

Army Officer Accused of Prisoner Abuse

By Master Sergeant Patrick V. Garland (Retired)

This title sounds like the headline of a current event, but it was taken from newspaper accounts of nearly a hundred years ago. The New York Times covered the story of a general court-martial from December 1919 into early 1920. The trial took place at Castle Williams, Governor's Island, New York—the Atlantic Branch of the Disciplinary Barracks at the time.

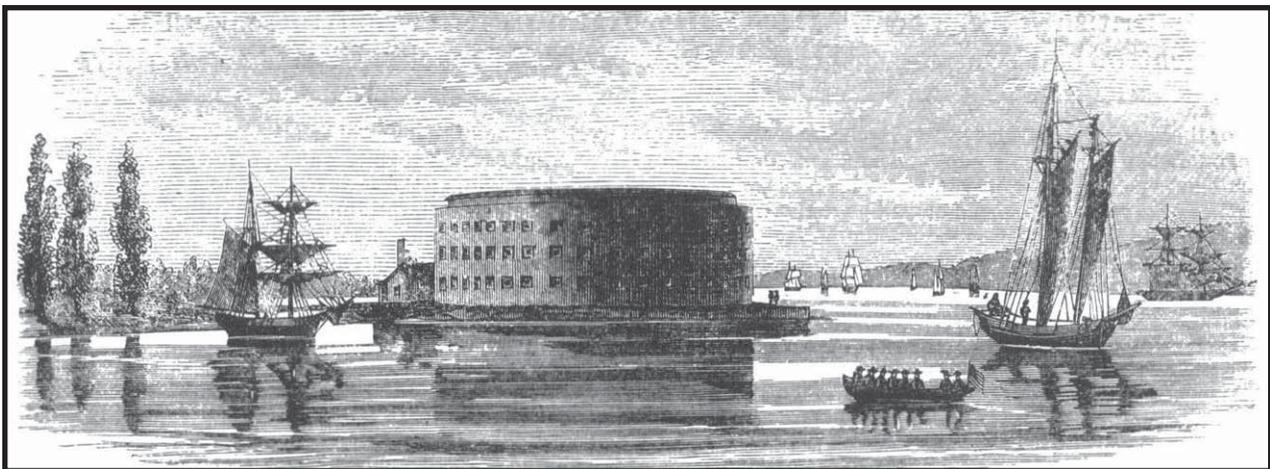
The defendant, Captain Karl W. Detzer of the U.S. Army, had been the commander of the 308th Military Police Company (Criminal Investigation) stationed in LeMans—a port of embarkation in France. During his term, he and his men investigated criminal activities and, as a result, made many enemies. The charges against him stemmed from allegations by former prisoners and disgruntled military policemen that Captain Detzer had frequently used excessive force against prisoners under his control. Lieutenant Colonel W. L. Culberson, inspector general, recommended that Detzer be tried for abuse to prisoners in his custody. These were American Soldiers under suspicion of criminal offenses—not prisoners of war.

Captain Detzer was formally charged with twenty-eight counts of misconduct and was confined at Castle Williams for trial by general court-martial. Major William Kelly, Judge Advocate General's Corps, was the prosecutor; he was assisted by Captain John M. Weir. Surprisingly, William H. Allaire (former provost marshal general of

the American Expeditionary Forces) was a member of the court-martial board.

Captain Detzer was born on 4 September 1891 in Allen County, Indiana.¹ He was educated in Indiana and gained some notoriety as a newspaper investigative reporter/writer, in Fort Wayne. A veteran of Indiana National Guard service on the Mexican Border, he later completed officer's training at Fort Harrison and was commissioned as a captain. During World War I, he traveled to France with the 84th Division as an infantry company commander. After the armistice, he was assigned to duties with the newly formed Division of Criminal Investigation.

Le Mans was a transit point for tens of thousands of U.S. troops heading home after the end of the war. It was also a location where vast supplies of materiel were stored while awaiting shipment home. The combination of the transient status and often poorly guarded supplies led many astray. Thefts were common, and the stolen property was sold to persons dealing in the black market. To combat this, Captain Detzer and his small force were constantly



Castle Williams, Governor's Island, New York

responding to calls for assistance. They investigated assaults and murders of American Soldiers by renegade Americans or French criminals. Those apprehended were taken to the Division of Criminal Investigation (DCI) (Le Mans headquarters) for interrogation. It was there that the alleged abuses took place.

The trial began on 10 December 1919. During the first days, several witnesses testified that they had been subjected to or that they had witnessed abuse by Captain Detzer or his subordinates. These witnesses included former prisoners, military policemen and, in several cases, inmates from the disciplinary barracks at Fort Leavenworth and Governor's Island. In fact, Captain Detzer himself had been confined at Governor's Island in close proximity to several of his former prisoners. The first witness, Samuel G. Roth of Chicago, stated that he was a desk sergeant for Captain Detzer in Le Mans from February to April 1919; and he testified that he had personally witnessed the captain strike two prisoners—one of whom was Private Fred M. Yates. Private Yates, an inmate at Leavenworth, testified two days later that he had indeed been "slapped about" by Captain Detzer while he was in custody. Captain Detzer recorded the incident in his book entitled *True Tales of the D.C.I.*,² relating that he and his first sergeant had stopped Yates and asked him to identify himself. Yates told Captain Detzer that he was a special railroad guard and that he had apprehended two men who had been acting suspiciously in the railroad yards. Yates asked for assistance with getting his two "prisoners" to the military police station. The first sergeant left with one of the prisoners in the sidecar of his motorcycle, leaving Captain Detzer alone with Yates and the remaining prisoner. Shortly thereafter, Yates pulled his pistol on the unarmed Detzer and made his escape. During his testimony, Yates verified that he had falsely impersonated a military policeman, but was steadfast in his story of being "slapped about" by Captain Detzer (and his first sergeant) following his arrest later that night.

During the investigation, one of Yates' companions claimed that Captain Detzer had forced him to swallow a lighted cigarette; but during the trial, he testified that he had been told to dispose of a lighted cigarette and had dropped it to the floor and crushed it with his boot. In almost every case, Lieutenant Thomas F. Heffernan, Captain Detzer's defense counsel, was able to get the prosecution witnesses to recant some, if not all, of their testimony.

It was discovered, through defense witnesses, that there was a plot to discredit Captain Detzer before he left France. One very important witness had been a judge advocate general lawyer who had defended some of the complainants against Captain Detzer in France. Former Captain Ralph E. Jones testified that some lawyers from the judge advocate general office in Le Mans were developing information to "get" Captain Detzer. Jones himself had been ordered to investigate Detzer's unit for instances of abuse, but he found no evidence of misconduct. A few

days later, Lieutenant Leo J. Rasche (formerly of the 308th Military Police Company) testified that, during his time with the unit, he had witnessed only one instance of a prisoner being struck, and that was by Sergeant Frank Hoyt, who was later fired by Captain Detzer. At the time of the trial, Hoyt was listed as a deserter, believed to be residing somewhere in France.

A total of 125 witnesses were called, many of whom appeared for the defense—including Colonel E. O. Saunders, Chief of the DCI in France. Captain Detzer testified in his own defense, claiming that when he assumed command of the company, abuse was common. He further stated that he had transferred the former commander, Lieutenant Leonard D. Mahan, and more than seventy enlisted men for inefficiency or abuse of prisoners. In addition, he related that friction had developed between the judge advocate's office (including the assistant prosecutor handling his case) and his own unit.³ Detzer was vigorously cross-examined by the prosecutor. As the prosecuting attorney, Major Kelly's conduct became so harsh that the court-martial board recessed. When they returned, Major Kelly was issued a reprimand that stated, "The court desires that the examination of the witness by the judge advocate be conducted in a calm manner consistent with the dignity of this court."⁴

On 6 February 1920, Lieutenant General Robert Lee Bullard (commander of the Department of the East) published an order which stated that Captain Detzer was found "not guilty" of all twenty-eight specifications filed against him and that he was to be restored to duty.

Captain Detzer continued to serve and, during World War II, was active in the China-Burma-India Theater. After retirement, he continued writing and worked as a *Reader's Digest* editor. He died in Branford, Connecticut, on 28 April 1987.⁵

Endnotes:

¹*U.S. Census 1900 (Indiana)*, U.S. Census Bureau, 1900.

²Karl W. Detzer, *True Tales of the D.C.I.*, Bobbs-Merrill Company, Indianapolis, 1925, pp. 51–68. This book contains fictitious names.

³"Capt. Detzer Denies Cruelty at Le Mans," *The New York Times*, 1 January 1920.

⁴"Court Reprimands Detzer Prosecutor," *The New York Times*, 6 January 1920.

⁵Social Security Death Index, <<http://ssdi.rootsweb.ancestry.com/>>, accessed on 22 May 2009.

Master Sergeant Garland retired from the U.S. Army in 1974. During his military career, he served in military police units and criminal investigation detachments and laboratories. At the time of his retirement, Master Sergeant Garland was serving as a ballistics evidence specialist at the European Laboratory. He remained in this career field until retiring from civilian law enforcement in 1995.