
History on Display:

The Military Police During World War II

By Mr. Jim Rogers

The newly upgraded World War II exhibit at the U.S. Army Military Police Museum includes a selection of historic objects, many of which are featured in this article. These items represent diverse operations and locations during the war—some with a direct history to specific military police Soldiers.

With the onset of World War II, the Military Police Corps experienced permanence, growth in numbers, and increased professionalism in training and operations. From homeland security to postwar occupation and trials, military police men and women served selflessly alongside countless uniformed and civilian Americans.

When U.S. troops arrived in Ireland in January 1942, they became the first of more than 2.8 million U.S. military personnel deployed to the United Kingdom to fight the Axis powers in Europe. In June 1942, General Dwight D. Eisenhower established the American Military Headquarters in London, with the military police headquarters and his military police bodyguards located nearby.

The 204th Military Police Company was making an assault landing at Fedala, French Morocco, in November 1942, when the unit came under attack from an enemy destroyer. Allied forces drove across North Africa, battling against Italian and German forces, before the fighting ended at Tunisia in the spring of 1943. Allied operations in the Mediterranean included the invasion of Sicily, followed by Salerno and Anzio on the Italian Peninsula.

The Allied invasion of northern Europe commenced on 6 June 1944 at Normandy, France. Military police waded ashore at Utah and Omaha Beaches with the 1st, 4th, 29th, and 90th Divisions or parachuted or hang glided with the 82d and 101st Airborne Divisions. Specially trained military police companies saw beachhead service with



Artifact photographs are not to scale.

Left: Sleeve Patch, Japanese War Crime Trial Security—This photograph is a replica of the patches worn by military police providing courtroom security and guarding Japanese defendants during the war crime trials in the Philippines and Japan, 1945–1946.

Center: China-Burma-India Theater Insignia—This oversized lapel insignia (locally manufactured) signified membership in some of the nondivisional units in the China–Burma–India theater of operations.

Right: International Police Brassard—This brassard was used by Soldiers of the 796th Military Police Battalion assigned to Vienna, Austria, at the conclusion of World War II. Other countries that participated in the patrols—England, the Soviet Union, and France—are also represented on the armband.

specialized engineer brigades. As Allied forces broke from the beachhead and drove inland, military police Soldiers established traffic control on unfamiliar urban and rural thoroughfares and main supply routes. Most notable were the “Red Ball Express,” “White Ball Express,” and “ABC Highway Express.”

During the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944, German infiltrators dressed as U.S. military police Soldiers and disrupted communications. The

Rhineland offensive began in March 1945, with the U.S. First, Third, and Ninth Armies and the Canadian First Army. The military police of the 9th Armored and 9th Infantry Divisions secured and maintained traffic control at the critical Rhine River crossing in Remagen, Germany. Allied forces pushed through the collapsing Third Reich, until Germany surrendered in May 1945.

In the Pacific Theater, military police were faced with significantly different environmental



Top: Thompson Submachine Gun, M1A1—The “Tommy Gun” was a .45-caliber weapon issued to military police and many other branch Soldiers in all World War II theaters. The weapon had close-range stopping power and a high rate of fire; both traits were very useful for military police missions.

Center: Japanese Katana and Scabbard—This photograph shows a finely crafted, edged weapon (also known as a samurai sword) captured or surrendered by the Japanese at the end of World War II. This weapon was collected as part of the demilitarization process ordered by the Eighth Army Provost Marshal, Lieutenant Colonel Carol V. Cadwell. Swords were exempt from collection if it was proven to be “a hand-forged weapon . . . over 100 years old . . .” or in a family for more than three generations.

Bottom: German Mauser Rifle, K98—This bolt-action rifle was a standard-issue weapon for German forces. Although it was reliable and accurate, the K98 could not match the speed of semiautomatic rifles—such as the M1 Garand—used by the United States.

and command conditions—trackless jungles and small islands with extreme and unfamiliar weather conditions—than those in Europe. Islands were often separated by vast stretches of ocean, resulting in lengthy naval voyages and infrequent resupply missions. Military police in the Pacific also operated under a more restrictive organization than their multifunctional counterparts in Europe. As mandated by their command, these Soldiers were assigned single, specific functions, causing an overlap in the geographic areas of responsibility between military police units and the troops that they served. Despite these constraints, military police served selflessly in the Pacific and China-India-Burma Theaters.

The war against Nazi Germany ended on 7 May 1945 with a formal surrender by the ranking German leadership. As the Allies transitioned from combat operations to military occupation, they were

faced with a shattered infrastructure in Germany. Thousands of refugees were struggling to return to their homes, often across the borders of occupied zones. To effectively handle duties and control the border of the U.S.-occupied zone, General Eisenhower announced the formation of an elite police force—the U.S. Constabulary. The force was operational 1946–1952 and numbered 30,000 strong. Charged with war crimes, prominent leaders of the Third Reich were placed on trial by an international military tribunal in Nuremberg, Germany, while an additional 1,672 cases were tried before Army courts. Military police were instrumental in guarding prisoners, providing courtroom security, and administering executions.

The hostilities with Japan formally concluded on 2 September 1945 with the signing of surrender documents on the deck of the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay, Japan. The objectives of



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Left, top: Military Police M1 Combat Helmet—The first use of military police-marked helmets is believed to have occurred in 1943 during the Italian campaign. The military police of the 1st Infantry Division painted “MP” in gold on their helmets in July of that year, becoming the first known unit to establish military police helmet markings. Photographic evidence and surviving examples suggest that this practice proliferated throughout the European Theater and, to a lesser degree, the Pacific Theater, with a variety of markings. This photograph shows a replica of an M1 combat helmet from the 2d Infantry Division.

Left, bottom: Custom patch for the 519th Military Police Battalion based at Yokohama, Japan (worn during postwar duties). The patch is from the right sleeve of the jacket in the center photo.

Center: Wool Field Jacket, Pacific Theater, M1944—The unofficial name of this jacket was the “Ike Jacket.” The jacket in this photograph was worn by a private first class with the Eighth Army (see the patch on the left sleeve). Note the double sets of collar disk insignia versus the distinctive unit insignia worn on the lapels.

Right: Combat Service Boot—This boot, with its integral two-buckle cuff, replaced the field footwear of separate shoes and canvas leggings.

the surrender agreement included the resolution of Japanese sovereignty and disarmament, economic, human rights, and occupation issues.

According to the Potsdam Declaration, war criminals were prosecuted, especially those who had "visited cruelties upon our prisoners." Japanese

war criminals were tried before an American military commission in Manila, Philippines, and an international military tribunal in Tokyo. During this time, military police were again responsible for prisoner confinement, courtroom security, and executions.

MP
Goes into Action!
Awarded
Distinguished
Service Cross

 Officers and Men of the 704th and 706th will remember him as **Sergeant Burns**. His associates will also recall how diligently he applied himself to Military Duties; the time he was selected for OCS; his successful completion of schooling; his being commissioned in the Corps of Military Police.

1st Lt Walter F. Burns, with an MP outfit, went into action in North Africa. Employing "Commando" tactics, tho severely wounded, he led his MP's against strong enemy opposition during the invasion of the French Morocco Harbor. He was awarded the DSC



↑ For Service in North Africa ↑
Maj. Gen. Geoffrey Keyes
decorating
1st Lt Walter F. Burns of the Military Police
with the Distinguished Service Cross

MP'S IN ACTION MAY BE EMPLOYED IN FRONT LINE FOX HOLES
OR IN EQUALLY IMPORTANT REAR GUARD SECURITY POSITIONS
MP's are Dependable All-round Combat Troops

Poster showing Major General Geoffrey Keyes awarding First Lieutenant Walter F. Burns the Distinguished Service Cross