

# One German POW's Story

*By Leigh Smith*

Four hundred seventy-seven dead: 265 dead from wounds or natural causes; 93 casualties from accidents; and 119 violent deaths, including seven murders. This is the breakdown of the 477 German prisoners who died in the U.S. during captivity. One of the seven who were murdered is buried here in El Paso.

Werner Drechsler was born on January 17, 1923, in Muhlberg, Germany. He joined the *kriegsmarine* or navy and was assigned to *unterseeboot* (submarine) U-118 of the 12th U. Boat flotilla, obtaining the rank of leading seaman or *obergefreiter*.

On June 12, 1943, the planes of the aircraft carrier USS Bogue attacked and sank U-118 near the Azores in the Mediterranean. Out of a crew of 55 men, 40 went down with the ship. The remainder, including Drechsler, became prisoners of the U.S. Navy.

Drechsler cooperated with his captives and gave them information about German submarines and tactics. According to Ronald H. Bailey, consulting editor for Time-Life Series entitled "World War II,"

Drechsler was provided a cover as Petty Officer Leimi. He was confined for seven months in cells at Fort Meade, Maryland, with other U-Boat sailors, where he talked with them about their submarines and presumably collected information for his interrogators.

On March 12, 1944, Drechsler was transferred to the POW camp at Papago Park, Arizona, which housed mostly German U-Boat crewmen, including some members of the U-118 crew. This transfer occurred even though the Navy warned the army to keep Drechsler segregated from other naval prisoners.

Joint Service Operations was a new concept, and it took time for the armed forces to cooperate with each other. The Office of Naval Intelligence kept Drechsler around because they wanted to get as much information as they could concerning German submarines. The other prisoners at Papago Park compared notes and quickly confirmed that Drechsler was Leimi and had spied on them. A few hours after his arrival at Papago Park, Drechsler was found hanging from a rafter in a compound shower room. He was 21.

Seven men (Helmut Fischer, Fritz Franke, Gunther Kuelsen, Heinrich Ludwig, Bernard Ryak, Otto Stenger and Rolf Wizury) were executed for the beating and hanging of Werner Drechsler. These men were hanged in August 1945 at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

A total of 14 Germans were sentenced to death by U.S. military court martials for committing murders in various POW camps. Seven murders and 72 suicides occurred in prison camps as a result of pressure from diehard Nazis who remained faithful to Hitler and National Socialism, even as prisoners. These men held mock trials and sentenced the "traitors" to death. Those German soldiers who were suspected feared the Nazi groups in camp would find out and often committed suicide.

Papago Park was only a temporary POW camp, so Drechsler's body was transported to Fort Bliss. Whether he had no family or no one cared to claim this "traitor's" body, we do not know. Now just another historical statistic, Werner Drechsler is buried alongside fellow German servicemen in the Fort Bliss National Cemetery. ☪