

«Hitler's Canadians» – a World Premier broadcast

First Documentary of German POW Camps in Canada

TORONTO (NW) - In the early 40's, many small towns across Canada awakened to the sound of German military jackboots. German soldiers, sailors and pilots marched down main streets to hastily constructed camps for some 40,000 German fighters imprisoned as POWs on Canadian soil.

Storyline Entertainment and History Television are proud to announce the World Premier broadcast of "Hitler's Canadians" on Sunday, March 11 at 8:00pm et/pt. This one-hour documentary, which took almost 3 years to conceptualize and produce, tells the little known story of German POWs in Canada during WW2. It features dramatic re-enactments of brilliant and hilarious escapes, the biggest prison rebellion in Canadian history and surprising interviews with former prisoners.

"In a time when prisoner of

near your home as a POW!" The Gestapo-like rousting Biggs expected turned into a two-hour conversation with a new friend about the beauty of the Canadian Shield, lumber camp work and the policeman's dream of returning to Canada – and prompted Ted Biggs to begin researching the topic.

Biggs explains: "It struck me that the pleasant exile of Canada's POW camps would have shattered the world view touted by the Nazis. The stories we discovered while making this show proved this to be true...we also found familiar expressions of shame and denial common to many who fought for the Nazis. In this moment in wartime, Canada's fundamental decency shone through."

In 1940, before the U.S. entered WW II in December 1941, the growing ranks of German prisoners in Britain presented an ur-



German POW's march into the camp in the movie (left) and in the early 40's (bottom).

Below left: Director and writer Douglas Williams with co-producer Ted Biggs

Below: Producer Ed Barreveld.



war camps like Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo tout new rules for POWs that ignore the Geneva Convention, we can look in our own backyard for some lessons and guidance. Although there were exceptions, Canada's treatment of the German POWs is an example we should strive to uphold today," says producer Ed Barreveld.

"Hitler's Canadians" was inspired by a real life chance encounter of co-producer Ted Biggs' father. In 1957 Bill Biggs found himself stranded overnight in the Braunschweig train station. An angry policeman shook him awake and demanded to see his "papers." Upon inspecting the passport the policeman broke into a huge grin; "I spent the war

gent problem. Straining to meet the Geneva Convention standards for POW treatment and with Nazi armies nearing their shores, Britain saw the POWs as a potential threat on their own soil and opted to send them to Canada. Some POWs were in prison here so long they called themselves "Hitler's Canadians".

"Hitler's Canadians" reveals this little-known side of Canada's role in WW II. Director and writer Douglas Williams says: "There were 26 POW camps in Canada during the war years. One surprise was the distinction between concentration camps and POW camps. In Canada, German POWs lived in luxury!" But it wasn't a vacation for everyone. "Day-to-day POW camp



life was run by the inmates – and organized along military lines. This meant that committed Nazis were frequently in command positions. They made life miserable for anyone deemed less committed to the Nazi cause. Two suspect prisoners were lynched in the Medicine Hat camp."

Producer Ed Barreveld knew "Hitler's Canadians" was an important film to make now, especially considering the interview subjects are elderly and some might need convincing to relive their pasts. Last summer the production moved to Germany for interviews with nine former German POWs. Their words reflect the contradictory and complicated nature of the time.

Among the former POWs the production tracked down and interviewed in Germany was Ulrich Steinhilper, a First Lieutenant in the Luftwaffe, whose Messerschmitt 109 was shot down while escorting German bombers during the Battle of Britain. "Being made a prisoner was just contrary to everything I had as an idea for my life," says Steinhilper. "So it was absolutely natural for me to try to be a free man again. I knew I was a good officer, and I wanted to



help Germany win a war again." Steinhilper made several attempts at escape, finally succeeding by faking his way into a mental hospital so he could take advantage of a Red Cross special needs prisoner exchange programme. Uli returned to Germany where he authored three books on his experiences on "the other side," and IBM has credited him with inventing the concept of "word processing."

Without exception, the former POWs seen in "Hitler's Canadians" were grateful for Canada's hospitality and treatment. All of them realize that if it weren't

for their time behind Canadian barbed wire, they might not have survived the war. Between 1945 and 1960, 265,000 Germans immigrated to Canada. 6,000 of them were former POWs.

"Hitler's Canadians" was produced by Ed Barreveld, co-produced by Ted Biggs and written and directed by Douglas Williams from a story inspired by Bill Biggs. "Hitler's Canadians" is produced for Storyline Entertainment Production Inc. in association with History Television, History Channel and with the participation of the Canadian Television Fund, and the Rogers Documentary Fund

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