

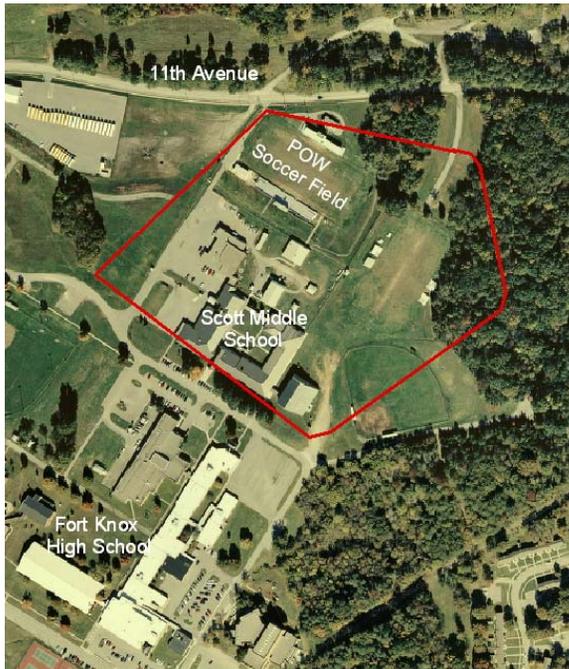


Italian POWs at the Fort Knox POW Canteen.
Patton Museum Collection

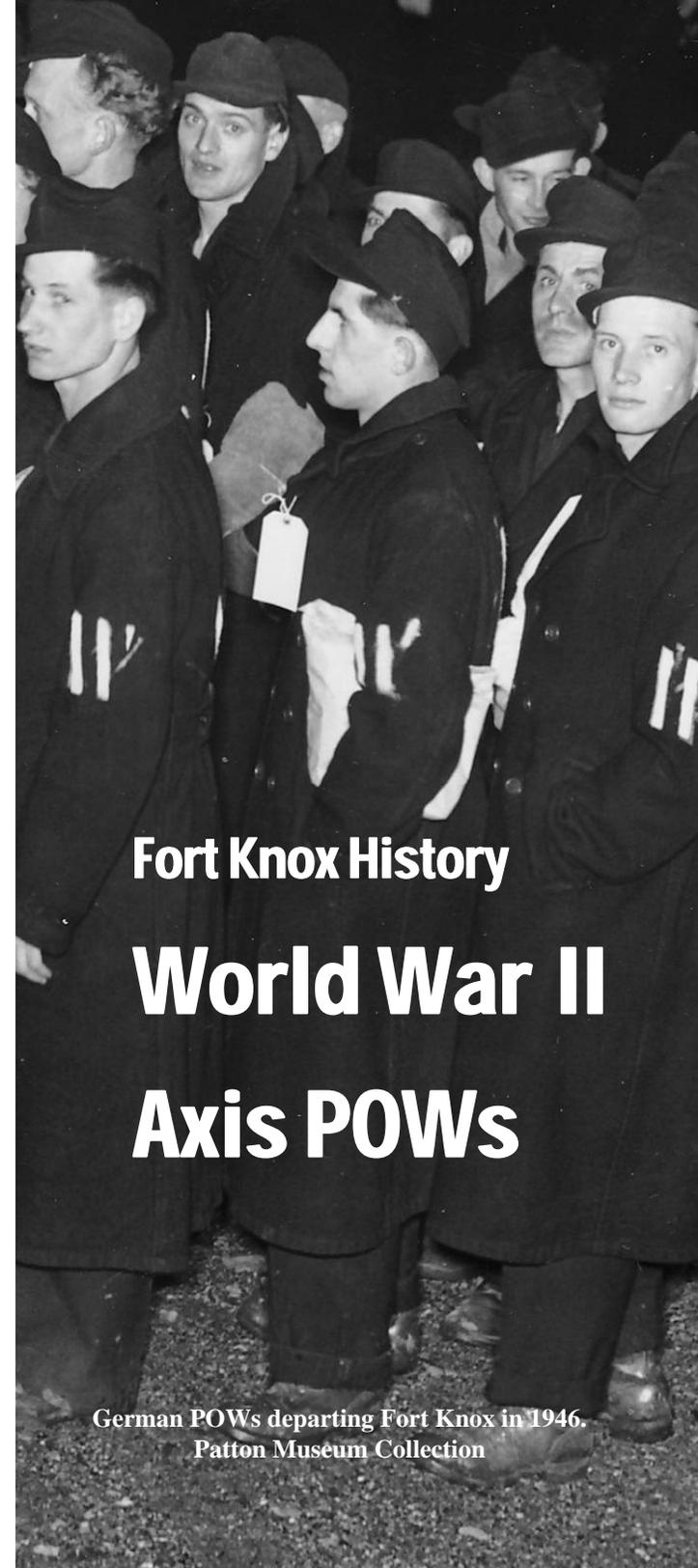


Fort Knox Cultural Resources Office
Environmental Management Division

112 11th Avenue
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Outline of where the POW Camp once stood at
Fort Knox.



Fort Knox History World War II Axis POWs

German POWs departing Fort Knox in 1946.
Patton Museum Collection

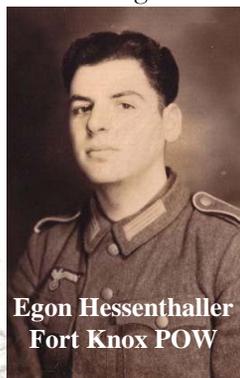
Axis Prisoners of War at Fort Knox

During World War II the United States found itself unprepared for the thousands of Axis prisoners being captured. Prisoners began arriving in the United States in 1942 and most would be kept until 1946, one year after the war ended. After capture, German and Italian prisoners of war were transported to the United States by boat to be processed. From there they were sent to one of the 150 “main” POW camps in the United States or to one of the 500 smaller POW branch camps. Fort Knox was site of a main POW camp between **February 1944 and June 1946**. POW camps were usually segregated by branch of service and rank. The majority of Italian and German prisoners at Fort Knox were enlisted men and not officers. There were no known Japanese POWs at Fort Knox.

After Italy’s position changed in the war they were allowed more freedom on post. They were given American uniforms to wear with a patch that read “ITALY.” Many of the German POWs at Fort Knox were members of the Afrika Korps, who had been captured in Africa in 1943. Most of the German prisoners did not consider themselves to be ardent Nazis. When possible, “hard core” Nazis were removed from the general population of prisoners. However, German POWs still had to be careful about expressing their political opinions for fear of retaliation by these Nazi radicals.

The POWs at Fort Knox had a routine camp life which included work, rules, and recreation. Upon arrival they were given new clothing that had the letters “P” and

“W” painted on them. They were only allowed to wear their military uniforms at funerals for their comrades. Outdoor and indoor work details were assigned, many times alongside civilian employees. Many civilians and prisoners got along well with one another and some became friends. The prisoners were paid 10-80 cents a day in canteen vouchers which could be used at a commissary set up for them. There they could purchase soap, cigarettes and candy bars among other items.



**Egon Hessenthaller
Fort Knox POW**

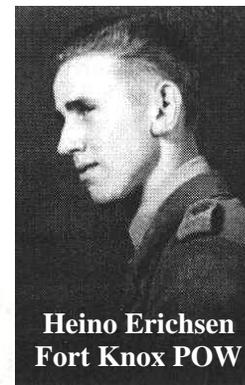
One former POW, Egon Hessenthaller, recalled that his time as a POW at Ft. Knox was more impressive than all of his other war experiences.

The POWs lived in barracks, which looked very much like the barracks U.S. soldiers lived in. The POW barracks at Ft. Knox have since been demolished. The location of the POW camp is now occupied by Scott Middle School. The former camp soccer field is the only remaining feature of that camp and is now used for American football by students!

A number of Axis prisoners died while at Fort Knox and are buried in the post cemetery. One tragic incident involved the accidental shooting of two prisoners, Ernst Schlotter and Frederick Wolf, while guards tried to identify Nazi thugs. The newspapers falsely claimed, from fear of German reprisals against American POWs, that these prisoners were trying to escape.

Escape attempts were few at Fort Knox. One prisoner, Werner Schwanbeck, escaped in February 1945 and made it all the way to Nashville—reportedly in his German paratrooper uniform! He boarded a city bus and rode undisturbed for a good while before telling the bus driver in broken English that he wished to return to Fort Knox.

A former German POW has written about his experiences at Fort Knox. Heino Erichsen was captured in 1943 while serving in the Afrika Korps. This young German was first sent from POW Camps in Texas before coming to Fort Knox in the spring of 1944. Heino, who spoke English well, held various jobs on post. In his book he relates many interesting and memorable stories about his time at Fort Knox. He would remain here, like the others, until March of 1946. He later returned to settle in America in the early 1950s and soon became a United States citizen.



**Heino Erichsen
Fort Knox POW**

Much is still unknown about the Axis POWs that were held at Fort Knox in World War II. The public is invited to help in the ongoing research by sharing stories, photographs and items related to this interesting time in Fort Knox history.

For additional reading:

The Reluctant Warrior: Former German POW Finds Peace in Texas. By Heino and Jean Erichsen. Eakin Press, Austin, Texas; 2001.