Allied Special Forces and Prisoner of War Recovery Operations in Europe, 1944–1945*

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Abstract

This article investigates the efforts made to protect prisoners of war (POWs) in German hands at the end of the Second World War. Challenging contemporary and historical judgments, it argues that Allied plans were reasonable, realistic, and reflected a widespread belief in the importance of protecting the lives and well-being of Allied POWs. Although only two operations were ultimately mounted, the process of raising and equipping specialized recovery units provided a valuable learning experience for Allied planners, which later went on inform recovery operations in the Pacific, and set a precedent that arguably extends to influence attitudes towards POW recovery today.

The importance of safely recovering servicemen from the hands of their enemies has become one of the central elements of the modern state’s “contract” with its serving personnel. If servicemen and women are to give their all in combat, and hold to a high standard of conduct after capture, the state, for

*The author gratefully acknowledges the insights offered by Roderick Bailey, James Crossland, Christopher Murphy, Mark Seaman, and the Journal’s referees in commenting on earlier drafts of this paper, and offers his thanks to members of the Special Forces Club, London, who hosted a lecture on this subject on 6 October 2015, and to Mr. Les Hughes for permission to reproduce items from his archive collection.


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its part, has the responsibility to ensure that no stone is left unturned in securing their release and repatriation. Such views lay behind the ninety missions launched to liberate U.S. personnel from captivity in North Vietnam between 1966 and 1970; they fuelled the emergence of the powerful prisoner of war/missing in action (POW/MIA) lobby in the United States, and have provided a recurrent theme for screen-writers and movie-makers ever since. Recent conflicts have provided spectacular examples of such operations, from the Israeli raid on Entebbe in July 1976, to the “saving of Private [Jessica] Lynch” in the 2003 Iraq War, to Russia’s recent recovery of navigator Konstantin Murakhtin in Syria in November 2015. Although operations of this nature always entail a high risk, the political pressure on governments to recover their nationals is frequently strong, especially in states such as the United States and Israel, where the credo “leave no man behind” is deeply etched into the military culture and society at large. Despite a litany of painful failures—from Son Tay in November 1970, to the Tehran hostage rescue mission in April 1980—the United States remains committed to recovering its servicemen, dead or alive. At the close of the 1991 Gulf War, efforts to tackle Iraq’s chemical and biological weapons’ program jostled for priority in the Coalition with Washington’s determination to locate Lieutenant Commander Michael Speicher, who had been missing since the early days of the conflict. Two decades on, Washington ignored its injunction against negotiating with terrorists and exchanged five senior Taleban fighters for Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl, despite doubts over the circumstances of Bergdahl’s capture.

If POW rescue operations have become part and parcel of our understanding of contemporary warfare, the same cannot be said for the period before 1945. Apart from a handful of successful operations in the Philippines in early 1945, large-scale “prisoner recovery” missions have left little imprint in the literature. The details, for instance, of George Patton’s ill-fated attempt to liberate Oflag XIIIC, Hammelburg, in mid-March 1945, which saw the relief convoy annihilated on its return to Allied lines, remain largely unknown. Belligerents were ready to help their men escape from captivity or make their way home from neutral countries, but with the exception of a handful of celebrated individual rescue attempts—such as those of Benito Mussolini or Raymond Aubrac—organized

1. Private information. The matter was closed only after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. His remains were located after exhaustive investigations in 2009.
“prisoner recovery” operations were rare. The dearth of such operations should not, however, imply a disinterest in securing the liberty of POWs through military means. This paper examines the intense discussions on this theme that took place in Allied circles over the last twelve months of the Second World War in Europe. These discussions not only explored diplomatic options and questions of relief, but also included consideration of the prisoners’ physical protection during the final weeks, days, and even hours of the Nazi regime. Though a host of practical and political obstacles made the prospect of mounting successful military rescue missions daunting, this did not deter Allied planners from their task, or diminish the sense of moral responsibility British and American officials felt towards their compatriots in enemy captivity. No more than a handful of rescue operations were ultimately launched, but the experience in Europe provided an important testing ground for this area of activity; they gave rise to the first specialist units dedicated to POW recovery, and laid the foundations for the recovery operations in the Far East three months later and, arguably, those that followed.

Emerging Ideas on the Repatriation of POWs at the Close of Hostilities, 1943–1944

British and American thinking over the fate of their prisoners in 1945 was framed by a determination to avoid the errors made at the end of the Great War. Although the armistice in November 1918 ensured a relatively orderly end to armed hostilities, the Entente failed to locate and repatriate their men in a timely fashion. Frustrated by the inertia of their governments, numerous prisoners simply abandoned their camps and joined the throng of refugees drifting across the continent in search of their homes and loved ones. The chaos that ensued brought needless hardship to the prisoners concerned, and laid governments open to charges of indifference that were difficult to refute. Planners in the 1940s consequently viewed POW repatriation as an administrative question of how to maintain a level of control over their men sufficient to meet their immediate food, clothing, and health needs and arrange for their transportation home. This task was, however, complicated by the waxing population of displaced people, wrought by years of war and alien occupation. By early 1944, predictions as to the situation likely to confront Allied forces at the war’s close envisaged a “mass uprising” of peoples, with migrants facing “appalling problems of obtaining food and shelter on their way [home], probably aggravated by widespread strikes, disease, and rioting. Barracks and prison camps will be destroyed and there will be sporadic fighting over many areas.” Faced with such a prospect, Allied planners


concluded that prisoners should be instructed to remain in their camps, under the authority of their senior officers or representatives, and await the arrival of Allied relief columns. Although the “stay put” policy caused embarrassment in the fall of 1943, when, in obeying instructions, some 50,000 Allied POWs in Italy missed the chance to escape and merely exchanged Italian guards for German ones, the absence of any realistic alternative meant that the instructions—now rebranded as the “stand fast” order—remained the central tenet of Allied thinking towards POW recovery in Germany at the war’s end.7

Viewing POW recovery as a logistical issue also reflected Allied confidence in Germany’s willingness to abide by the 1929 Geneva Convention in its dealings with western POWs. Notwithstanding the obvious brutality of Adolf Hitler’s regime, and concerns over the working conditions in German mines and the scale of camp rations, British and American POWs had been relatively well treated during the first three years of the war. Confidence sharply declined over the winter of 1943–44, when camp inspection reports began to indicate a marked increase in the use of firearms by camp guards and foremen. The ominous trend reflected strains in the German war economy and the difficulty of managing an increasingly truculent work force, but also pointed to an increasingly permissive attitude towards the use of force amongst the German security forces. Events the following year lent weight to such fears.8 In May 1944, the Reich’s propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, gave vent to his frustration at Allied bombing by encouraging German civilians tolynch Allied aircrew who fell into their hands. The same month London received confirmation of the murder of fifty prisoners who had broken out of Stalag Luft III on the night of 24 March. The gruesome incident appeared to signal a worrying shift in the balance of power inside Germany, with the regular armed forces losing ground to the Schutzstaffel (SS) and Gestapo. Heinrich Himmler’s elevation in the Nazi hierarchy following the attempt on Hitler’s life on 20 July inevitably strengthened these concerns, as did the spate of prisoner killings behind German lines in Normandy and the appointment in November of an SS general, Gottlieb Berger, as head of the POW camp system.9

When, therefore, Allied planners turned their attention over the summer of 1944 to POW repatriation at the close of hostilities, the question they wrestled with was not, as before, an administrative one, of how to extricate a quarter of a


million exhausted prisoners from the ruins of Hitler’s Reich, but rather a security one: what could be done to protect Allied POWs from revenge attacks as the Nazi regime went through its last death throes? The view of the British Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), to whom the matter was put in July 1944, was relatively sanguine. The committee reaffirmed the belief that the German army “broadly speaking” adhered to the Geneva Convention and “disapproved of the shooting of the RAF [Royal Air Force] escapers.”\textsuperscript{10} The fate of Allied prisoners would depend, however, on who controlled Allied POWs in the final days of the war—the German military, die-hard Nazis, or moderate elements within the German regime, SS, or Gestapo—and what form Germany’s “defeat” would actually take. On both issues, opinions varied widely. Most officials assumed that the so-called “Eclipse” period—the war’s end-phase resulting in the final extinguishing of Hitler’s power—would consist of the defeat of German land forces on the battlefield, followed by an internal collapse of the country’s central government. But what this meant in practice was unclear. A study conducted by Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) in mid-August assumed that the residual German authorities would seek to fulfill their obligations, but would probably succeed in meeting only 60 percent of the prisoners’ food and medical needs.\textsuperscript{11} A JIC paper composed at the same time talked of the \textit{probability} of there being “no authority exerting effective control over the country from which unconditional surrender could be accepted.”\textsuperscript{12} Comparatively little thought, though, was given to the conditions that might arise where a total German collapse did not occur and where Allied armies would be required to fight their way into every corner of the country.\textsuperscript{13}

Where opinions did converge was on the critical importance of making adequate preparations to deal with the possibility, however remote, of a last-minute massacre of Allied prisoners. Indeed, one of the striking features of the discussions was the strength of opinion behind the need to protect Allied POWs, and the absence of any sustained criticism of Allied prisoners in allowing themselves to be captured in the first place. The British Army Council, which had fixated over the problem of “premature surrender” during the First World War, now freely admitted that “few questions arouse stronger feeling throughout the British Commonwealth than the treatment and welfare of our prisoners of war.” Politicians were careful to avoid exciting unwanted attention to the issue,

\textsuperscript{10} JIC (44) 322 revised, 29 July 1944, Entry 7, Box 73, Record Group (RG) 331, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland, U.S.A. (NARA). This view was shared in the Foreign Office; the War Office was more skeptical. Phillimore (War Office) to Roberts (Foreign Office), 14 August 1944, FO916/871, TNA.

\textsuperscript{11} Delivery of Aid of Food and Medical Supplies to Allied POW post-hostilities, by SHAEF G4 Division, 17 August 1944, AIR2/5638, TNA.

\textsuperscript{12} General Form of German Collapse, JIC (44) 349 Final, 10 August 1944, M1642 Roll 14, RG 226, NARA. Author’s emphasis.

\textsuperscript{13} Minute by N. Crockatt (MI9), 5 October 1944, WO32/1124, TNA.
but did not hesitate to press their concerns on the government.\textsuperscript{14} The weight of moral responsibility bearing on Allied planners is evident in a paper produced on the last day of August by the body responsible for coordinating British and U.S. air operations. The “first consideration” of the Allied powers after Germany’s military defeat, the paper noted, “should be the repatriation of their nationals who have had the misfortune to be prisoners of war and who are thus not in a position to help themselves.” “To deny to our POW the use of these facilities to accomplish their immediate repatriation,” it went on, “would be inconsistent with civilized standards of humanity. The hardships, suffering and even deaths of large numbers of prisoners of war in Germany, which would be inevitable if they were to be left until the occupation of the country is accomplished, would constitute an unforgivable indictment which could never be erased.”\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Initial Planning, June 1944 to March 1945}

Mindful of these obligations, the JIC recommended that planning focus on three principal areas. First, it was vital that secure communications be established with the POWs to ensure that Allied forces could evaluate and react to changes in the prisoners’ circumstances. Though simple in theory, the practical difficulties had proved exceptionally difficult to overcome, and remained so until the final days of the war. By October 1944, MI9, the British escape and evasion service, had radio and letter contact with “the bulk” of camps holding British officers and airmen, but of the eleven Stalags holding other rank prisoners and known to possess radio receivers, only three had acknowledged receipt of communications by that date, and the collapse of postal services to the camps over the latter half of 1944 inevitably reduced the effectiveness of coded letters. Moreover, of the “other rank” POWs, only one in eight was detained in camp at any one time: the rest were held in work-detachments located upwards of several hundred miles from the main base camps. Thus, even before the wholesale evacuation of POW camps in Poland and eastern Germany began in early 1945, the problem of communicating with western POWs had not been resolved, and concern on this point remained a key constraint on Allied options as the war edged to its conclusion.\textsuperscript{16}

The second recommendation, which eventually became the central plank of Allied policy, entailed threatening the German authorities with post-war retribution should they fail to protect the well-being of Allied POWs under their control. The approach had the benefit of not depending on the existence of a functioning government in Berlin, but its political problems were manifold.

\textsuperscript{14} Lord Vansittart to Brendan Bracken (Minister of Information), 15 December 1944, FO898/328, TNA.

\textsuperscript{15} The evacuation of Allied POWs from Germany, AF COPC/S 2050, 31 August 1944, AIR2/5638, TNA. Foot and Langley, \textit{MI9}, 289–90, 291. MI9 was tasked with identifying and interrogating POWs suspected of collaboration.

\textsuperscript{16} See Venables (SHAEF) to War Office, 22 January 1945, and \textit{Table to show dispatch and acknowledgement}, by MI9, 5 February 1945, indicating no contacts with twenty-seven major camps by early February. Entry 7, Box 75, RG 331, NARA.
As Britain’s Political Warfare Executive never tired of pointing out, the mere broadcasting of such warnings would inevitably publicize Allied anxieties that might in turn be exploited by the Nazi regime for their own political or tactical ends.17 Equally worrying, however, was the potential strain on relations with other Allied nations. Moscow was known to harbor grave misgivings over any contacts with the German regime, lest they be used to convey peace-feelers from the West. The French and Poles, for their part, questioned the priority given to American and British POWs over the interests of other Allied nationals—military and civilian—in German hands.18

Charting the proposal through the various inter-governmental processes without exciting Soviet opposition or resentment from the junior allies took considerable time, and by the end of 1944, little progress had been achieved. Pressure mounted to draw a response from the Soviets, and when, in mid-March 1945, Joseph Stalin came out definitively against a joint warning, the western governments were left with either abandoning the project, or going it alone. It is a measure of the depth of British and American anxieties over the fate of their men—and perhaps too, the dearth of any realistic alternatives—that the two governments decided to ignore Soviet sensitivities and instruct General Dwight Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of Allied forces in western Europe, to publish the announcements as planned. The first warning, issued on 24 March 1945, threatened prosecution for anyone found to have acted upon Hitler’s infamous “commando order” of 18 October 1942, in which German military and security forces had been instructed to treat commando forces as illegal combatants and shoot them on sight. The policy had been known to the Allies since 1942, but was confirmed only in early March 1945 when an actual copy of the order fell into Allied hands. A second so-called “solemn warning” was published on 24 April, and reminded camp guards of their individual responsibility for the safety of Allied POWs. A final communiqué, issued on 28 April, instructed the German authorities to cease moving western POWs around, and instead leave them “in situ” and permit them to be overrun by the advancing Allied forces.

It is the JIC’s final set of recommendations—that involving the use of military force to protect POWs—that primarily concerns us here. The options for such activity included everything from battalion-strength airborne units, capable of seizing and securing “save-havens” for Allied POWs, to small reconnaissance teams, who could be inserted into individual camps or work-detachments. When first raised in the fall of 1944, the discussions had an inevitable air of unreality, as much would depend on the conditions at the moment of Germany’s collapse. Still, even at this stage, doubts were raised over whether the Allies would possess the necessary men, material, and aircraft to carry out operations on a grand scale or, indeed, whether the proposed measures would not aggravate tensions between

17. See minute by Air Commodore Groves (Political Warfare Executive), 22 December 1944, FO898/328, TNA.
18. See minute by Anthony Eden (Foreign Secretary) for W. S. Churchill (Prime Minister), 5 March 1945, FO954 Roll 22, TNA.
the POWs, their guards, and the local German forces and lead to precisely the massacre that they were meant to forestall.

In London, the initial inclination was to err on side of caution. The Air Ministry welcomed the chance to play an “important part,” on the assumption that the cessation of hostilities would leave its bomber force with “little or nothing to do but kick their heels and get into trouble.” But the service chiefs were loath to tie the hands of the theatre commanders—Eisenhower in western Europe, and General Harold Alexander in the Mediterranean—by insisting that forces be retained from POW recovery operations.19 “Since the camps are numerous and widely dispersed and since many of the prisoners are not accommodated in camps at all,” the chiefs concluded in early September, it was unlikely that “airborne troops could assist in this way on a large scale.” Subsequent investigations into alternative options proved equally disappointing. The RAF was reluctant to countenance low-level fly-pasts of the camps either to intimidate the guards or “signal” Allied intentions to the prisoners.20 In sum, early British discussions concluded that the surest way of protecting POWs lay in the swift defeat of the German armed forces and the occupation and control of Germany. This was, of course, little more than a counsel of despair; most were confident that Germany’s field army could be destroyed, but no one could tell whether Allied forces would be able to establish the necessary control of German territory to prevent Nazi diehards executing Allied prisoners or seizing them as hostages.

The tenor of discussions in Washington was rather different. Here, officials proved more open to the idea of airborne operations. This was partly a matter of scale. Not only were there fewer U.S. POWs, 45,000 by late 1944, against some 140,000 British, but of these, three-quarters were housed in just seven camps in Poland, all of which were conveniently situated near airfields. Preliminary investigations suggested that if regimental-size combat teams could provide “initial security” to each camp, a fleet of 400 heavy bombers could evacuate the men in as little as four or five days. Staff in Britain’s Air Ministry had made similar calculations, but had been deterred from pressing the case because of the number and dispersal of British prisoners.21

If opinions diverged on the capacity for independent military action on behalf of the prisoners, a consensus did, nevertheless, emerge on two important issues. The first concerned the wisdom of supplying Allied prisoners with firearms. This option had been raised by the JIC in the summer, and had occasionally come up in communications with the camps and with those prisoners repatriated on health grounds over the course of 1944. The possibility of mobilizing prisoners had always exercised some appeal. In mid-1943, MI9 and the Special Operations Executive (SOE) had agreed

19. Bomber Command to Air Ministry, 8 November 1944; Minute by J. O. Balfour (Air Ministry), 14 November 1944, AIR2/5638, TNA.
20. Minute by N. Crockatt (MI9), 5 October 1944, WO32/11124, TNA.
21. A force of 200–250 bombers could “completely evacuate” a camp of 10,000 prisoners in three to four days using one aerodrome. Minute by J. O. Balfour (DB Ops Air Ministry), 14 November 1944, AIR2/5638, TNA.
that British prisoners should join the resistance in the event of a general uprising in
Poland. There was little chance of repatriating the men through organized channels,
and the resistance might arrange for small parties to reach neutral Sweden.22 By mid-
1944, most camps holding Allied POWs had managed to acquire some arms and
ammunition. At Oflag VII-C, Laufen, Wehrmacht officers in the camp administration
even helped American prisoners smuggle in arms, as they feared the intentions of the
local Nazi party and felt powerless to prevent a massacre on their own.23 In some cases,
prisoners had managed to assemble sizeable arsenals, but in the main, the quantities of
equipment were negligible.24 In the large Luftwaffe camp at Barth, for example, Allied
airmen possessed just two revolvers and six spare rounds of ammunition.25 There were
also serious doubts over the prisoners’ military value. With many British prisoners
entering their fourth year of captivity, it was questionable whether they were fit to
shoulder arms effectively. By early 1945 most planners felt that arming the prisoners
would merely complicate the operations of regular or irregular units, and, most likely,
precipitate the very violence that the measures were designed to waylay. As a matter of
policy, therefore, the supply of arms to prisoners was discouraged. On 8 March 1945,
General Eisenhower stipulated that no arms or sabotage materials were to be dropped
within twenty-five miles of known POW camps to minimize the danger of prisoners
becoming embroiled in the fighting.26

The second issue to be clarified over the discussions in late 1944 concerned the
value of reinforcing the privileged status enjoyed by western POWs in German camps.
Although the aerial bombing of German cities clearly strained German willingness
to accord Allied airmen full protection under the Geneva convention, Allied planners
were loath to discard this vital element of restraint on German guards and camp
commandants. Allied airmen were increasingly singled out for special treatment, but
by and large German civilians had refused to heed Goebbels’s call and greet every
downed pilot with a pitch-fork. Most Allied pilots reached their camps in one piece,
and once there, they remained under the authority of the Luftwaffe commandant. So
long as the German authorities outwardly adhered to the international conventions,
there was every value in underscoring the legal distinction between those who enjoyed
protection under the Red Cross and POW conventions and those who did not.

22. “MP” (SOE) to “AD/E” (SOE), 13 July 1943, HS6/637, TNA.
23. Curiously, the local Nazis apparently intended to wreak vengeance against only Ameri-
can prisoners, not their British counterparts. Roswell McClelland (US legation, Berne) to F.
James (American Red Cross), 20 February 1945, Entry 7, Box 46, RG 311, NARA.
24. By January 1945, the Weidmennsdorf working camp near Klagenfurt had enough
weapons and ammunition for all 270 men. Report by Lt. Col. Allan (MI9), 7 January 1945,
Enter 7, Box 73, RG 331, NARA.
25. Report by Lt. Col. A. C. Allan (MI9), 5 January 1945; “MP” (SOE) to “AD/E” (SOE),
13 July 1943, HS6/631 folio 130, TNA; Foot and Langley, MI9, 291–93.
26. Gen. Eisenhower (SHAEF) to Brig. Templar (War Office), 8 March 1945, Entry 1,
Box 85, RG 331, NARA. The practical effect of this measure must be questioned given the
widespread dispersal of POWs at that time. MI9 had had doubts over the military effectiveness
of POWs since mid-1943. See “AD/E” to “MP,” 24 July 1943, HS6/637 folio 129, TNA.
Such views naturally bolstered the argument for withholding the supply of weapons to the camps, as once armed a prisoner naturally lost his right to protection under the conventions. They also, though, strengthened the case for privileging western Allied POWs in any recovery plans. Internal correspondence suggests that it was a concern over the dissipation of Allied military resources that prompted planners to insist on distinguishing between POWs and foreign workers. Eisenhower was especially anxious lest public pressure force him to divert resources from the battlefront to tackle the humanitarian needs of Europe’s population.  

These worries were not shared by the French and Polish governments-in-exile, whose nationals were held as prisoners, civilian internees, guest-workers, and slave labourers. The French and Polish secret services had forged resistance and intelligence networks that paid little attention to neat legal categorizations, and deliberately used POW camps as communication hubs. Both governments envisaged their agents moving from intelligence gathering to sabotage and armed resistance in the final stages of the conflict. While they were ready to genuflect to Anglo-American sensitivities, in reality the two anticipated eroding the status of their POWs at precisely the time when western prisoners were most likely to be exposed to revenge attacks.

Relations with the Soviets raised even more concerns. Soviet servicemen had been denied POW status since the start of the conflict, so none of the neat distinctions favored by the western governments had the slightest purchase on Soviet thinking. The sheer number and deplorable physical condition of Soviet prisoners in German hands by early 1945 made their recovery unattainable on the basis of current resources. More problematic still, though, was the prospect of prompting similar POW recovery operations by the Soviets. If the principle of inserting military units into Germany to protect foreign workers was accepted, there would be nothing to prevent Moscow from insisting on the insertion of sizeable Soviet military units into the western theatre of operations, or in the zones nominally ear-marked for western influence.

The British and Americans had good reasons, therefore, to keep their allies at arms’ length. U.S. officials were particularly wary of the French “Direction générale des études et recherches” (DGER), responsible for contacts with the French POWs, which they considered an “amateur outfit rocked by personal animosities and changes,” whose intelligence product was “of little value.” Nor were they keen to see talks progress on a tri-partite basis, since three-way relationships were “always very difficult” and left the Americans “in no position to compete

27. For the “strong political pressure” on the Air Ministry to “make the most effective use of our air force to assist POWs,” see minute by Director of Policy (Air Ministry), 25 February 1945, AIR2/5638, TNA.

28. “MP” (SOE) to “AD/E” (SOE), 13 July 1943, HS6/637 folio 130, TNA.

29. For SHAEF anxieties about French plans to foster a rebellion amongst its prisoners, see Minute by Brig. Venables (SHAEF), 19 November 1944, “French clandestine organizations,” Entry 7, Box 73, RG 331, NARA.

30. Archer and Dean to AGWAR for CCOS, 28 March 1945, Entry 27, Box 85, RG 331, NARA.
with such old veterans of intrigue as the various British Secret Services."\(^{31}\) The British shared some of these misgivings, and agreed to “parley” with the French, sufficient, as one official put it, to “maintain a degree of control over them by bringing constant pressure to bear . . . and withholding equipment etc. for schemes of which we do not approve.”\(^{32}\) After a series of non-committal discussions in late 1944, the chief of staff for SHAEF, Lieutenant General W. B. Smith, bluntly informed French General Charles de Gaulle’s chief of general staff for national defense that it was “out of the bounds of possibility” for airborne forces to assist foreign “deportees” in the German Reich, and emphasized the “extremely small scale and inevitable tardiness of those measures of protection and relief that are in fact practicable.”\(^{33}\) To sweeten the blow, the British helped establish training schools for French agents, and put forty organizers and wireless operators through schools in England.\(^{34}\) SHAEF also dropped leaflets over Germany in November and December 1944, threatening retribution for anyone found ill-treating foreign workers.\(^{35}\) But French attempts to include “foreign workers” in Eisenhower’s “solemn warning” in late April 1945 were firmly rebuffed. Whatever the Allies were prepared to do for POWs at the war’s end, the principal focus was to be on British and American nationals: any benefit accrued by prisoners of the other Allies was purely incidental.

Thus, although POW recovery had emerged as a priority for western planners by late 1944, little headway had been made beyond securing agreement on a handful of basic principles. Events over the winter underscored the seriousness of the situation likely to face western—particularly—air force POWs in German hands as the war dragged on. Spurred on by Allied pronouncements about the “Trojan Horse” in Germany, the German authorities lost little time in tightening camp security arrangements. Red Cross food cans entering camps were punctured on arrival to prevent their use in escapes or by resistance forces, while the reserves of parcels held in British and American compounds were deliberately reduced from three months’ to one month’s supply, reversing the progress made in building up stocks over the previous twelve months, and leaving POWs vulnerable to delays in the parcel service in the final months of the war. Of even greater significance was the decision to evacuate camps in the east to avoid them being overrun by the Red Army. Evacuations began in mid-

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31. OSS European Theatre of Operations United States Army (ETOUSA) to Col. E. W. Gamble (Washington), 12 April 1945, Entry 215, Box 2, RG 226, NARA.
32. Minute by Earle Jones for G1 ACOS G1, 1 December 1944, Entry 7, Box 73, RG 331, NARA; Memo for the President, 16 March 1945, M1642 Roll 25, RG 226, NARA.
33. Lt. Gen. W. B. Smith to General Junin 2nd draft (January 1945), FO1049/26, TNA.
34. Only two French missions were ever infiltrated into Germany by SOE. William Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE. The Special Operations Executive 1940–1945* (London: St Ermin’s, 2000), 710.
35. In November and December 1944, 8.3 million leaflets were dropped: FO898/328, TNA. For the salutary impact on German behavior: see CX12500 (SIS report), 18 January 1945, HS6/631, TNA.
January 1945 and became a staple feature of the POW’s experience until the final days of the war. Apart from the appalling hardship endured underway and the increasing exposure to air attack and assaults from the civilian population, the evacuation led to chronic overcrowding and a deterioration in the sanitary and health conditions in the remaining camps in central Germany.36

Although not immediately apparent to western observers, the decision to evacuate prisoners was symptomatic of Hitler’s determination to maintain control of his “western hostages.” Even after the Anglo-Americans recovered the military initiative following the collapse of the German Ardennes offensive in early January 1945, it became increasingly clear that the “Eclipse” conditions, upon which so much planning had been founded, were unlikely to materialize. Far from capitulating, German military resistance became increasingly dogged as Allied forces edged their way into the German heartlands. “The further this campaign progresses,” Eisenhower admitted on 31 March, “the more probable it appears there will never be a clean cut military surrender.”

Our experience to date is that even when formations as small as a division are disrupted, their fragments continue to fight until surrendered. All the areas in which fragments of the German Army, particularly the Paratrooper, Panzer and SS elements may be located, will have to be taken by the application of or the threat of force. This would lead into a form of guerilla warfare which would require for its suppression a very large number of troops.37

This was ominous for Allied POW recovery plans, for it left Allied assumptions about the “Eclipse” conditions—of a formal German surrender, the existence of a functioning German command, and the majority of POWs concentrated in camps awaiting instructions—in tatters.38

The Military Option: Preparing Rescue Missions

Confusion over the likely timing and nature of Germany’s military collapse needs to be borne in mind in judging Allied military preparations for POW recovery over the final months of the war. The resumption of the Allies’ advance in early January 1945 focused attention on the issue, but it was only in the third week of February that the theatre commanders received their first official directive from the Anglo-American Combined Chiefs of Staff, and even here, particulars remained tantalizingly vague. SHAEF was instructed to prepare a “broad outline plan” for the dispatch of troops “by land or air,” capable of providing “maximum initial security” and the rapid evacuation of Allied prisoners. Priority was to be accorded to prisoners


38. For these doubts, see K. G. McLean (SHAEF, Plans Section G3) to Brig. Bosville (DACOS, G1), 18 January 1945, Entry 1, Box 85, RG 331, NARA.
captured “under U.S. and British command.” Still wedded to original thinking over “Eclipse” conditions, the chiefs called for forces to be deployable at the “earliest possible moment, consistent with deterioration of German resistance and evidence of impending surrender.” Despite almost six months of preliminary discussion, SHAEF’s planning staff appears to have been taken aback by the chiefs’ directive, for it took them nearly three weeks to decide on the basic nature and scope of the recovery operations, and another week to arrive at a coherent plan. The U.S. Tactical Army Air Force (USTAAF), the First Allied Airborne Army, and the Special Forces headquarters, who were approached in turn, declined to assume the lead on the grounds that they lacked the necessary administrative capacity or that their forces—principally paratrooper units and Special Air Service (SAS) squadrons—were all earmarked for other tasks. Efforts to co-opt the secret services were likewise initially unsuccessful, as neither SOE nor its U.S. counterpart, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), was prepared to coordinate major ground or air operations, or take responsibility for any activity that might lead to a massacre of Allied prisoners.

Discussions were not helped by the fact that SHAEF officers were “still very vague in their own minds as to what was wanted.”

The final plan, communicated to the chiefs on 26 March, amply reflected the haste and confusion in which it was conceived. The First Allied Airborne Army tentatively agreed to release battalion–strength airborne units for POW protection, though the scale of deployment would depend on the actual circumstances. SHAEF’s army group commanders were given the green light to dispatch relief columns to camps lying near their axis of advance, though Patton’s hapless bid to liberate Hammelburg camp on 25 March provided a timely reminder of the inherent risks of such operations. “Maximum initial security” could thus be assured for only a handful of the thirty-five camps believed to hold British and American POWs. Instead, SHAEF resigned itself to relying on the resources of the British and American secret services, which at best could provide only basic reconnaissance and communication facilities. The entire planning process paid little heed to the anticipated level of threat to Anglo-American prisoners, and amounted to a series of disjointed discussions between agencies that had only the slimmest idea of what they were ultimately being asked to do.

Of the two secret agencies, it was the OSS that proved more enthusiastic about the task. Its chief, William Donovan, had been angling for such a role since

39. Combined Chiefs of Staff to SHAEF for Eisenhower, 26 February 1945, HS8/202, TNA.
40. This “problem,” SOE’s council noted, “was the responsibility of SHAEF.” Minutes of SOE Council meeting, 13 March 1945, HS8/202, TNA.
41. Minutes of SOE Council meeting, 6 March 1945, HS8/202, TNA.
42. Eisenhower to CCOS, 26 March 1945, Entry 7, Box 73, RG 331, NARA.
43. For background SHAEF papers, Summary of intelligence regarding POW and foreign workers in Germany with particular reference to the possibility of massacre, SHAEF/17240/25/1, February 1945, and Stockpiling supplies for foreign workers in event of massacre, February 1945, FO1049/26, TNA.
mid-December 1944, when news of the requirement first reached him. Whether Donovan’s interest reflected his personal commitment to POW recovery, or a greater confidence in the utility of military force than his British counterparts, is not known; what is clear, is that he had strong institutional interests at stake in securing OSS an active role in Germany’s final defeat. He had approached the president the previous September insisting on the importance of mounting aggressive subversion behind enemy lines; POW work offered a convenient entrée into this space.44 The OSS had already aided the recovery of American prisoners from Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria, and this experience was clearly at the forefront of Donovan’s mind when he initially proposed a role for OSS in discussions with General Henry “Hap” Arnold, commanding general U.S. Army Air Forces, in December 1944.45

At this date, OSS had at its disposal several operation groups that had recently completed active operations in the Mediterranean, but by the time SHAEF returned to the matter in early February 1945, these forces had all been reassigned to other duties in Italy. One thirty-four-man “German” unit was available, but a third of the men could not speak German and possessed “no special qualifications whatsoever for getting along well in German occupied territory.”46 The only other groups to hand were fifty Norwegian teams, but all were committed during the February moon period to operations designed to impede the withdrawal of German forces from Norway. Neither the Norwegian- nor the Italian-based teams were keen to be diverted into speculative operations in Germany. Despite these difficulties, Donovan was clearly loath to go back on his word, and over the course of February and early March, he browbeat his staff at Caserta and London into agreeing to commit to the enterprise and secure a suitably elevated position for OSS in any resultant Anglo-American organization. In Italy, a company was placed at the disposal of 15th Army Group and plans made to prepare all combat-ready men for operations in northern Italy and Austria.47 In France, meanwhile, sixty German operation groups were pledged in early March with a promise to withdraw some of the Norwegian groups if required.48

By contrast, Donovan’s British counterparts were, from the outset, reluctant to support an activity that was “scarcely its business.” SOE continued to take the line that it had “no role to play in the matter” until its hand was forced in early March.49 Its hesitation partly reflected the pressure of other priorities—not least in the Far East—

45. Donovan to Arnold, 18 December 1944, M1642 Roll 98 folio 635, RG 226, NARA.
46. Memo for Donovan by Lt. Albert G. Lanier, 10 February 1945, M1642 Roll 98 folios 619–620, RG 226, NARA.
47. See correspondence between Donovan and Caserta, M1642 Roll 98 folios 616–643, RG 226, NARA. For SACMED plans, see SACMED, *Air evacuation of ex-POW from Austria*, 20 March 1945, Entry 7 Box 73, RG 331, NARA.
48. Donovan to Ustravic (London), 16 February 1945, M1642 Roll 98 folio 615, RG 226, NARA.
49. Minute for COS by Col. Earle M Jones, 5 December 1944, Entry 7, Box 73, RG 331, NARA, SOE Council minutes, 6 February 1945, HS8/202, TNA.
but partly too, its experience in mounting operations deep behind enemy lines. Doubts over the strength of the German resistance movement—especially after the July 1944 bomb-plot—and of the chances of operating in the absence of local reception parties, meant that discussion on running Anglo-American teams into Germany petered out in the summer of 1944, never to return. SOE’s council designated Germany as its primary target in early August, but in truth SOE had neither the plans nor the appetite to infiltrate agents into the Reich, and remained “obstinately skeptical” of any organized activity inside Germany. Preference, instead, was given to “mobilizing” foreign workers and German prisoners in Allied hands and preparing the ground for operations “during the post-armistice period.”

SOE’s sister service, the Secret Intelligence Service, also struggled to make much headway in penetrating the Reich; by late 1944 the life-expectancy of agents infiltrated into Germany was barely three weeks. British officials did not, therefore, view the prospect of parachuting teams behind German lines with much enthusiasm. They were also wary of assuming responsibility for any operations closely associated with military developments on the ground. SHAEF’s initial suggestion that an integrated command organization sit alongside Special Forces headquarters was, in the words of the SOE official sent to discuss the matter, “simply not on,” as such an organization was thought incapable of dealing with complex operations subject to “hourly alterations and improvisations.”

It was not until full operational control was accepted by SHAEF in March—in the form of a dedicated “PWX” staff attached to forward SHAEF headquarters—that SOE finally agreed to “father the project” and raise and equip the necessary force.

A Forlorn Hope? Rescue Operations in Germany and Austria, April–May 1945

The training and composition of the force hastily assembled to meet SHAEF’s requirements in early April, the Special Allied Air Reconnaissance Force (SAARF), naturally reflected SOE’s approach to clandestine operations. Personnel were divided into three-man units, similar to the “Jedburgh” teams dropped into France before D-Day. Although they were supplied with small
arms, their job was not to “protect” the prisoners. Instead they were to parachute into Germany, locate the whereabouts of Allied POWs, establish their needs, evaluate the attitude of the local authorities, and act as go-betweens for the prisoners, the camp authorities, and the advancing Allied units.55 A training base was established at Wentworth Golf Club at Virginia Water, outside London, to deliver a syllabus covering field craft, patrol and reconnaissance, map reading, coding and encoding, driving German vehicles, first aid, use of standard German small-arms, unarmed combat, and German phrases. Teams also tested their skills off-campus, establishing radio contact with Wentworth before attempting to reach, undetected, British military establishments.56 About a third of the personnel were recruited from the ranks of British, American, French, Norwegian, and Belgian special forces, for whom the camp inevitably had something of a “ritualistic” character. “Few of us,” recalled one SOE veteran, “were prepared to take all this training too seriously; and many of us found excuses to be absent from Wentworth, for we all had better things to do.”57 Paratroopers from the First Allied Airborne Army provided the majority of U.S. personnel and a third of the British, while the remainder were drawn from the regular services and selected for their particular language or local knowledge.58

The rapidity of the Allied advance from early April—belying Eisenhower’s predictions—meant that by the time large numbers of Allied prisoners began to be uncovered by Allied forces, SAARF had only 18 teams ready; the majority were not expected to have completed full training until early May.59 Nevertheless, the crumbling of German resistance transformed SAARF’s task. With camps and work-detachments being overrun on a daily basis, the need to drop units behind German lines declined. Instead, from 17 April, the majority of SAARF teams were provided with jeeps, and dispatched to newly liberated camps to provide assessments on the prisoners’ immediate material and medical needs and distribute consignments of some of the 17 million ration packs assembled for the purpose.60 Eight Belgian units were deployed in a similar capacity to assist famine victims in the remaining pockets of German-occupied Belgium, while a handful of the teams were diverted to German concentration camps to search for Allied agents. Of the 120 teams designated for SAARF training, 74 were ultimately used (25 British,
13 American, 16 French, 11 Belgian, and 6 Polish) and distributed amongst the forward units of the British 21st and the U.S. 6th and 12th army groups.61

On only two occasions were recovery units deployed as initially intended. Six teams (two British, two American, and two French) were airlifted to Stalag XI Altengrabau, east of Magdeburg, on 24 April, while a four-man British team from Supreme Allied Commander, Mediterranean (SACMED) “A Force” was dispatched to Stalag XXVIII/A Wolfsberg, near Klagenfurt in Austria, on 8 May.62 Interestingly, the recollections of those involved are uniformly disparaging about their duties. Major Philip Worrall considered his operation to Altengrabau a “deluxe unrealistic operation”; one of his colleagues described it as “completely crackers.” Jock McKee, who led the team to Wolfsberg, thought the entire affair “really no rescue at all but merely a provocation to the nastier elements of the German Army. I was very much against [this ‘forlorn hope’], for I did not want to get killed for bugger all and I saw no value in it, as the British 5th corps was rapidly advancing into southern Austria.”63 In fact, although the Altengrabau operation did see fatalities—one French team disappeared without a trace—SHAEF’s war diary rated Worrall’s operation to Altengrabau as “extremely successful”; routine reports were sent direct to London and the White House, and in both cases, the operations led to the safe recovery of Allied prisoners.64

In the fluid situation in Germany and Austria at this stage of the war, it was perhaps only to be expected that the operations would depend on luck as much as good planning or judgment. The teams that negotiated the prisoners’ release at Altengrabau were all initially apprehended and detained in the very camp they had set out to liberate. Yet, in both cases, the rationale for casting fortune to the wind was strong. Wolfsberg was believed to contain over 10,000 British prisoners at the start of the year, double the number held at any other camp in Austria, while Altengrabau was, by mid-April, the central concentration point for three large Stalags to the east (IIIA, Luckenwald; IIIB, Furstenburg; and IIIC, Alt Drzewice)

61. Memo, “SAARF Progress report,” by Brig. J. Raymond, 3 June 1945, Entry 30, Box 139, RG 331, NARA; Eveleigh Earle Denis Newman interview, Sound Archive 27463 Reel 4, IWM; List of SAARF teams, Papers of Mjr. J. M. Lyon, Documents 13341, IWM.

62. A Force was established in 1943 to facilitate POW recovery in Italy. SHAEF considered sending teams to Stalag IVC at Wistritz, Sudetenland, but Russian troops reached the camp before the operation took place. Venables to ACOS G3, 8 May 1945, Entry 7, Box 73, RG 331, NARA.

63. Worrall, “Surviving without a father”; Odette Brown interview, Sound Archive 26370 Reel 3, IWM; Unpublished Memoir by Lt. Col. John McKee, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London. For McKee’s earlier work for A Force, see Gilbert, POW, 285; and for similar opinions voiced by other SAARF veterans, Roderick Bailey, Forgotten Voices of the Secret War (London: Ebury, 2009), 296.

whose combined population exceeded 150,000. By 24 April the camp lay only
twenty-three miles from the U.S. front line, but news that a party of senior Allied
POWs—known as the Prominenten—were being whisked into Hitler’s Alpine
Redoubt prompted the Allies to redouble their recovery operations and publicize
the “solemn warning” to German guards over the evening of 24–25 April. In
little more than a fortnight, however, Worrall was able to persuade Altengrabau’s
commandant to relinquish authority, arrange for an airdrop of food and medical
supplies, and negotiate for U.S. trucks to pass through German lines to evacuate
the 2,000 British and American POWs, plus smaller numbers of Belgians, French,
Dutch, and Serbs. Some 1,000 Polish and 9,000 Soviet POWs were handed over to
units of the Soviet army. McKee’s experience at Wolfsberg was similar. Landing
in front of the perimeter fence, he was immediately surrounded by jubilant
prisoners who had already effectively taken control of the camp. Before he could
secure their safe repatriation, though, McKee had to talk an SS battalion into
relinquishing its weapons, and dodge the bullets of local partisans who ambushed
him on route to a rendezvous with British forces at Klagenfurt. In both cases,
the SAARF teams had to overcome the suspicions of the Russians, whose units
reached the camps before the evacuations were complete, and whose record of
treatment of Allied special forces was far from generous. One of the teams sent to
Altengrabau was detained by Soviet forces for four days, and returned to western
lines only after they broke out of Soviet custody.

Conclusion: The Impact and Legacy of POW Rescue Operations

Historians have tended to echo the views of contemporaries in evaluating
the Allied POW recovery operations. According to Arieh Kochavi, the Allied
governments “stood by almost completely helpless” as their exhausted prisoners
bid to survive the final days of Hitler’s Reich, an event that Tony Rennell and John
Nichol depict as the prisoners’ “last escape.” That the vast majority of British and
American prisoners survived this ordeal, and that Nazi extremists did not indulge
in an orgy of violence, ultimately had little to do with Allied public warnings
or military operations. Yet to argue that the Allies “decided against taking any

65. For the Prominenten, see Giles Romilly and Michael Alexander, Privileged Nightmare
66. PWX journal entry of 3 May 1945 0825hrs, Entry 7, Box 69, RG 331, NARA.
67. McKee, Unpublished Memoir; Les Hughes, “The Special Allied Air Reconnaissance
68. They avoided the fate of SOE’s Operation Freston team, sent in to establish contact
with the Polish opposition in late 1944, who were handed over to the NKVD. Report on Seal-
ingwax, Operation Violet, Entry 30, Box 139, RG 331, NARA; Jeffrey Bines, Operation Freston.
The military mission to Poland, 1944 (London: Jeffrey Bines, 1999).
69. Kochavi, Confronting Captivity, 221; John Nichol and Tony Rennell, The Last Escape:
The Untold Story of Allied Prisoners of War in Germany, 1944–1945 (London: Penguin, 2002);
James Crossland, Britain and the International Committee of the Red Cross, 1939–1945 (Basing-
direct and overt action on behalf of their men” overlooks the substantial relief operations carried out by the Allied land and air forces, and the political and resource constraints on Allied options.70 There is no question that the Allied military and civilian leadership took the threat against their men seriously, and felt both morally and politically compelled to take steps to reduce this danger. The Americans showed the greater propensity for military action, demonstrating, perhaps, an early manifestation of the commitment to POW recovery that so marked later U.S. military outlook. The archives do not indicate whether this commitment reflected a specially heightened level of sensitivity towards the fate of their captured servicemen, but the fact that British policy makers had spent four years resisting German intimidation over POW treatment may well have hardened attitudes towards the dangers facing their men in the “Eclipse” period.71 Nevertheless, the available evidence suggests that American enthusiasm for military options lay in part in the potential for mounting rescue missions when the issue was first raised in mid-1944, and the particular attraction that POW

70. Kochavi, Confronting Captivity, 202.
recovery operations held for Donovan’s OSS as the war entered its final phase. While Allied counter-measures were far from comprehensive, what ultimately confounded their plans was the development of events on the ground, not the lack of imagination or conviction. The possibilities of deploying military forces diminished as the hope of inflicting a decisive battlefield defeat on the German army ebbed. It was clear, by late March 1945, that the Allied armies would need to extinguish every last ember of German resistance. The dangers of mounting large-scale rescue missions in this environment remained high, as Patton’s foray to Hammelburg showed only too well. Allied resources would therefore need to be deployed flexibly; adaptability would be decisive. Nothing better illustrates this than the fact that liberated prisoners first arrived in southern England on 3 April, the same day Wentworth opened its doors to SAARF recruits and only five weeks before Germany’s final capitulation.

Allied recovery operations were ultimately destined to supplement the activities of their ground forces and relief agencies, rather than supplant them. They were also designed to complement the work of those other bodies working to restrain German behavior in the final days of the war. SAARF’s modus operandi was, in this respect, strikingly similar to the work undertaken by Swiss diplomats and Red Cross officials who were dispatched to the principal camps holding British and American POWs and who frequently interceded with the German authorities to halt camp evacuations and negotiate the safe transfer of prisoners across the battle lines. In early February 1945, Allied officials even tried to convince the International Committee of the Red Cross to equip its delegates with two-way radios for use in communicating with advancing Allied units. The suggestion was politely turned down, but in its essence the concept differed little from that adopted by the SAARF teams two months later.72

The recourse to special forces for the POW recovery role is also noteworthy, given the use of specialist units in this capacity during the Cold War and beyond. Set against the battle-honors won by Allied secret agencies over the course of the war, it is hardly surprising that SAARF does not loom large in their histories; this was even so in the OSS, whose staff laid greater store on the operations than their British counterpart. As one SAARF veteran, James Hutchison, admitted, “no one will claim that SAARF played a dazzling, outstanding or war-winning part.”73 Still, Allied operations on behalf of POWs in 1945 are significant. The success in recruiting, training, and deploying teams on these missions supports recent research findings that emphasize the versatility of the Allied secret agencies by this stage of the war.74

72. Minute by G. M. G., 7 February 1945, Bern Box 85, RG 84, NARA.
an impressive list of skills that extended well beyond “setting Europe ablaze” and included mobilizing guerrilla forces, fomenting political unrest, carrying out industrial sabotage, manipulating currencies, and waging economic warfare. Moreover, it acquired this new skill-set in a remarkably short space of time. As Hutchison again notes, “three years earlier (in the Middle East for instance) it would have taken a year at least to create what was now extemporized efficiently in a month.”75 It is perhaps not surprising that SAARF’s commanding officer claimed that the unit’s leit motif was its “sense of extreme urgency.”76

Finally, although the 20,000 POWs “recovered” from Altengrabau and Wolfsberg were a fraction of those whose lives hung in the balance in April–May 1945, the real significance of these rescues probably lay beyond Europe’s shores. It should not be forgotten that the previous attempt to recover POWs in any number—in Italy in 1943—had been a disaster. What the experience in Germany in 1945 gave Allied planners was not just the chance to learn from their earlier mistakes and develop the technical wherewithal to plan and mount successful relief and recovery operations; it gave them confidence to carry this experience into the Pacific theatre. Here too, the pace of events confounded expectations, but the practical obstacles to prisoner recovery (the wide dispersal and appalling physical condition of Allied prisoners) dwarfed even those encountered in Europe. The safe return of prisoners from Germany thus provided a template and skill-set that were translated into the activities of South East Asia Command’s RAPWI organization (Recovery of Allied Prisoners of War and Internees), which began its operations in earnest in early August 1945. It also created an important precedent. In reluctantly agreeing to “father” SAARF, the head of SOE, Sir Colin Gubbins, admitted that although he had “no particular wish to undertake [the task],” he could not ignore the “moral responsibility to do all we can to help.”77 This sense of moral responsibility bore heavily on those involved in POW recovery operations and set the bar that western governments and their militaries have felt obliged to meet ever since.

77. Sir Colin Gubbins (SOE) to Lt. Gen. Sir F. E. Morgan (SHAEF), 6 March 1945, HS6/637, TNA.
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