Descriptions of the Fort McClellan POW Camp

The Fort McClellan POW Camp, although differing from most other camps in its physical attractiveness, conformed to existing Army standards for the confinement of Axis Prisoners of War during World War II.

McClellan’s camp was designed for one enclosure with three separate compounds and four companies in each compound, and about 250 men in a company. It was a rectangle, approximately 2,000 feet along its front and back and 1,400 feet on either side, laid out on a heavily-forested hillside in the extreme western section of the Fort McClellan complex. Ten-foot-high barbed wire fencing enclosed the perimeter of the camp. Eight guard towers, each a couple dozen feet high to the catwalk where U.S. MPs kept vigil, were emplaced, three on a side, with each of the four corners sharing a guard tower, guaranteeing complete coverage of the camp.

Each of the 144 separate company barracks housed about 20-25 German POWs when at full strength (with the prisoners holding the equivalent ranks of American privates, corporals, and sergeants).

Each company was allotted 12 individual single-story barracks (heated by stoves in the cold months and cooled by open windows in the warm portions of the year), a kitchen and mess hall, a large barracks for shower and toilet facilities, a recreation center or dayroom, and usually an athletic field or exercise area.

The compounds held infirmaries, canteens, carpentry shops, barber and shoe repair shops, recreation centers or dayrooms, educational facilities, libraries, and athletic fields.

The camp also included a hospital and dental clinic, a nondenominational chapel for Catholic and Lutheran services, a number of recreational facilities for concerts and movies, and an open-air stage constructed by the prisoners for their own dramatic/comic/musical presentations. Electric poles and wiring provided power throughout the camp. A long, rectangular, spacious greenhouse stood at the northeastern end of the camp.

The prisoners were allowed, even encouraged, to beautify the fronts and sides of their individual barracks with flowers, shrubbery, and rock gardens complete with decorative features and miniature houses. The U.S. Army endeavored to maintain morale among the prisoners and keep negative incidents to a minimum by presenting as pleasing a place of internment as possible.

The compounds were separated from each other by wire fences, but gates (frequently and on special occasions) opened, allowing prisoners to freely go from one compound to another.

McClellan’s camp received accolades from inspectors and inmates alike because of its scenery. A December 1943 inspection report applauded the fort for its “very pleasing appearance. It is surrounded by the timber covered slopes of the southern foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. … Groups of trees within the compounds provide shade for the prisoners during the hot Alabama summer and lend beauty to the camp. The barracks for the prisoners are painted olive drab which blends very well with the surrounding foliage and further assists in beautifying the camp.”

Many POWs came to appreciate their stay in McClellan because of the camp’s physical beauty and relative safety and the generally humane way in which they were treated. Former POW Alfred Arens, returning to McClellan for yet another visit in September 1991, wrote: “And now my fourth visit, and it leads me again to McClellan. Why have I come? Why have I undertaken the stress of crossing 5,000 miles over the sea? Well…the stay in McClellan was – after the years in my parents’ house – the longest coherent period of staying in the same place in my life. Therefore there has developed a kind of home-sickness in me when I see this region, these streets and these old trees which stood already here during my time nearly 50 years ago.”

This excerpt is from *The Fort McClellan POW Camp: German Prisoners in Alabama, 1943-1946* by Jack Shay, whose parents were formerly Alabama citizens living in Anniston. It was published by McFarland & Company in 2016. It may be obtained from the publisher (800-253-2187 or [customerser@mcfarlandpub.com](mailto:customerser@mcfarlandpub.com)) or from Amazon or any bookstore.

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