

3 The Hangmen

British hangmen

Thomas William Pierrepont (1870 - 1954)

Period on Home Office List 1906-1946

Thomas William Pierrepont was the older brother of Henry Albert Pierrepont who was on the British list of hangmen from 1901 to 1910. Henry persuaded his brother to apply for the job, and even privately “taught him the ropes”. Thomas was accepted and worked as a hangman for 40 years before being removed from the official list in 1946 due to his age, as he was by then 76 years old.

Thomas assisted at 35 executions and carried out 203 civilian hangings in England and Wales (among which three spies) and four in Scotland. Thomas was the official executioner for the Irish Republic after it gained independence from England in 1923 and carried out 28 executions at Dublin’s Mountjoy prison between 1923 and 1944,

plus four in Belfast. He was appointed as executioner for the US Military in Europe, being responsible for the hangings of 16 US servicemen at Shepton Mallet prison during World War II between March 1943 and August 1945, and one in Canisy in France in August 1944. In at least four, possibly six of the hangings at Shepton Mallet, Thomas was assisted by his nephew, Albert. Tom Pierrepont died on the 10th of February 1954 in Bradford.



Albert Pierrepont (1905-1992)

Period on Home Office List 1932-1956



Albert Pierrepont was the son of Henry Pierrepont. His first experience of the family “trade” was assisting his uncle Tom in the hanging of Patrick McDermott at Mountjoy Prison in Dublin on 29 December 1932. His first job as an assistant in England was again with his uncle, at the execution of Richard Hetherington at Liverpool’s Walton prison on 20 June 1933. He took over as “No.1” when Thomas had to retire in 1946.

Albert Pierrepont was by far the most prolific hangman of the 20th century having been assistant or principal at the hangings of 433 people including 16 women in his 24 years of service in the U.K. and abroad. His tally of executions was greatly increased as a result of World War II, working at Hameln (Hamelin) prison in the British controlled sector of Germany between 1945 and 1949 where he

carried out 201 executions, including 149 men and ten women who were convicted of war crimes, 40 for civilian crimes plus two British soldiers convicted of murder. The most notable of these executions was the first batch which took place on 13 December 1945, when he hanged 11 members of staff from the Belsen Concentration Camp at Hameln, including Irma Grese, Elisabeth Volkenrath and Johanna Bormann plus 8 men including Josef Kramer, the Commandant of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, dubbed by the press as "The Beast of Belsen". A further two men were hanged that day for the Almelo murders of a British soldier and a Dutch civilian.

Albert was flown over to Germany for each series of executions and was given the privileges of a Lieutenant Colonel by the Army. He was assisted by Regimental Sergeant Major Richard O'Neil at all of these, plus Alexander Hurry, Sergeant James Hunter RCMP and Edwin James Roper at some of the double hangings where it was normal British practice to have two assistants.

Albert also carried out two hangings in Gibraltar on 11 January, 1944 of two Spanish agents recruited by the German intelligence service. They were Luis Lopez Córdon Cuenca who had planned to detonate bombs in the British naval dockyard there and 19 year old José Martin Munoz who had started a serious fire there.

He was involved as principal or assistant in the execution of 14 men convicted of espionage, treachery and treason during and immediately after World War II. These included John Amery who was hanged at Wandsworth on 19 December, 1945, and Nazi propagandist "Lord Haw-Haw," real name William Joyce, at Wandsworth for treason on 3 January, 1946. Theodore Schurch was the last person to be executed for treachery in Britain when Albert hanged him at Pentonville on 4 January, 1946. In 1956, Albert resigned over a dispute of fees.

He died in a nursing home in Southport, Lancashire, on 10 July, 1992 at the age of 87.

Stanley William Cross (1893 – 1942)

(Assistant) Executioner 1932-1941.

Cross was born in Fulham on 9 September, 1893. After six years and 160 days of service with the Dorset Regiment he was discharged in July 1915. He joined the Metropolitan Special Constabulary Reserve on 8 March, 1926 and was still serving with this body when he applied for an assistant executioner's job in 1932. At that time, he described himself as a Motor Driver (currently unemployed), and single.

He was accepted and took the training course at Pentonville, starting on 25 July, 1932, together with Albert Pierrepoint. The October 1932 list of executioners featured their names already. On 23 November, 1932 at Oxford, he saw his first execution as trainee observer. Officially, this function was called "second assistant", but there was nothing to do except to stay on one's feet and to keep one's breakfast down.

He assisted on 16 occasions of which four were doubles, mostly to Thomas W. Pierrepoint. His first execution, and the most memorable one of the four which he performed as principal, was the hanging of Udham Singh at Pentonville on Wednesday 31 July, 1940. Singh, a Sikh extremist, was condemned for the murder of Sir Michael O'Dwyer. His execution report sheet shows a very curious entry: The length of drop as determined before the execution is given as 7 ft 1 in, but the length as measured after the hanging is 6 ft 6.5 in only. Very obviously something was amiss with the drop length, and the prison doctor, Mr. Murdoch, firmly placed the blame at Cross' doorstep: "He is not a suitable person on account of mental incapacity vide particulars of length of drop."

The apparent muddle of the Singh execution did not prevent Cross from being employed for the double execution of Carl Heinrich Meier and José Waldberg, both sentenced under the Treachery

Act, at Pentonville on 10 December, 1940. However Cross again struck the prison doctor as being of questionable mental capacity: "Not good at figures. I am of opinion he is not yet certain of working out drops."

Still, Cross was given his fourth job at Pentonville when he was engaged to hang another spy, Charles Albert Van Der Kieboom, on 17 December, 1940. Since the execution report is missing, it is open to conjecture whether the hanging was another debacle. Anyway, Cross was never again employed as number one executioner.

After assisting in yet another double spy hanging on 6 August, 1941 at Wandsworth, his last job was assisting Thomas Pierrepont at Winson Green prison in Birmingham on the 19 September, 1941 with the execution of Eli Richards. Shortly after that, he died in spring 1942.

Herbert Morris (1888 -)

Assistant Executioner 1939-1951

After school, London-born Herbert Morris worked three years in a book binding and printing shop, then joined the Army and spent 13 ½ years in the Royal Artillery and the Military Mounted Police until discharged in July 1919. The next year, in March 1920, he joined the Prison Department of the Federated Malay States and stayed on for 17 years. During 15 years of that time, he was employed as executioner. In April 1937, he was 49 years old (born 18 February 1888), married with four sons, 14, 11, 9 and 7 years of age. He decided to return to Britain "for family reasons".

In May 1938, he sent in his application as executioner to the Prison Commission. When told that he would need to take a course of instruction at Pentonville prison, he graciously replied that "Your offer of course of training is accepted. Though I am perfectly conversant with the scale of drops, weights, the system of measuring the rope...". He was accepted and, after his instruction, was present on 1 November, 1938 at Wandsworth as a trainee observer when Thomas W. Pierrepont, assisted by Stanley W. Cross, hanged one George Brain.

He may have dreamt of becoming a principal in England, too, but he was restricted to a subordinate role.

From 1939 to 1946, he assisted in 23 hangings of which two were doubles. Among these were one spy and three US soldiers. From July 1946 to January 1951 he does not appear on record.

On 4 January, 1951 at Shrewsbury, instead of strapping the legs of the culprit as he should have done, he tried to "assist" Albert Pierrepont with the rope.

The prison governor reported this to the Prison Commission, and on 14 February, 1951, a letter to Morris was penned telling him that it had been decided "not to call upon your services in future."

Alexander Riley (1908 -)

Assistant Executioner 1940-1946

The 30-year-old Manchester scaffolder applied for employment as executioner on 23 June 1938. According to a newspaper article published in 2006 when National Archives files regarding his service were released, he wrote: "I am not afraid of anything. ... I'm a British subject and all my parents think I'm quite capable of carrying out any duties." Like many other applicants, he had a military background, having served in the Royal Navy for seven years.

After completing his course of instruction, he saw his first execution as a trainee observer on 8 February, 1939 at Durham. In the following years, he assisted in at least 12, possibly 15 executions including three American soldiers, two persons convicted for treachery, two German prisoners of war, and one traitor. There is no information why he disappeared from the record after 24 April, 1946.

Henry (Harry) Kirk (1894 – 1967)

(Assistant) Executioner 1941-1950.

Harry Kirk was born on 23 December, 1894 in Great Grimsby, Lincolnshire. After some time as clerk and lunacy attendant he joined the Port of London Police at age 20 and stayed on for 25 years – without promotion – until being pensioned off in about 1939.

He applied for a job as executioner's assistant in August 1938. The governor at Brixton Prison who interviewed him had the suspicion that he might have a morbid interest in the job, one of his friends having been an executioner in Arabia. This first application however fell flat because Kirk realised the job was not paid as well as he thought it was, and that he had to complete 25 years with the police first because he needed the pension.

In August 1940, still living in Catford in south-east London, he renewed his application, and this time he was accepted. Sometime in the summer of 1942, he took over a village inn named "The Black Horse" at Elton in the historic county of Huntingdonshire (7 miles south-east of Peterborough). This two-storey 17th century stone building with slate pitched roof and Georgian windows, just across the street from the church, is still in business as of 2016.

He worked as an assistant to Thomas and Albert Pierrepont and Stephen Wade on at least 24, possibly 38 occasions. Two of these were double executions of men sentenced under the Treachery Act.

Kirk had a very short career as a hangman. When he executed Norman Goldthorpe at Norwich on 22 November, 1950 for the murder of 66 year old Emma Howe at Yarmouth, snorting sounds were heard coming from the prisoner. This was apparently due to the hood jamming in the eyelet of the noose. This was thus Kirk's first and last hanging as principal.

Henry William Critchell (1901 -)

Assistant Executioner 1940-1948

Critchell's application letter bore the date of 11 July, 1940. He described himself as a mortuary keeper with "experiences in my present occupation for the past 16 years. ... 39 years of age. British subject. Military service, 12 years regular service, enlisting as a Boy."

Critchell's father having been blinded in the First World War (1917) was living in St. Dunstan's, a charity for blind servicemen. Little Henry was educated and raised, as he says in his application, in Elder Rd. Schools (Poor Law) West Norwood. At the age of 13 years 1 month - that would have been in November 1914 - he enlisted as a boy in the Regular Army and attended Army School till he was 18 years of age.

He served as a "bandsman". During the latter years of his army service, he became a P.T. instructor. Upon transfer to the Army Reserve, he took up a job as a male nurse in a mental hospital, followed by another as a "head male nurse over mental defectives", and after eighteen months as labour master at Edmonton (Work)House, he became a mortuary keeper shortly before Christmas 1936. "All my life I've been taking on jobs other people didn't like", he wrote in 1949.

From this curriculum vitae, it is a bit unclear how he counts his sixteen years experience in his "present occupation", but it is evident that, when speaking of "12 years regular service" in the military, he is counting the full years between enlistment and transfer to Reserve.

The Prison Commissioners accepted his application immediately, and after completing his training course Critchell saw his first execution as trainee observer, together with Harry Kirk, on 31 October, 1940 at Wandsworth.

After that, he was employed as assistant executioner on at least 22 (possibly 24) occasions (10 of them during the years 1942/43) of which four were doubles. He participated in the execution of four men sentenced under the Treachery Act, and of traitor John Amery. He was mostly employed in Wandsworth and Pentonville Prisons, only seven engagements being elsewhere.

At the end of 1948 or beginning of 1949, he wrote to the Prison Commission that he was currently unable to accept engagements, and remained silent when the Prison Commission wanted to know for what reason and for how long.

Two newspaper articles shed some light on his motives: "1 OCT 1949" reads the Prison Commission date stamp on a cutting from the *Daily Mail*; headline "Even a hangman has feelings". Harry Critchell is quoted as having said, with regard to a condemned murderess, that he resented the "needless delay in the granting of a reprieve". To reprieve women was almost certain, but they didn't know, and the law, he said, kept them in unnecessary misery and suffering during the wait.

The other newspaper article dates from 1955. A few days after Ruth Ellis' execution, in a letter to the *Sunday Pictorial*, he wrote: "Ruth Ellis had gone out of all misery and suffering. But what about those who had to watch? It is the living that suffered by this devilish, uncivilised practice. I write this in good faith. I have entered that pit and shamed myself many times. I am thoroughly ashamed. The harm it has done to me no doctor can remove. The memories and scenes of the Condemned Cell and the adjoining scaffold are forever embedded in my mind. No medicine can ever help me. I still suffer." Critchell seems to have pulled the brake when he noticed that his side job had done harm to his soul.

Stephen Wade (1887 – 1956)

(Assistant) Executioner 1940-1955

Born on 14 December, 1887 in Droylsden, Manchester, he first applied to be an assistant executioner when he was 21, was turned down as being too young, and renewed his application every couple of years until he was finally accepted in 1940.

After having first worked as a clerk, motors were the fulcrum of his professional life for many years. He ran his own taxi or haulage business until he moved to Doncaster in 1935 where he became a partner in a café and ran "Wade's Motor Coaches". Wade was now 52 years of age, a married man with two grown-up children, a daughter of 25 and a son two years younger. The Prison Commissioners invited him for a training course from 26 to 31 August, 1940 at Pentonville prison under the direction of chief engineer Pugh. There he met fellow trainees Harry B. Allen, Henry W. Critchell, and Harry Kirk.

His name was put on the list in October 1940, and on 26 November, 1940, he saw his first execution as trainee observer at Bedford. His first job as assistant to Thomas W. Pierrepont was one of executing a man condemned for treachery: George J. Armstrong, hanged at Wandsworth on 9 July, 1941. His second job was to assist Albert Pierrepont in the latter's first senior assignment, and his third brought him again face-to-face with an enemy agent, Karel R. Richter, who fought his executioners and the prison warders for 17 minutes until he could be hanged. Besides Armstrong and Richter, Wade was involved in the hanging of four more enemy agents.



All in all, he assisted on 34 occasions of which three were doubles. On 6 October, 1945, five German prisoners of war were hanged in five single executions for the murder of a fellow prisoner. Albert Pierrepont was assisted by Stephen Wade and Harry B. Allen, but we do not know in how many hangings either of the assistants actually helped on this day.

In March 1946, Wade was employed as senior executioner for the first time. In April, he was fined £10 plus costs for obtaining groundnut oil without permission, and *stolen* oil at that (these were food rationing times, and the Black Market bloomed). The event did not cut short his career, however. Until 1955, he hanged 29 men in 27 single hangings and one double. While most other executioners did not get any more assistant's jobs once they were promoted to chief, Wade continued to be Albert Pierrepont's regular assistant in Scotland. Pierrepont held him in high esteem, and said so before the 1949-1953 Royal Commission on Capital Punishment: "a good, reliable man".

Wade was a quiet, restrained man of few words. In October 1955, he was removed from the list of executioners because his eyesight was failing, and the Prison Commissioners did not want to take a risk. On 22 December, 1956, he died of stomach cancer, aged 69.

Richard Anthony O'Neill

Assistant executioner at Hameln (1945-1949)

Shortly before the first executions at Hameln took place, a document dated "Dec 45" mentions him as "C.S.M. O'Neil" and says he was to be "made available by 609 'P' Det for the period of the 'Belsen' executions". Albert Pierrepont remembers him as "Regimental Sergeant Major in the Control Commission for Germany" and as speaking fluent German. Since he had not participated in an execution before, but was to assist in the hangings nevertheless, Pierrepont "was rather startled at being given a novice" but soon found out that he "could not have hoped for a better man".



On 13 December, 1945, Pierrepont and O'Neill hanged three females in single executions, followed by 10 men in five doubles.

On 8 March, 1947, they hanged eight more war criminals, followed by ten on 15th and seven on 16th May 1946. Contrary to British prison practise at the time, they performed double executions with just one assistant present.

RSM O'Neill assisted Pierrepont, according to the latter's memoirs, "at about two hundred executions" in Germany – which must mean in every execution performed at Hameln. The other men mentioned as having assisted at Hameln seem to have been additional assistants.

The "New Year's Honours" list published in a Supplement to the LONDON GAZETTE, 29 December, 1953, says that the British Empire Medal (Civil Division) was awarded to "Richard Anthony O'Neill, Deputy Chief Warder, Allied Nationals Prison, Werl, British Zone of Germany". It seems that O'Neill continued to work in a German prison after Hameln was closed, although it is impossible to judge from this note whether he held the position at Werl as a soldier or civilian, and whether he had already been a prison officer before he enlisted.

Alexander Hurry

Assistant Executioner at Hameln 1946-1947

If it wasn't for a payslip we would not know that this man assisted Albert Pierrepoint at Hameln. In the National Archives folder FO 1060/243 there is a "Claim for Assistant Executioner's Allowance" by one Alexander Hurry, dated 18 June, 1949. Hurry (of whom we know nothing but his name) claimed, at £2 apiece, remuneration for his services on 8 and 11 October, 1946, and on 7th March 1947, £58 in total.

It is unknown why he waited for more than three years until he demanded to be paid.

James Hunter

Assistant Executioner at Hameln 1947.

No biographical data are known of this man who worked with Albert Pierrepoint and RSM O'Neill on 22 and 23 January 1947 – except that he was a sergeant in the Corps of Royal Military Police, and obviously a courageous man.

On 31 March, 1945 (then still a Lance Corporal) he was on a post at a road junction near Süchteln, Germany, when in a field nearby a German mine exploded, killing one Sapper and wounding a Royal Engineer Sergeant. Hunter ran towards the man crying for help although he knew the field to be mined, made sure the Sapper was dead and dragged the Sergeant to safety; he survived. It was afterwards found that there were two more mines within three yards of the site of the exploded mine. Hunter was awarded the British Empire Medal for his gallantry.

It is a riddle why he assisted at Hameln at all. Normally, a second assistant would be needed only in double executions. Hunter however was first brought in as second assistant for the single execution of Driver Francis John Upson, a British soldier, for the murder of a German woman. Upson's was the only execution on 22 January – and with two assistants present.

The next day, Pierrepoint, O'Neill and Hunter hanged eleven German war criminals in five doubles and one single. After that, there is no more trace of James Hunter in European hangmen's circles.

Edwin James Roper (1906 –)

Assistant 1935-1942 in Shanghai, Executioner 1946 in Hong Kong, Assistant 1947-1948(-49?) in Hameln

Born 15 April, 1906 in Flitwick, Bedfordshire, and raised in Rhondda Valley (Wales), he enlisted in 1922 in the Somerset Light Infantry, faking his age, and served with them until 1929. Some months after his discharge, he enlisted as a prison officer in the Shanghai Municipal Police and, after completing his training in the spring of 1930, was assigned to Shanghai Municipal Prison (average number of inmates: 8,000).

Out of what he himself calls "morbid curiosity" he watched 200-250 Chinese executions of which 30 were by extremely slow strangulation, the rest by shooting.

In 1935, being promoted to Principal Warder meanwhile, he was asked by the Governor of the prison whether he'd like to assist in the execution of a British subject. The executioner whom Roper was to assist came from H.M. Prison, Hong Kong.

When Japan declared war on the USA (7 December, 1941), Japanese troops occupied the prison but let the British continue to run it until, 2 or 3 months later, when they took over completely and interned the British – an experience which reduced Roper, over the next 3 ½ years, from 20 stone to 10.

After the end of the war, Shanghai and its prison came under the Chinese government which meant Roper could not return to his previous post. However, he was offered the post of Chief Executioner at

Hong Kong where executions of condemned Japanese war criminals were due to begin. With "Revenge Is Sweet" in mind, Roper accepted, and performed a large number of executions between 1 April, 1946 and shortly before Christmas.

He sailed for Europe in January 1947. In the same year, British authorities having informed him that his services as a hangman and prison officer would be invaluable in Germany, Roper accepted an appointment with the Control Commission for Germany and moved to Bielefeld with his wife.

On 5 September, 1947, he assisted Alfred Pierrepont and Richard O'Neill (whom he failed to mention in his memoirs) for the first time at Hameln, hanging the British Sergeant Charles E. Patrick for the murder of his A.T.S. girl friend, followed by three Poles and ten German war criminals on the same day.

A payslip found in National Archive folder FO 1060/242 proves that he assisted on three more occasions (16, 5, and 10 executions). In his memoirs he claims to have continued to participate in Hameln hangings after January 1948, until the last one on 6 December, 1949, but there is no independent confirmation of this. In April, 1951, he returned to England. According to himself, his total tally of executions which he performed or participated in was "nearly 300".

US hangmen.

John Clarence Woods (1911 – 1950)

US Army Executioner 1944-1946

Woods was born on 5 June, 1911 in Wichita Kansas. He joined the US Navy on 3 December, 1929, and went AWOL (Absent Without Official Leave) within months.

He was convicted at a general court martial and subsequently examined by a psychiatric board on 23 April, 1930. He was diagnosed with "Constitutional Psychopathic Inferiority without Psychosis", was found "poor service material" and discharged.

In 1933, after half a year with the Civilian Conservation Corps, he went AWOL again, refused to work, and was dishonourably discharged.

Before being inducted into the United States Army in

August 1943, Woods was intermittently employed in construction as a laborer, and when registered for Selective Service in 1940, he was working part-time at a feed-store in Eureka, Kansas.

His military training began in September 1943. He may have participated in the landings on Omaha Beach with his unit.

Shortly after D-Day a US Army courts martial in France sentenced soldiers to death for murder, or for rape of French women, they found that they did not have a hangman available. An enquiry among the troops found some volunteers, among them "John C. Woods, 37540591, Company B, 37th Engineer Combat Battalion, 5th Engineer Special Brigade". When questioned about his antecedents, he said he had been "assistant hangman twice in the state of Texas and twice in the state of Oklahoma".

The Judge Advocate recommended that this claim be checked, but there is no proof that it was done. In October 1944, Woods was promoted from private to master sergeant and attached to the 2913th Disciplinary Training Center. He was a hangman now.

Careful investigation by French MacLean found that he hanged at least 34 soldiers (possibly two more) and assisted in the execution of five more in the European Theater of Operations.



On 29 June, 1945, we find him in Germany for the first time. In a corner of the prison yard at Rheinbach, assisted by S/Sgt. Thomas F. Robinson, he hanged three Germans for the murder of an unidentified US airman.

Newspaper articles from this time already report that he had been an executioner before the war, and that his total tally of executions, civilian and military, ran into hundreds. Obviously Woods was already working on his legend.

The next execution in Germany that can be attributed to him with certainty was on 10 November, 1945 at Bruchsal. Again the gallows was erected in a prison yard, and again the convicts were German civilians who had beaten to death US airmen who had at the time been prisoners of war. S/Sgt. Fred Guidry assisted Woods in executing these five men who were involved in the Rüsselsheim massacre of 26 August 1944.

Round about at this time, Herman J. Obermayer, later to become a well-known journalist and publisher, served as a clerk in the office of the Theater Provost Marshal. In this capacity he got to know Woods. He was not favourably impressed: "John Woods was a short, muscular sort of a man, and I would describe him as kind of the world's flotsam. He talked the language of the hobos and flotsams and the people who do these kind of jobs. He was, I think, an honest craftsman who took pride in his job, and he thought it was a very good job. He had 30 executions a year maybe, and the rest of the time the Army treated him very well because he had a skill that nobody else had in the Army, and so he was allowed to be drunk the rest of the time or do whatever else he wanted to do as long as he showed up for these things and performed them well."

But on one occasion, Woods showed up a day or several days late, and excused himself saying he was delayed because he had to look for the right kind of rope because the last time he hadn't been given the right kind. He shuffled into the general's room, boots unpolished, and instead of chewing him out, the general jumped up and exclaimed "Glad to see you, Woods!" Any other soldier, when walking into a superior officer's room, would take care his dress was impeccable, would salute crisply and not expect a more cordial greeting than "At ease!". The Army gave Woods very special treatment indeed. Once Obermayer even got a nanny's job: to make sure Woods didn't get drunk and fail to appear at an execution.

The Woods/Guidry team performed four more executions at Bruchsal in January 1946. In March, there were four more hangings at Bruchsal which were probably also performed by Woods (assistant unknown).

In the spring of 1946, Woods was looking for a new assistant, and found military policeman Private First Class Joseph Malta, who helped him hang 14 men convicted at Dachau for concentration camp atrocities. This took place on 28/29 May, 1946 at the US War Criminal Prison No. 1 Landsberg/Lech. There were 28 prisoners to be hanged, and the Army decided not to let Woods do all these executions but to build two gallows in the prison yard and have Woods with Malta work on the left one and the German executioner Johann Reichhart (alone) on the other. There were 14 hangings on each of the two days, Woods and Reichhart taking turns.

Woods and Malta returned to Landsberg for the hanging of Justus Gerstenberg on 12 September 1946.

Lt. Stanley Tilles had been assigned the task to be present at Gerstenberg's hanging and, later, to organise the Nuremberg hangings. Unlike Obermayer, he got a favourable impression of Woods: "I had been warned that Woods was an unpredictable trouble maker with a violent temper. I found none of these descriptions to be true. In the time that we worked together Woods was professional and

knowledgeable in a difficult occupation. He was respectful, friendly and controlled when on duty. He did have a predilection for beer, and was given to verbal and physical outbursts when he was drunk." Woods' next job in Germany was to hang the Nuremberg defendants who had been sentenced in the Major War Criminals Trial. Together with about five MP volunteers, among them Malta, he constructed three dismountable gallows, transported them to Nuremberg, assembled them, performed the executions, took down the gallows, brought them back to Landsberg where they had been built, and destroyed them.

There seems to have been some kind of celebration in the NCO club at Landsberg after Woods and his men returned from Nuremberg. Woods, not being satisfied with his share of four ounces of liquor per night, raised hell with the sergeant in charge of the club when his request "to break out the booze" was refused. The turmoil was so critical that Lieutenant Joseph H. Williams had to be called, the commandant of the guard company at Landsberg. Woods' pleading and cajoling had no effect on him; Williams told him to "Shut your trap!" and "Go to your quarters, Sergeant" and that was the end of it.

After that, Woods does not seem to have been employed as executioner any more. In November/December 1946, he is said to have returned to the States but stayed in the Army. On 21st July 1950, on the Pacific island of Eniwetok, Woods was accidentally electrocuted when working on a power line. He is buried in Toronto, Kansas.

Vincent J. Martino (1924 - 2003)

US Army assistant executioner (1945-46)

A resident of the Bronx, New York-born Martino was enlisted on 1 March 1943, described in the enlistment record as a stock clerk in his civilian occupation, with three years of high school under his belt, and a single man (with dependents). French MacLean, in his book "The Fifth Field", says he was born on 17/04/1924, stood 5'6" tall and weighed 195 lbs.

From the execution report contained in August Kobus' US trial file it is evident that he was executed at Bruchsal on 15 March 1946 by Woods, "T/Sgt Vincent J. Martino" assisting. Woods and Martino knew each other from at least six executions in June to September 1945 where Woods had been hangman and Martino had been a member of the MP escort.

On the day before Kobus went to the gallows, the three Hadamar perpetrators (see Chapter 10) had been hanged at Bruchsal; it would be very astonishing if they had been executed by a different team.

Thomas F. Robinson (1920 –)

US Army assistant executioner (1944/45)

Born in New York in 1920, Robinson went to war in 1942 in the 554th Quartermaster Depot. When after D-Day the Army started an inquiry among their men in France whether anybody would volunteer to serve as hangman, Private First Class Robinson came forward. He was selected and immediately upon the opening of the Paris Disciplinary Training Center at the Caserne Mortier was promoted to "Technician Third Grade (Staff Sergeant)" and made an assistant executioner.

He worked together with John C. Woods and accompanied him on at least eleven occasions to execute US soldiers at several locations in France.

Newspaper reports mention him as being present in the execution of the death sentences awarded in "the first civilian war crime case tried on German soil since the Nazis surrendered". Three Germans were hanged on a gallows erected in the court of Rheinbach prison on 29 June, 1945 for the killing of a US airman who had fallen into their hands after parachuting from his burning plane.

Robinson was discharged 9 November, 1945 in New York City and presumably returned to his civilian trade as a baker.

Fred J. Guidry (1922 -)

US Army assistant executioner (November 1945 – January 1946)

Only very few details are known about this Staff Sergeant in the US Army. There are some newspaper reports on the hanging of the culprits who killed six captured US airmen while they were being led through Rüsselsheim. The newspapers name Guidry as assistant executioner, adding "from New Orleans, La". One set of data in the "Electronic Army Serial Number Merged File" in the US National Archives fits: Serial number 38312789, born 1922, residence in county Orleans/Louisiana, single, education: 2 years of high school, civil occupation: unskilled labour. Enlisted 6 October, 1942 at New Orleans, La.

The above mentioned five executions were performed on 10 November, 1945, on a gallows in the prison yard of Bruchsal prison, and they were filmed by the Army. On 11 January, 1946, one more execution took place at Bruchsal, and three more on the following day. These hangings, too, were filmed. A comparison of these films leave no doubt that in all cases the same assistant was employed: A chubby staff sergeant with a baby face.

Since Joseph Malta says that Woods was looking for a new assistant early in 1946, it seems logical to assume that Guidry left Europe at about that time.

Joseph Malta (1918 – 1999)

US Army (assistant) executioner (1946-47)

Malta, a second-generation American whose parents immigrated from Sicily around the turn of the century, took up his father's job of floor sanding and married early. By the end of 1945, he was drafted and sent to Germany, serving in the MP.

Patrolling the bars at Heidelberg seems to have bored him – when in early 1946 Woods drove around asking who would be willing to assist in hangings and eventually become his successor (since his time in Europe was nearing its end), Malta together with two or three others volunteered. After some tests, Woods decided to try Malta.

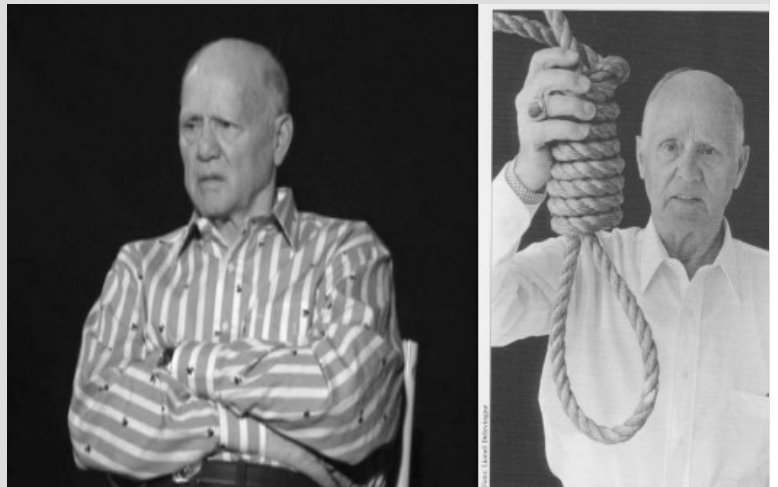
On 28/29 May, 1946, he assisted Woods in the mass hanging at Landsberg/Lech.

Woods and Malta hanged Justus Gerstenberg on 12 September, 1946 at Landsberg for the murder of an unknown soldier.

Their next task was the construction of three gallows for Nuremberg. On 16 October, 1946, starting at 1:11 a.m., they hanged the ten German major war criminals.

After the Nuremberg hangings, Woods returned to the States, and Malta became chief hangman. He didn't stay at Landsberg but was attached to the Third Army Military Command at Heidelberg, and when needed, travelled to Landsberg.

There were two executions at Landsberg on 4 December, 1946 which may well have been the first which Malta performed as chief.



Lt. Williams of the guard company at Landsberg remembers Malta rather unfavourably in his 1986 memoirs: "He talked rapidly and incessantly in the approved fashion of movie gangsters, and strutted around arrogantly with a big, black cigar jutting out of the corner of his mouth ... he loved the role that had been thrust upon him, and he tried to give it the flash and color that he felt it deserved. Some of this color had a sadistic overtone", culminating in visiting the men in the death cells, showing them a miniature scaffold that he carried with him, and enjoying the prisoners' dismayed faces. He certainly did not shy away from brutality. If the hangmen noticed that the neck of the prisoner had not been broken by the fall, Malta would "help along": "I jumped upon the hanged man, adding my weight to his. With my right hand I seized his head by the left ear and jerked it round. You heard a 'bump' when the vertebra broke. That was it for him."

Lt. Williams recalls the end of Malta's hangman career thus: When he called him long distance in early 1947 to come to Landsberg for an execution, Malta informed him to send an army sedan for him, or else he wouldn't be there. Williams told him that only the commandant had a winterized jeep, and if that was good enough for a Major, it should be good enough for a Private First Class. Malta refused, and thereupon Williams told him to consider himself no longer working for WCP #1 Landsberg.

It is not clear how Malta, under these circumstances, could claim to have hanged 60 Nazi government and military leaders (interview, 1996). In another interview, he said that between October 1946 and June 1948 he travelled across the American Zone of Occupation, executing Nazi war criminals in Heidelberg, Stuttgart, Mannheim and Nuremberg. But probably this was another case of "giving flash and color". There were no executions at Heidelberg, Stuttgart, or Mannheim that these authors know of, and very probably Malta left Europe and the Army in 1947 to return to floor sanding.

However interviewers in the 1990s mention that Malta still had a miniature scaffold in his flat...

Johann Baptist Reichhart (1893 – 1972)

German Executioner in US employ 1945-1946

Reichhart was born on 29 April, 1893 to a Bavarian family in which the office of executioner was hereditary since the 18th century. In 1924, he took over from his uncle, Franz Xaver Reichhart, and until the end of the war executed more than 3,000 persons, mostly by guillotine. During the Nazi regime, beheading was the default method for ordinary criminals, but in 1942 hanging became optional. Thereupon Reichhart allegedly designed and submitted to his superiors a gallows allowing for a long drop. This was however rejected, and strangulation was the method used (e.g. on the conspirators of the 20 July, 1944 attempt on Hitler's life).

After the war, Reichhart was used by the Americans to execute war criminals. There are conflicting reports, both stemming from the memoirs of US soldiers, whether he was sought out in his hiding place or whether he volunteered for the job.

It seems that his first executions at Landsberg/Lech occurred on 19 November, 1945, and that he performed six or seven all in all until, on 28/29 May, 1946, a total of 28 condemned were to be hanged of whom Reichhart executed 14.

From films shot on that occasion by the Army it seems that Reichhart, although assiduous and obsequious in manner, was self-assured enough to use his own methods: He used handcuffs to pinion the hands of the condemned while Woods used strings, and he made sure the coils of the



nooses sat below or just behind the left ear of the condemned while the American team placed them at the back of the head.

There is no evidence (or likelihood, for that matter) that Reichhart was employed after that. In his later days, he claimed to have given up hanging because he had been told that, due to sloppy work of American investigators, a mix-up of persons had occurred, and one of the men hanged by him had in fact been innocent. Furthermore, he was arrested in May 1947 and confined in Moosburg/Isar internment camp where he stayed until his trial before the Denazification Court in December 1948.

N.N.

US Army Executioner (1947?) 1948 – 1949

After Joseph Malta had stopped performing executions in Germany which was in June 1948 at the latest (based on his own interview statements), there were more hangings at Landsberg to which we cannot connect an executioner's name. Lt. Williams' statement in his memoirs that Johann Reichhart was brought in after Malta left seems to be erroneous, given the fact that the German executioner was in an internment camp or in hospital from May 1947 till December 1948. However there may be a core of fact in Lt. Williams' further statement that one of the later executioners was a "U.S. Army staff sergeant from the 508th Military Police Battalion stationed at Munich, Germany. He was from Louisiana and about 28 years old. A number of executioners, military and civilian, had preceded him."

These authors think that this "Louisiana sergeant" may be responsible for the Landsberg executions between Malta's departure and 21 March, 1949, when Josef Brauner was hanged for the murder of inmates at Flossenbürg Concentration Camp. After that, a two-year gap began until on 7 June, 1951 the last seven executions at Landsberg, performed by Warrant Officer Britt, closed the series.

Warrant Officer Britt

US Army Executioner, 1951

There are no personal details known about this executioner who performed the last seven executions at WCP #1 Landsberg on 7 June, 1951. He is mentioned in Arthur Settler's eyewitness account of these executions as having been flown in from Texas for the occasion, as having hanged "scores" of criminals before, and as having adjusted the coils of the noose at the nape of the neck. An unnamed US sergeant was his assistant, according to Settler.

Some time before these hangings, the German news magazine "Der Spiegel" mentioned Britt in February 1951, saying that he had been "taught the ropes" by a former concentration camp hangman named Kilian who was to be his assistant. There is a core of truth in this: There was indeed a concentration camp hangman named Josef Kilian (* 17/07/1910 Nuremberg – † 05/07/1984 Frankfurt/Main). He was tried in the Nordhausen/Dora Trial (case 000-50-37) and on 30 December, 1947 sentenced to life in prison. The sentence was confirmed by the Reviewing Authority on 25 June 1948. Settler's conflicting evidence aside, it is highly unlikely from these facts alone that he would have been free and available just three years later.