October 1942, was a long-awaited turning point in the war in North Africa. That same victory, however, had exacerbated prisoner-of-war problems for the British. They were already holding over 130,000 Italian prisoners. At El Alamein alone they picked up an additional 30,000 Germans, and new prisoners were being captured daily, among them large numbers of Hitler’s Afrika Korps [see box, pages 6-7]. The space-pressed British needed help, and the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff responded to urgent pleas, agreeing to accept prisoners on American soil. Thus was set in motion a series of events that would bring the Afrika Korps to the countryside of Alabama.

For the first contingent of German prisoners destined for this state, the rumors had begun even before they left North Africa: Capture by the Americans meant certain starvation. New York City had been leveled by German bombs. The Statue of Liberty was now a heap of twisted scrap metal. When the prisoner transports steamed into New York harbor and other eastern ports, the captives had stood at the railings and gawked at the towering skylines, at the thousands of cars, at the overwhelming bustle and vitality of the cities. Then there had been the train ride. Accustomed to the boxcars used to transport troops in Europe, the Germans had climbed warily onto passenger trains and stared out the windows, silently awed by the rich, unscathed farmland. Finally, they reached their destination, a place few, if any, had heard of before—Aliceville, Alabama.

"‘Germans comin’ in on the Frisco!’ was the cry that passed through the throngs of Aliceville residents who lined the railroad tracks along Highway 17 on June 2, 1943. It was late afternoon, almost a quarter to five, and some of the curious onlookers had spent the greater part of the day jockeying for positions from which to view the spectacle. They all wanted to look at the ‘Nazi supermen’ who were rumored to be on the special 4:45 train.

No breakdowns in security would occur. Companies of soldiers were positioned along the entire length of highway that stretched from the railroad station to the camp. They were armed with rifles, machine guns, shotguns, and pistols. Many were equipped with bayonets. It was unquestionably the greatest show of armed force most of the onlookers had ever seen, an "event," wrote one correspondent, "that rivaled the cyclone that hit Aliceville six years ago." The
across the state in four base camps.

Almost immediately after the establishment of the Aliceville camp—the largest of the Alabama POW facilities, with over 5,000 prisoners—construction had begun on a second camp near Opelika, which opened only days after Camp Aliceville. Built to accommodate 3,000 prisoners, the facility received its first trainload of POWs in early June 1943. Like the prisoners at Aliceville, most of the Opelika POWs were members of the Afrika Korps, although a few proved to be Arab deserters from the French Foreign Legion.

In late June 1943, 2,000 German POWs arrived at a third Alabama camp, constructed near Fort McClellan, just outside Anniston; a final base camp was opened almost nine months later, in February 1944. This internment facility—at Camp Rucker, near Enterprise—was hastily constructed in direct response to the area’s desperate need for farm laborers. It was the smallest of the four camps, with a prisoner population under 2,000, most of whom were enlisted men.

Following the German surrender to the Allies on May 7, 1945, Alabama's POW camps began to close. The Aliceville facility was deactivated in September 1945, and the Opelika camp closed in December. The Camp Rucker internment facility, however, stayed open until March 31, 1946, permitting camp authorities to continue POW work details that were vitally important to that labor-short region. The POW compound at Camp McClellan, which served as a processing center for many of the prisoners at the Alabama camps, was the final internment facility deactivated, April 10, 1946.

The buildings, materials, and even some of the land on which the camps stood were disposed of through a bid system operated by the War Assets Administration. The neat green buildings, the miles of plumbing, electrical cable, and barbed wire were removed in a piecemeal manner that took years to complete. Some of the land at Camp Opelika was sold to individuals who wanted to use it for industrial development; the city of Aliceville bought most of that camp’s land with plans to build an industrial park on the site; and the POW grounds at camps Rucker and McClellan were reclaimed by the military.
Even before his stunning military exploits in North Africa, Erwin Rommel had become a German national hero. Rommel, the son of a schoolmaster, had joined the army at eighteen and had served with distinction in World War I, when his keen understanding of battlefield tactics became apparent to his superiors. An infantry regimental officer in the years between the wars, Rommel, in 1940, was given command of Germany's Seventh Panzer Division, which played a decisive role in the defeat of France. Called the "Ghost Division" because its rapid movements and unexpected appearances terrified French military and civilians alike, the Seventh Panzers entered France from Belgium, raced on to the English Channel, and then darted along the western coast to capture Cherbourg. Because of Rommel's daring, brilliantly orchestrated performance as a tank commander in France, Hitler chose him to rescue the much-beleaguered Italian forces in North Africa.

Certainly the Italians needed help. Hoping to demonstrate Italy's military prowess and to carve out an empire equal to the one that Hitler was wresting out of Western Europe, Benito Mussolini had ordered his troops to invade British-occupied Egypt in June 1940. But the poorly trained Italians, despite their superior numbers, were no match for the British. Within six months they had lost nine divisions and more than 400 tanks; over 130,000 Italian soldiers were in British hands.

Embarrassed by Italy's North African debacle, Hitler dispatched German forces to bolster the remaining—and seriously demoralized—Italians. New divisions, including a powerful force of panzers and a light, mobile mechanized division, soon arrived in Tripoli. The troops that Hitler sent—soon the world would know them as the elite Afrika Korps—were among Germany's finest. At their helm was General Erwin Rommel.

Combining his own unorthodox military strategy with the Korps' uncanny ability to live and fight in the harsh North African desert, Rommel quickly demonstrated to the British and the world that the war in Africa was far from over. He took the offensive in the desert with the same "blitzkrieg" attacks that he had perfected on the battlefields of France, relentlessly shoving the British eastward and gaining a reputation as the "Desert Fox." "We have a very daring and skillful opponent against us," Prime Minister Winston Churchill told the House of Commons, "and, may I say across the havoc of war, a great general."

With the fall of the British fortress at Tobruk in June 1942, the desert war turned into a nightmare for the Allied forces. There appeared to be no stopping the brilliant German general; his Afrika Korps appeared equally invincible as it pursued the British forces across North Africa—to El Alamein.

There, the stiffened British resistance, led by the fiery Lieutenant General Bernard Montgomery, stopped the German onslaught at the El Alamein Line, in Egypt. The Germans suffered overwhelming defeat: 59,000 killed, wounded, or captured; hundreds of tanks and guns destroyed. The often cantankerous Montgomery, whose tactics in battle were as unorthodox as Rommel's, proved to be the Desert Fox's match. It was soon evident that unless the Germans received supplies and reinforcement, the Afrika Korps would be hammered back across the continent.

The retreat by Rommel and his Korps began in earnest in November of 1942. By the time the German withdrawal ended, the British had wrested virtually all of Libya from Rommel. The exhausted Afrika Korps attempted to

Field Marshal
Erwin Rommel
(Courtesy National Archives)
minimize losses in the months that followed El Alamein, but in March 1943, British antitank gunners struck a devastating blow, surprising one of Rommel's units and destroying fifty-two tanks. Three days later, Rommel flew to Germany in an attempt to dissuade Hitler from continuing the desert war, but his pleas went unheeded and Rommel was relieved of his command.

"Africa will be held and you must go on sick leave," declared the Führer. That decision sealed the fate of a quarter million Germans and Italians in North Africa. In early May 1943, the American First Army and the British Eighth joined forces, encircling the Axis troops at Tunis. As German defenses collapsed, the combined Allied army surged forward. The end for the Afrika Korps came quickly. By mid-May, a quarter million Axis soldiers in North Africa had laid down their weapons. Rommel's replacement, General Hans Cramer, dispatched one final message to the German High Command: "Munitions expended, weapons and war equipment destroyed. The Afrika Korps has fought to a standstill as ordered. The German Afrika Korps must ride again."

But it was an empty message that reached Berlin. As throngs of cheering French and Tunisians celebrated the Allied victory, members of the Afrika Korps poured into hastily constructed prisoner-of-war compounds west of Tunis. Many of them appeared at the detention center driving their own vehicles, with white flags prominently displayed. But most came on foot. For some of them, it was the beginning of a journey that would lead from one of the harshest deserts on earth to the tranquil countryside of Alabama.

Rommel himself would suffer a much harsher fate. Increasingly disillusioned with Hitler's conduct of the war and sickened by the atrocities ordered by the Nazis, Rommel joined the July 1944 conspiracy against Hitler. When the assassination attempt failed, Rommel was taken from his home by SS troops on October 14, 1944, and forced to swallow poison.
crowd became unusually still as the 4:45 Frisco pulled into the depot. Everyone gazed at the closed doors of the train: farmers straight from the fields, merchants who had long since locked up their stores for the afternoon, mothers who had sent sons of their own off to the war, children who found the enormous crowds a diversion from the monotony of another summer day. All eyes focused on the single set of doors as they opened and the first prisoner emerged into the late afternoon sunlight.

Five hundred members of the once invincible Afrika Korps poured off the train and stood blinking in the glare. Some still wore bandages; others limped visibly. Almost all had been baked a deep brown by the North African sun; most were plagued with a variety of skin diseases and nagging injuries. Yet some of the proud veneer of the Afrika Korps remained: the feathered slouch hat of a jaunty Bavarian, the hobnailed boots that made a crunching sound on the rough gravel, an occasional arrogant glance, an outright defiant stare. But in general, they were simply a tired, shocked group of prisoners wearing an assortment of tattered uniforms, all standing quietly, clutching meagre stores of possessions in their hands: tattered duffel bags, an occasional musical instrument, a checkerboard.

As the last prisoner of war climbed from the train and fell into the five-abreast formation, a guard moved down the lines and asked in German if any prisoner spoke English. A slim, bespectacled man in a torn, blue coat slowly raised his hand. He was led to the front of the formation, and with a resounding first step, the group began the last forced march any of them would make during World War II. For them, the war was over.

In the distance, a second train could barely be heard above the heavy boots of the departing prisoners. As the train entered the crossing and slowed to a stop, the same scene was played out again by five hundred new faces. For an instant, the wary eyes of both captors and captives were diverted when a dog fight broke out in the street. Several small boys began to shout and throw stones at the animals, who quickly separated, still snarling. For one brief moment, a touch of normalcy returned. The episode could have occurred in Berlin or Tripoli just as easily. Now, a few of the weathered Germans laughed out loud; most of them smiled, as did many of the onlookers. The remainder of the prisoners fell swiftly into formation, and the second group of prisoners, some still smiling, began their march. The steady, heart-beat sound of moving feet again filled the air. It was a sound that would be heard frequently in the next week, not only during the day, but occasionally even at night. Within a week, the prisoner-of-war camp held over 3,000 men—fliers, tank drivers, gunners, cooks, mechanics. Before the war ended, thousands more would arrive, and the sound of soldiers marching from the tiny depot would become permanently fixed in the minds of many Aliceville residents.

For Colonel F. A. Prince, commander of the Aliceville camp, the night the first prisoners arrived was a long one. The tough, hawk-faced West Point graduate had been mildly shocked by the condition of the prisoners he had seen at the depot. The physical effects of their North African defeat had been apparent; many would require immediate medical attention. The processing alone would last until dawn. This night would be the first real test of the Aliceville personnel.

The facilities and procedures for processing the incoming prisoners were efficient, but the sheer number of arrivals made the task laborious. Prisoners filled out identification slips and were given receipts for any money
they possessed. Their belongings were searched for both weapons and papers. As the men emptied their bags, spreading the contents out on the floor for inspection by the guards, a revealing assortment of personal items appeared—possessions that had survived blinding sandstorms, bursting artillery shells, and the terrible destruction in North Africa: religious medallions, dry, cracked photographs of nervous, smiling wives and saucer-eyed children, tiny hoards of salt and tea and toilet paper, harmonicas, even violins.

In an adjoining area, a small group of medical officers and technicians began the next phase, a preliminary examination designed to spot urgent medical problems and to gauge the overall condition of the prisoners. For most of the new arrivals, food had been limited throughout their duty in North Africa, and conditions had grown worse after their capture. There had never been enough food at the mass internment camps, and the situation had improved only slightly on the crowded ocean voyage to the United States. Most of the men were severely malnourished, a fact reported to Colonel Prince, who quickly made the decision to open the mess halls that night.

That was no simple task, yet by 2 A.M. the initial group of prisoners sat down to their first substantial meal in months. If the last nine hours had bewildered the German POWs, this they understood—food. Food in abundance—meat, eggs, vegetables, coffee—even a strange, sticky concoction that appeared to be made from mashed peanuts. After months in the desert living on military rations, the sights and smells in the mess halls that morning were almost beyond comprehension for the new arrivals. Some thought it was a trick, an edible form

No base camp in Alabama was without a newspaper written and printed by the prisoners. Camp Rucker had its Das PW Echo, Camp Opelika its Der Querschnitt (The Cross Section), Camp McClellan, Die Oase (The Oasis), and Aliceville, Der Zaungast (The Guest Inside the Wire), a copy of which is pictured (right). Also pictured is the printing press which the Aliceville prisoners purchased with their canteen funds. Prevented from printing any political discussions, the papers generally featured articles about camp activities, essays, poetry, short stories, cartoons, and puzzles. Few copies of any of these newspapers remain, and no copies survive of the Alabama POW paper that was criticized severely by U.S. military authorities—Camp McClellan’s Die Oase. After the military Special Projects Division labeled the newspaper “militantly Nazi” and “very dangerous,” the paper began to appear monthly rather than weekly (due to a “paper shortage”), and its editor, POW Paul Metzner, was transferred to a camp for uncooperative prisoners.
of propaganda that would soon end. Just the same, they cleaned their plates, ate even the condiments on the tables, and had refills of coffee.

The morning of June 3 brought the beginning of a new way of life for the veterans of the Afrika Korps. The sky threatened rain as the prisoners filed from their new quarters. They had been assigned to compounds that held a thousand men each, then to barracks quartering fifty prisoners. Arrayed around the barracks were mess halls, a hospital, several small indoor theatres, recreation areas, and storage facilities—a small city. Some of the barracks had radios, and several prisoners whistled the melody to a song they had only recently heard, "Pistol Packin’ Mama." It was a catchy tune, even though few of them understood the lyrics.

Within a week, the prisoner population had ballooned to over 3000, and the workforce of captives had begun to transform the camp. Wearing blue denim uniforms with the letters "PW" stenciled across the back, they toiled diligently in their spare time, improving their quarters and the grounds. They also took charge of their own cooking, and the smells of German pastries, of baking ham and boiling cabbage, soon permeated the air.

"Give them two weeks and you won’t recognize the place," predicted Colonel Prince to a visiting reporter. "They are damn good soldiers." And at least on the surface that June morning, both the "good" soldiers and the situation at the Aliceville prisoner-of-war camp did indeed seem well in hand. Yet, beneath the surface, problems were simmering that neither the colonel nor the reporter could have predicted.

Despite the best efforts of the small medical staff, several prisoners died from a mysterious respiratory disease in
the first months the camp was open. The hospital, now overflowing with more than fifty patients, was in need of physicians who spoke German. Although the prisoners' diet had improved substantially since their arrival, the physical condition of most remained only fair, at best. To further complicate matters, the health of some prisoners was being threatened by more than just an undiagnosed respiratory problem. Injuries and "accidents" had occurred recently that appeared to be more than accidental.

While Aliceville's medical staff and officials attempted to deal with the increasing health problems of the prisoners, a handsome young captain in the U.S. Army Medical Corps was completing his instruction at the Camp Ritchie Intelligence Training Center in Mississippi. Captain Stephen Fleck (page 26) was no newcomer to the horrors of war, nor to the atrocities committed by the Germans. As a young student in 1933, he had fled his native Germany, returning warily in 1935 to arrange his immigration to the United States, where he completed medical school. The slender Jewish doctor had become a U.S. citizen in 1941, and soon thereafter he had enlisted in the military. In a matter of months, he was rattling along the backroads of Alabama en route to his new assignment at the Aliceville internment camp. Once there, Fleck would be required to treat some of Adolph Hitler's most devoted soldiers, and although he did not know it yet, he would play an important role in helping to identify two of the camp's most serious health problems.

In early July 1943, Captain Fleck reported for duty at the Aliceville camp hospital. Fleck had made the decision to keep his fluency in German a secret from the prisoners, and for the next four months he did so. His tiny office, less than five by eight feet with scarcely enough room for his desk and a chair, adjoined the camp's only examining room. Next door was the infirmary with enough beds for thirty patients. But now that the daily patient census hovered around fifty, the doctors were forced to utilize a nearby "cabin" for the overflow.

Throughout the steamy month of July, Stephen Fleck, whose arrival had increased the camp's medical personnel by 50 percent, labored with Captain John Kellam and Major Arthur Klippen to solve the respiratory mystery that was rapidly approaching epidemic proportions. The deaths that had occurred prior to Fleck's arrival had shared a common pattern—follicular tonsillitis followed by bronchopneumonia. Despite "intensive therapy including tracheotomy," some of the patients had died—a choking, gasping, tortuous death. Although autopsy results indicated a form of diphtheria, the doctors were unable to confirm the diagnosis bacteriologically. July edged into August, and the hospital beds remained full.

Three more weeks passed before the trio of American doctors would find an answer. Bacteriological tests finally confirmed that they were dealing with pharyngeal diphtheria, a form of the disease virtually unknown in the United States.

On August 23, the first accurate diagnosis was made. Other similar diagnoses followed, and on September 5, Schick tests to determine immunity were begun on more than 6,000 people in the camp, both Germans and Americans. Nine days later the testing job was complete, and the results were
Painters and potters were given ample opportunities to display their talents. One POW painted his home in Bavaria (left) on the wall of the prisoners' mess hall.

(Painting courtesy Bobbie Coleman; photographs courtesy Aliceville Public Library)

Staggering to the three men: over 1,200 people had tested positive. Immunization with diphtheria toxoid would have to begin immediately. Many adults, however, had adverse reactions to the toxoid; there would never be enough beds. To compound this problem, diphtheria immunizations had not been routine in the German army, yet many of the prisoners steadfastly claimed that they had already been immunized.

In the early fall of 1943, the tiny group of American doctors, with the aid of several German physicians, began administering the toxoid to all persons testing positive on the Schick test. A complex immunization schedule was devised, with a lower dosage than had ever been used before. Within days, the results were encouraging. The lower dosage appeared to be successful. But as the deaths from diphtheria came to a halt, the deaths by other means began to increase.

By mid-September, the Aliceville camp was nearly filled to capacity with Afrika Korps members. The internment center, designed to accommodate 6,000 prisoners of war, had ballooned to almost 5,300 in only three months. American personnel totaled 1,029, including civilians. The camp had become in every way a city complete with everything any city has—including violence.

According to various informal surveys, fewer than 10 percent of all German POWs were devoted Nazis. Another 30 percent were considered party faithfus. During the first half of 1943 at least, little effort was made by U.S. military authorities to identify hardened Nazis when they arrived at the camps. The prisoners themselves, however, quickly learned the political sentiments of the new arrivals, and in many camps, a Lagergestapo—a secret
The POW acting company performed a variety of plays to approving audiences at Camp Aliceville.

(Courtesy Aliceville Public Library)
A police unit that operated from within—kept those POWs suspected of being less than faithful to Hitler in a state of constant terror.

Not surprisingly, in the early months, the camp at Aliceville, with its concentration of devoted Afrika Korps members, had more than its share of prisoner violence.

It did not take an autopsy for Dr. Stephen Fleck to determine the cause of death for the slender German on the examining table. The bruises around the man’s face and chest had already begun to form. It was clearly murder.

According to Fleck, “Most of [the murders] were accomplished with bare hands or some cooking utensil. . . . They cold-bloodedly killed either with knives or strangling during the night. We probably had two or three such deaths a month . . . anybody whom they suspected of wavering in his Nazi enthusiasm. Nobody would squeal,” says Fleck, “because the squealer likely would face a similar fate.”

Similar stories reached the ears of Jack Sisty, the camp chaplain’s assistant. “We heard that the camp’s Nazi leaders would fill socks with gravel and use them as weapons to keep the others in line.”

The accounts by Fleck and Sisty of the violence at Aliceville illustrate a problem in internment camps nationwide. At Tonkawa, Oklahoma, five Afrika Korps sergeants beat a German corporal to death using clubs and milk bottles. The attackers were tried by their American captors and hanged on a gallows in an elevator shaft. The prosecutor in the case was a young trial lawyer named Leon Jaworski, who would later become the U.S. special prosecutor in the Watergate investigations. According to government reports, between September 1943 and April 1944, at least seven Nazi-inspired murders and seventy-two suicides occurred in various U.S. internment camps—figures which suggest that a significant number of the “cold-blooded” murders described by Stephen Fleck and others were ultimately classified by the U.S. military as suicides.

But Dr. Fleck knew otherwise. Never revealing that he understood German, Fleck forced the prisoners to speak to him through an interpreter:

[I was] thereby able to prevent a few murders, I believe. I overheard some of their talk, probably when they thought I was not within hearing distance. For instance, “so-and-so” has said he was glad to be out of Africa, something of this sort, although often it was next to impossible to trace “so-and-so” since they only used first names. Only by knowing where a particular person was housed and likely to have contact with such a man could we arrange some shift in quartering which may or may not have prevented some murders. . . . It was likely the murders were not committed by any one individual against another, but rather by a small group of fanatics who might not have known themselves who delivered the fatal blow.

For two Aliceville POWs, the fatal blow came abruptly on August 26, 1943. In separate escape attempts, they were shot and killed as they crossed into the no-man’s zone between the two barbed-wire fences that surrounded the camp. “Our men simply were doing their duty,” said a weary camp commander, Colonel Prince. According to
Sergeant Jack Sisty, however, only one of the Germans was actually attempting to escape. Sisty recalls:

There was one that was really a murder. He [the prisoner] was on a detail, and there was a guard . . . whose brother was killed in the war, and he vowed he'd "get a German." He was in charge of the detail. In this part of the state, you can't find a stone larger than a pebble. He claimed that this German was picking up a stone to throw at him—and he shot him. That was real murder. He wasn't brought on trial or anything; he was kicked out of the army with a dishonorable discharge.

Although Sisty's recollection of the incident contradicts official reports ("shot in attempted escape"), his story is tragically similar to an occurrence at a temporary camp in Utah, in which a guard, who explained afterward that he hated Germans, opened fire with a .30 calibre machine gun into a row of tents. Eight sleeping prisoners were killed and twenty more were wounded.

Both at Aliceville and at the hundreds of other internment camps across the country, the "breaks" for freedom by POWs continued. During the five years of enemy captivity in the United States, German POWs made 2222 escape attempts. Only one ever made it all the way back to Germany, and he was captured within a mile of the front lines. Most escapees were recaptured within a matter of hours or days. Hans Becker and Claus Hoyer, two POWs from Aliceville, were captured at sundown on October 18, 1944, when they surrendered peacefully to military police. They had eluded capture for almost sixty hours by hiding in the swamps of the Tombigbee River. Six other Aliceville escapees got as far as the bustling streets of Memphis. According to Jack Sisty, "They got out of the range of our ability to chase them . . . stole a car, and were driving down some street in Memphis—on the wrong side—when the FBI caught them."

For many prisoners, sports provided a much-needed outlet from daily camp life. Although track events (like the one above at Aliceville) were popular, soccer matches consistently had the highest number of participants and spectators. On weekends and evenings, many of the Americans employed at the camps brought their families to watch the matches, which reportedly were so exciting that even the guards in their watchtowers couldn't resist cheering for their favorite teams. Other sports also had considerable followings—tennis, boxing, bowling (on outdoor alleys), and handball (on one occasion at Camp McClellan, over 300 prisoners played in a single tournament).

The leisure time of one Camp McClellan prisoner, a former circus worker, took a decidedly different direction. He built a small zoo and filled it with various local creatures captured by men on work details. His collection of alligators, birds, possums, snakes, foxes, and other local wildlife was housed in an enclosure built inside the compound. The Germans domesticated many of the animals, even training some of them to perform tricks, much to the amusement of everyone.

(Courtesy Aliceville Public Library)
compound into a semblance of home. Grass was sodded in front of the green, newly painted barracks, and the grounds were decorated with mosaics made from flowers and pebbles. Shrubs, even some trees, were planted, purchased with profits from the prisoners’ canteens—profits that would eventually pay for virtually all improvements in the camp and all recreational activities of the prisoners.

Construction of a brick amphitheatre also began in the spring of 1944. Chairs, benches, and tables—all made by the prisoners—appeared in the various compounds, and the camp came to assume an almost park-like appearance inside the wire.

In accordance with the articles of the 1929 Geneva Convention, enlisted men among the prisoners received an allowance of ten cents a day. (Officers of the grade of major or above received $40 a month; captains, $30 a month; and lieutenants, $20 a month. Aliceville, however, had few commissioned officers.) For work outside the camp, prisoners received an additional eighty cents per day. All wages were paid in the form of canteen coupons. Although the Convention decreed that only privates might be compelled to work outside the camp, many of the noncommissioned officers volunteered for outside work in order to earn the additional wages that such employment paid and to combat the boredom inherent in captivity.

Tension was high in the first work details that ventured from the camp. Small groups of three to six prisoners were escorted to their work site by a heavy complement of guards with automatic rifles, followed by a truck with machine guns. Few chances were taken by the guards, who often feared, yet respected, the Afrika Korps veterans. If a POW on a work detail
wanted to light a cigarette, a standard ritual ensued: The prisoner requested a match, usually through the use of hand signals, since few of them spoke English, and even fewer of the guards spoke German. The guard then dropped a matchbox and walked backward with his rifle trained on the prisoner. Only then was the prisoner permitted to pick up the matches and light his cigarette. To return the matches, the procedure was performed in reverse. Strict protocol between captor and captive was maintained during the first months that the camp was open. By the spring of 1944, however, tensions between guards and prisoners had waned, as each group settled into its role.

One young German prisoner, Hans Kopera, who occasionally worked on outside details, later described the change in prisoner-guard relationships: "Things were completely different [after the first few months]. We arrived in the woods; the soldiers put their rifles together. We started playing cards, chatted, laughed, and eventually worked, but nobody was afraid of the other. We were rather good friends. Of course, there were individual differences."

Because of the local manpower shortages created by the war, prison laborers were in demand around Aliceville and neighboring towns, and large groups of POWs were transported to outside labor details, usually on day trips. They worked at a variety of tasks ranging from timber cutting to peanut harvesting, and it was not uncommon for groups of POWs to be sent to other areas of the state, where they set up side camps, or "tent towns," housing both prisoners and guards. Most of these facilities lasted only as long as the job—a crop to harvest, acreage to clear,
pine resin to drain. Although the Germans, on the whole, were exceptionally capable workers, on one job at least, their skills proved minimal—picking cotton. Whether their ineptitude was contrived or legitimate, the result was the same. Few farmers were willing to pay for a laborer who could not pick his weight in cotton, and the German POWs seldom managed even half of that. Because of their incompetence with cotton, fifty-three truckloads of Aliceville prisoners were shifted to the peanut harvest on September 9, 1943.

One of the larger side camps was established at Tuscaloosa. For nearly a year, most of the laborers in the kitchens and laundries at the U.S. Army’s Northington General Hospital were Aliceville POWs. They lived in wooden barracks, surrounded by barbed-wire fences, on a parcel of land bordering Fifteenth Street, and they soon became an accepted sight to all who regularly passed the tiny camp.

Thousands of miles from family and friends, the Germans diligently sought diversions to relieve the loneliness and boredom. To the prisoners, this sport called “football” that the guards talked about endlessly, and even tried to teach them, was certainly strange. The ball, pointed on both ends, was almost impossible to kick smoothly across the ground. Moreover, when someone made the mistake of picking this odd-looking ball up, many of the players would converge on him.

The POWs much preferred soccer, and teams were soon organized. But their uniforms, made from onion sacks, were all the same color, making quick identification of teammates difficult. The POWs solved the problem by repeatedly washing one set of uniforms with their denim workclothes, thereby tinting them a distinct shade of baby

Page 18: POWs made their own marionettes and wrote many of the plays in which they performed. Page 19, top and center: They also constructed a 1000-seat amphitheatre with handmade bricks. Bottom: One prisoner made a working violin out of matchsticks. (Drawing by POW Herman Kalbe; drawing and photographs courtesy Aliceville Public Library)
Standing in the freezing cold of Grand Central Station awaiting his army physical, Jack Sisty had little hope of being accepted into the military. He had been the victim of polio some years earlier, and one of his legs was shorter and smaller than the other. But he was determined to try anyway, and much to his surprise, he was accepted. His decision to enlist eventually led the New York City native to the newly constructed POW camp at Aliceville.

At the camp, Sisty found himself assigned to the post of chaplain's assistant, a position he held through a succession of camp chaplains. Because he had a fine voice (Sisty had sung professionally in New York), he also sang solos each Sunday at the morning service. His job at the camp involved frequent travel from one end of the facility to the other, and Sisty became the only soldier at Aliceville to ride a government-issue bicycle on his rounds.

In the spring of 1944, the young sergeant noticed a quiet, attractive secretary working at the camp headquarters. The wise-cracking Sisty was quickly hooked by her Southern charm, and the two were married that August. They moved into an apartment building for married soldiers, built across the highway from the camp, where they lived for the rest of Sisty's stay in Aliceville. (Although in considerable disrepair, that apartment building remains today, one of the few camp structures still standing.)

Following the end of World War II, Jack Sisty and his wife, Ettie, moved to New York City for a brief period, but eventually they returned to Aliceville. For ten years, the "transplanted Yankee" served as the director of the Aliceville Chamber of Commerce. Later, after completing his degree at the University of Alabama, Sisty worked for many years in rehabilitation of the handicapped.
Margie Archibald was certain that she would hate Aliceville. The slender, nineteen-year-old brunette with the wide smile had never wanted to leave her friends in Union Springs, Alabama. But her father's poor health prompted him to retire to his hometown of Aliceville, and she reluctantly followed in March 1943. Shortly after her arrival, she found work at the Aliceville Bank and Trust—and more. She found men. Hundreds of men. American personnel at the camp often topped 1,000, and for the attractive bank teller—and other single young women in Aliceville—the supply of eligible soldiers seemed unbelievable. "We had our choice," she says. "We could go out every night with who we wanted. It was sort of like a dream. They had the officers' club, the noncommissioned officers' club, and the enlisted men's club. We dated [them all] . . . some of the best-looking Yankee boys you ever saw."

In late 1944, Margie Archibald left the Aliceville Bank and went to work as a secretary at the internment camp hospital. Following the closing of the facility, she was hired by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers who were to oversee the dismantling of the camp. This job led to her first and last foray into entrepreneurship: She purchased all the camp's shrubbery for $85 and sold it piece by piece to individuals over a two-year period. "I may have made $400. I thought I was quite the businesswoman," she remembers.
rogance. Grier's decisive manner was particularly important in light of the gradual changes that had occurred in the prison population in recent months.

The previous spring, Aliceville had been designated a "segregation camp," or a facility to which uncooperative prisoners—in this case, uncooperative noncommissioned officers—were transferred. Many of those sent to Aliceville were quite open in their Nazi fervor, and Grier's job of running a smooth, trouble-free camp was tested often that fall.

Most of these new, special-category prisoners, whose numbers probably never exceeded 300, were older men whose range of experience and interest was diverse. Many chose not to work outside the camp, leaving themselves a great deal of free time. As Grier quickly learned, inventive and industrious prisoners without enough to do can be quite a nuisance. The wooden guard stick, or billy club, found one morning in the main compound was only one example. All of the guard sticks had been accounted for; all of the guards, too. Yet here was this extra stick. Although the Americans were puzzled by the stick, few of the POWs were. It had been made by the prisoners in the carpentry shop and tossed into the compound at night. Many a sly glance and wry smile had passed among the Germans as they watched the "desperate search for this seemingly missing guard" the next day. For the still-proud men of the Afrika Korps, it was one small victory over their captors, carved from a block of wood.

A far more impressive accomplishment floated high above the camp early one morning in March of 1944. It appeared to be an airplane, but no engine sounds could be heard. And it was small. The plane seemed to follow a regular pattern, rising high above the empty cottonfield outside the barbed-wire fence before falling in a gentle, looping arc over the compounds, then repeating the action. The guards in the towers were poised, rifles and machine guns trained on the intruder. Prisoners and American personnel alike were fascinated by the graceful flight, which came to an abrupt conclusion when the plane banked above the camp, failed to rise again, and crashed in the field outside the fence.

The wreckage revealed a pilotless glider over five feet long, with a wingspan approaching ten feet. It had been constructed in sections from fruit crate slats, then covered with fabric and shellac. A search of the camp revealed the method of launch—a short ramp and a complex series of inner tubes tied together, creating an enormous slingshot that would have required the effort of "at least a dozen men to launch."

Less frivolous activities, both creative and educational, also increased at the camp during its final year of operation. Classes were taught daily in dozens of areas, ranging from classical languages to blacksmithing to anatomy. Most of the instructors were older, noncommissioned German officers who had been transferred to Aliceville the previous year. Before the war, many had been professors at European universities and high schools, while others were skilled artists and craftsmen.

Overall, the number and kind of activities engaged in by the POWs reached astounding proportions. The landscaping (page 10) was now directed by a professional master-gardener, and the weed-free Bermuda lawns, the lush gardens, the greenhouse, and the elaborate topiary that adorned the grounds were all a tribute to his guidance and expertise. The appearance of the camp changed almost daily, as prisoners worked to improve the grounds, hoping to win the prizes or privileges awarded to winners of the monthly beautification contest.

Equally impressive were the prisoners' artistic efforts. Classes in sculpting, painting, carving, statuary,
The lure of better wages and new surroundings at the POW camp changed the lives of many Aliceville residents, among them John Richey, who had been the cook at the Aliceville Hotel for twenty-eight years. When a colonel eating at the hotel offered him a job as bartender at the camp officers’ club, Richey, delighted at the new opportunity, accepted quickly.

By day, Richey labored on the house that he was building for himself and his family in town, and in the evenings he reported to “the best job” he had ever had. It was hard work, but Richey enjoyed his job at the club and the stories and camaraderie that he shared with the officers, whose numbers seemed to grow almost daily. The arrival of eighteen slot machines increased both the club’s noise level and Richey’s responsibility. On a good night, he would empty over five hundred dollars from the machines—for the week, as much as two thousand—and deposit it in the Aliceville Bank. The officers’ club, he says, was “a regular little Las Vegas.”

In his second year at the camp, Richey found himself undone by his reputation as a cook. Camp commander Colonel Prince needed a new cook for the camp hospital, and he remembered the slow-baked hams and the delicious pastries that Richey had doted over at the Aliceville Hotel. Because the hospital mess was also the officers’ mess, Prince wanted a cook capable of producing something special. He wanted, and got, John Richey.

With regret, Richey wiped down his bar one last time and reported to his new job, where for the remainder of his time at the camp he applied his culinary skills in the hospital kitchen. Cooking in mass quantities became a way of life for him (for breakfast each morning he scrambled thirty-nine dozen eggs and fried thirty-two slabs of bacon). Working side-by-side with a staff of German POWs, he quickly learned that language differences, at least in the kitchen, posed little, if any, barrier.

By the time the Aliceville camp closed, John Richey had decided that he had had enough of kitchens to last a lifetime, so when a friend offered him a job selling life insurance, Richey turned in his chef’s hat for an actuarial table, and for the next twenty-one years he sold policies for United Service and Mutual Savings Insurance. Today, John Richey is retired and lives in the Aliceville house that he built while working at the POW camp.
The journey that led to the Aliceville internment camp was a long and, at times, a dangerous one for Captain Stephen Fleck of the U.S. Army Medical Corps. Less than a decade earlier, in 1933, Fleck, a student and a Jew, had fled his native Germany to escape the increasing anti-Semitism. In 1941, following his completion of medical school in the United States, Fleck became a U.S. citizen, and soon thereafter he enlisted in the military. The shortage of doctors at the new POW camps led to his temporary assignment to the Aliceville camp. During his stay at the facility, Fleck’s work in helping diagnose a diphtheria epidemic and, possibly, in preventing several murders [see page 15] was of critical importance in the camp’s early months.

For Fleck, the work with prisoners of war in Aliceville was merely a beginning of such duty. Following assignments at Camp Rucker, Alabama, and Camp Cullman, New Jersey, the young physician was transferred overseas. The next time Fleck encountered German POWs was shortly before VE Day near the Czech border, when he was assigned to a detention camp for 80,000 German prisoners. Detaining the prisoners was not a difficult task, according to Fleck, “as the Germans were only interested in not being caught by the Russians.” But many of the prisoners had been exposed to typhus, and Fleck’s central concern was to keep the captives “reasonably healthy so there wouldn’t

Above: Dr. Stephen Fleck today. Inset: Captain Stephen Fleck and his wife Louise Harlan Fleck on their wedding day, October 13, 1945. Right: Stephen Fleck (in uniform) in Heemstede, Holland, 1945, with his first cousin Arthur Van Cleef (left), Van Cleef’s wife, Lily (center), and their children Dori and Joost (back row). (Photographs of Dr. and Mrs. Fleck and the Van Cleefs courtesy Anna Fleck Jacobs; photograph of Dr. Fleck today by Chip Cooper)
be any epidemics.” Later, Fleck participated in the evacuation of several concentration camps, and the final months of his duty were spent working with medical teams shuttling released concentration camp victims across “Czechoslovakia—then kind of a no-man’s land—back to their home countries, mostly France and the Low Countries.”

In the weeks following the war’s end, Fleck searched the concentration camps for his relatives, primarily his first cousin Arthur Van Cleef and his family. Finding no trace of them, the worried Fleck finally located the Van Cleefs in their own house in Holland.

Arthur and his wife Lily had escaped death and the camps by spending the war years hiding in various attics in Amsterdam; their children, Dori and Joost, had lived on separate Dutch farms.

For the past thirty-five years, Dr. Fleck has lived in New Haven, Connecticut. Recently he retired from Yale University as Professor of Psychiatry and Public Health and director of the Yale Psychiatric Institute.

pottery-making, embroidery, and ceramics were taught regularly, and a subsequent outpouring of visual art resulted. Exhibits were held often and occasionally shown to visitors, who were impressed by the quality of the work.

In early 1944, two of the camp’s finest artists, Herman Kalbe and Hans Fanselow, were granted permission to draw fifty pen-and-ink sketches of the camp (pages 11, 19, 22), and they spent the remainder of the year sketching scenes of the daily lives of both captives and captors.

Many of the art classes required special equipment that the U.S. military authorities would not supply. In the face of such impediments, the prisoners often responded ingeniously. In the pottery shop, for example, a wood-fired kiln was constructed from salvaged materials. The same shop also contained a homemade grinder capable of preparing fine clays for firing.

Although most musical instruments were purchased from canteen profits, at least two were homemade. Using local wood, animal bones, scrap wire and metal, the POWs built a piano. No less inventive was a working violin which the prisoners built from matchsticks (page 19).

The evenings in the Aliceville camp were also filled with activity. The symphony orchestra that had been formed in the first months that the camp was open had now grown to over forty members, and concerts featuring the music of Beethoven, Haydn, Wagner, Verdi and other composers played to large, appreciative audiences. Performances were given in the 1000-seat amphitheatre (page 19), which the prisoners had built from bricks they had molded and baked themselves. In addition to the symphony, the POWs formed six small bands, six glee clubs,
POWs work in a sawmill outside the Aliceville camp.
(U.S. Signal Corps photo courtesy Bobbie Coleman)

a dance orchestra, a string quartet, and a twenty-five member choir for the Protestant services.

For those more inclined to the theatre, the 1944-45 season promised to be a good one at the Aliceville camp. The POW acting company, comprised of over fifty members, many of whom were professional actors, undertook an impressive list of plays that included Goethe’s Faust, Shakespeare’s As You Like It, and a one-act German comedy, The Broken Jug, by Heinrich von Kleist. These performances invariably played to full houses, and each production was performed at least six times to permit the entire camp to attend.

Most aspects of camp life, including reviews of the camp theatre and orchestra performances, were covered by the prisoners’ weekly newspaper, Der Zaungast (The Guest Inside the Wire), which was widely read and discussed by the prisoners. Printed on a used press purchased by the POWs (page 9), the paper was prohibited by U.S. military censors from printing political discussions. Most of the two surviving issues are filled with articles about camp activities, philosophical and general essays, poetry, short stories, cartoons, and puzzles.

While the year 1945 marked an educational and creative high point for the Aliceville POWs, it also witnessed the beginning of the end for the German military forces. As the prisoners read and heard of the faltering Nazi effort, some of them came to accept the inevitable Allied victory. Most, however, refused to believe the newspaper reports, labeling them as propaganda.
Only after Germany surrendered to the Allies on May 7, 1945, were most prisoners at the camp convinced that they had lost the war.

As camp deactivation plans were put into effect, many prisoners were shifted to other camps, and by June 1, the number of POWs at Aliceville had declined to 3,485. When the camp was officially deactivated on September 30, 1945, the remaining prisoners were transferred to various repatriation centers around the country in preparation for the long-awaited journey home.

Two months after the last prisoner had departed, Aliceville's American military personnel began to move on to new bases and different assignments. For a few civilian and military personnel, employment at the camp lasted well into 1947, as dismantling of the facility continued. Those who remained watched as the Aliceville prisoner-of-war camp disappeared in the ensuing months. The amphitheatre, once filled with such creativity and vitality, was demolished and sold for scrap. Weeds quickly covered the sloping sites.

During the final months of dismantling, the camp consisted of only a few scattered buildings and a solitary tennis court in bad repair. On days when there was no work to do, the camp's lone secretary played tennis with the only remaining janitor. The soft, rhythmic sound of their volleys provided a quiet, final counterpoint to the day, almost four years earlier, when members of the German Afrika Korps marched into the lives of the Aliceville community.

Many former POWs retained fond memories of their days at Aliceville. The contrast between life as a POW in the United States and life in postwar Germany was a point stressed by most of the former POWs who wrote to Aliceville mayor Gerald Stabler after the war. A sample:

**June 8, 1947**

I often think on the days I spent in Alabama as a prisoner of war. In this time I never was hungry. But today in Germany I am always hungry. . . . There is very little bread, we have no potatoes, no flour and no sugar. We have also very little fat and dripping. There are days, my mother does not know what to cook for the family. But we hope it will be better in autumn, when the harvest is brought in. But I think till this time, there will be very bitter days. When I am hungry, I often wish to be a prisoner in the U.S.A. That's very sad. That's the same with the clothes. When [I became] a soldier I was a young man and now all my clothes are too small. I am very glad that there is now summer. But what will happen in winter?

Gerhard Stroh
Tubingen am Neckar
French Zone
Germany

**September 15, 1947**

For a long time I was PW in the camp [at Aliceville]. Often I have gone through your town. I am sorry that I was not able to speak often with the American people, but I can say, that I have been treated there very well. Now I am discharged. When I came to Germany, [I discovered] that I have lost all and often I must think of the good life, we have had in your country. Although I was a PW at that time, I have not to take care for [clothing and food]. Both are very scanty here.

Johannes Peters
Kreis Schleswig
British Zone
Germany

(Letters courtesy Mrs. Gerald Stabler)
Austrian native Hans Kopera had long dreamed of becoming a medical doctor, but World War II shattered those hopes. Instead, he, along with most of his high school classmates, enlisted in the German army after graduation. Kopera, only seventeen at the time, was assigned to the Second Kradschutzen Batallion of the Tenth Panzer Division. In the summer of 1942, he saw his initial combat, in northern France, and by the time of his arrival with the first German troops in Tunisia that autumn, the blond-haired youth had become a veteran fighter.

Kopera fought in the battles at Kassarine Pass, Tebourba, Toebessa and Medine; he rose to the rank of sergeant and was awarded the Iron Cross. Then, on Good Friday 1943, he was captured by a regiment of Scottish Highlanders, thus beginning a long, circuitous journey in captivity that would lead him from the desert outside Medjes el Bab, across the Atlantic Ocean, and eventually behind the barbed-wire fences of the Aliceville internment camp in the late summer of 1943.

Kopera had studied English in school, and although his command of the language was limited, he became an interpreter at the camp. It was a difficult job, especially in the early days when tensions between guards and prisoners were high. But as the days in captivity passed, tensions waned, and Kopera’s proficiency in his new language increased dramatically. When his fellow prisoners kidded him that he sounded more Alabamian than German at times, the good-natured Kopera accepted their kidding, but he found his own way to counter their jibes—with caricatures. Sketching quickly with a pencil, the young soldier made hundreds of humorous sketches of other POWs, and even of American personnel. His sketches amused everyone, and his work was in frequent demand on birthdays and other special occasions.

As a noncommissioned officer, Kopera was not required to work outside the camp, and he soon found himself with an excess of free time. To fill his days, he helped to landscape the barracks grounds, engaged in endless gab sessions, wrote weekly letters home, and, once again, dreamed of becoming a physician.

When Kopera heard that the camp hospital needed a “ward master” for the surgical wing—someone who could serve as an interpreter between the German patients and the staff of American and German doctors—he volunteered quickly. It was not the job that he wanted, but at least it was a step closer to hospital work and to his dreams of becoming a doctor.

In the early months of 1944, that dream came even closer to reality when Kopera and several other interested POWs persuaded the German doctors in the hospital to start medical classes as part of the camp education curriculum. Sitting on “little self-made chairs” that they brought to class each morning, the beginning medical students studied a variety of subjects from basic chemistry to histology. Kopera also found a new focus for his artistic talents—human anatomy. He became a nightly visitor to the X-ray lab, where he spent hundreds of hours making sketches for the lectures. By the time the camp closed, he had completed nearly 2,000 drawings and had completed three semesters of study.

But difficult times lay ahead for the would-be doctor. When the war ended, Kopera and many other prisoners were shuttled from one temporary camp to another; their food rations were cut drastically and their exemptions from
work details revoked. U.S. authorities officially blamed the change in treatment on food and labor shortages throughout the country, but according to Kopera, most German POWs thought differently. Many saw the new treatment as a form of retribution for the atrocities uncovered in the Nazi concentration camps and for the often poor treatment that American prisoners had received from the Germans. Whatever the reason, the change in treatment had a powerful effect on the attitudes of many prisoners. Kopera recalls: "If they changed our thinking in the course of the years in America, they spoiled a lot by the bitter end [when]... treatment was not only less human, but to an appreciable extent, absolutely inhuman (600–800 calories per day)."

Finally back in Austria, Kopera was accepted for medical school at the University of Graz, where his requirements were reduced by a full year because of his military service and his training at Aliceville. Hans Kopera graduated as a medical doctor in the summer of 1951. In 1973, he was named head of the Clinical Pharmacology Unit at the University of Graz, a position that he still holds today.