

Movies/TV

These PoWs came back

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They seem like any bunch of vacationers, these fair young men, as they gambol in the woods or sun themselves around the pool. Their lodge is well-equipped and outside there are tennis courts, nature trails ... and barbed wire.

It is Spring, 1940, and these are not tourists but German troops, some SS officers. They're some of the 40,000 Nazi soldiers captured during intense fighting in Europe and transported to prisoner-of-war camps in Canada.

PoW camps in Canada? It's the suddenly relevant story of the new Toronto-made documentary *Hitler's Canadians*.

Despite all that the Allied troops would encounter in Europe, including Auschwitz, they treated their German captives with extraordinary civility. Each camp was set up with a German officer running the day-to-day activities of the prisoners. In the newsreel footage, all appear well-fed and happy to be out of Hitler's inferno.

The impetus for the film came in 1957 when co-producer Ted Briggs' father found himself stranded in the train station at Braunschweig, Germany. An angry policeman shook him awake, examined his papers, then let him go, exclaiming with a grin "I spent the war near your home as a PoW."

"I'd heard about the large number of German PoWs who



Dramatic recreations for *Hitler's Canadians* were filmed in Bowmanville at one of two surviving PoW camp structures.

legally returned to Canada after the war," says producer Ed Barreveld. "I always wondered why they'd come back to a country where they were interned. They explained that in the camps they first learned about freedom."

Barreveld says the filmmakers' first step was to advertise in German papers. "The response was huge. What we wanted was some balance but there was nobody who'd say it was anything else but tolerable. It was sometimes dull, sometimes it rained for weeks but that was nothing compared to fighting on the eastern front."

Barreveld had also heard of romances between small town girls and the boys in the camps but couldn't get anybody to confirm this on camera. The former PoWs he interviewed are all old now; they left Canada more than 60 years ago as young men.

Old movies — *Stalag 17*, *The Bridge On The River Kwai*, *King Rat* — dramatize the plight of PoWs, but these German survivors remember nothing of that sort.

Some worked in logging camps, others on nearby farms, but most did not have regular jobs. One PoW took correspondence courses from the University of Toronto, which he later used in Germany to get a science degree.

Camps were established across Canada, with 10 each in

Ontario and Quebec but only one in New Brunswick, perhaps fearing Nazi U boats were lurking just off the beaches ready to scoop up German prisoners.

"Most of the camps are gone, destroyed after the war," Barreveld reports. "The one in best shape is at Bowmanville and it's there we shot our dramatic recreations."

If the PoWs had a hero, it was German pilot Franz von Werra. A fictionalized account of his exploits was given in the 1957 film *The One That Got Away* starring Hardy Kruger.

Von Werra escaped several times while a PoW in Britain. Transported to Canada, he jumped out of the window of a moving train and escaped across the St. Lawrence River to freedom in the still-neutral United States.

When he eventually made his way back to Germany, he was decorated by Hitler, only to later perish when his plane crashed.

"We had to do this now or lose the last survivors," Barreveld says. "They are elderly but, when interviewed, episodes that happened 60 years ago still burn brightly in their memory."

"We wanted to show how Canada's camps were models for other nations to follow. Today that lesson is more relevant than ever."

Sunday at 8 p.m. on History.