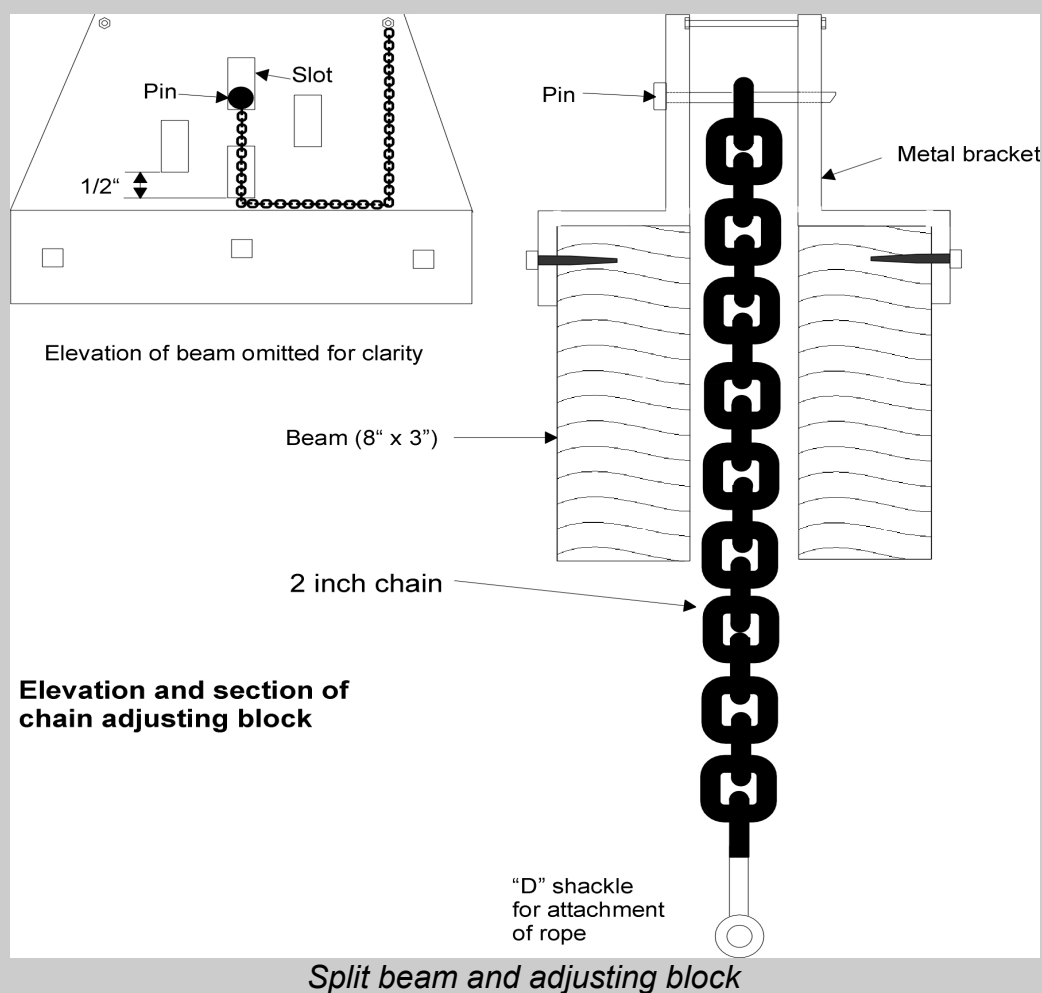


1 The Gallows

British gallows used for spies and traitors at Pentonville or Wandsworth. Sixteen spies and traitors were hanged at either Pentonville or at Wandsworth prisons in London.

There are no photographs of the gallows at Pentonville. However we do know that at the end of the 1920's, to save the prisoner having to walk the 25 yards to the gallows, a new execution facility was provided within the prison, comprising a stack of three rooms in the middle of A Wing. The top most room contained the double beam from which up to three 2" link chains could be suspended, for attachment of the rope(s) which hung down through floor hatches. The chain adjusting mechanism allowed the drop to be set to an accuracy of half an inch.



For a single hanging the centre adjuster was used for the hanging rope, while the outer two were used to suspend ropes for the warders to hold onto, while they supported the condemned man.

The first floor room, painted a pale green, contained the lever and trapdoors and the ground floor room acted as the “pit” into which the prisoner dropped. Adjacent to this room was an autopsy room where post mortems were carried out.

Albert Pierrepoint described the trap in 1931 as having two leaves, each some 8 feet 6 inches long by 2 feet 6 inches wide, with rubber backed spring clips to catch them when they were released. Also on the first floor were the two condemned cells separated from the execution chamber by an ante room. It was just 20 feet from the condemned cells to the gallows.

Wandsworth prison's gallows was allowed to be photographed and in fact still survives in pieces within the Galleries of Justice in Nottingham, where the author saw and photographed it. There were two sets of condemned cells at Wandsworth, back to back in a mirror image pattern on E Wing. These were reached by the prisoner from the yard, by climbing a metal staircase. Between Condemned Cell A and the execution room was a small lobby, through which the officials entered from the main prison, to witness the hanging.

As at Pentonville, the execution chamber comprised three cells, one above the other at the end of E Wing where it joins the rotunda. This Condemned Suite was constructed in 1937. Alfred Richards was the first to be hanged here, on 12 July, 1938. The top floor, reached by a steel ladder from the execution room, contained the beam with three floor traps through which hung down chains for attachment of the ropes. There were three chain adjusting blocks bolted to the beam, with the centre one for use for single executions and the outer two for double ones.



Beam and adjusting brackets (from an 1:6 model by PJG Design)

The first floor contained the 8 feet 6 inches long by 5 feet 8 inches wide trapdoors and the operating lever.

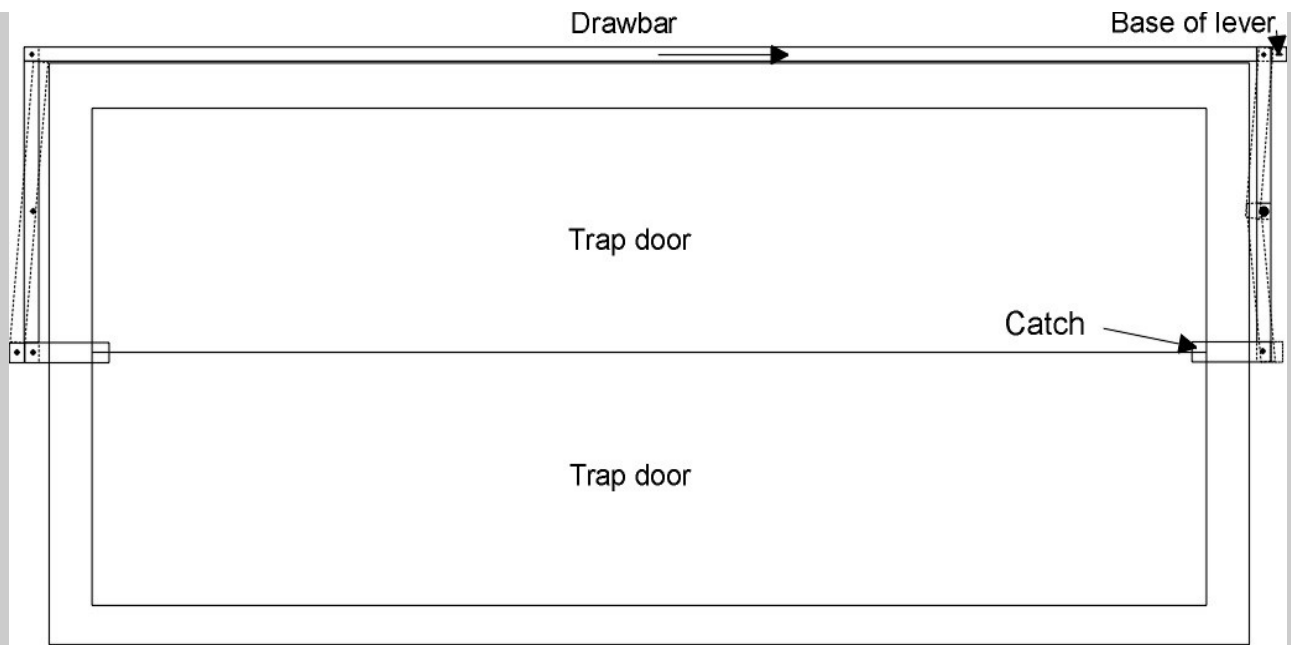


Execution chamber (from an 1:6 model by PJG Design)

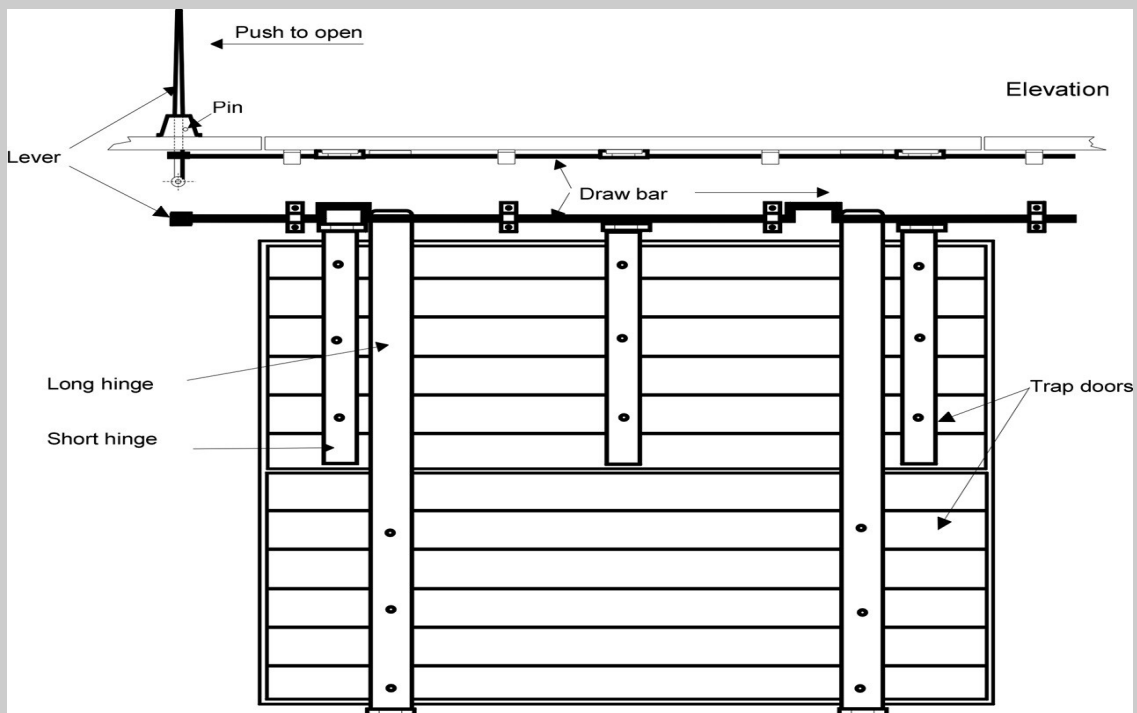
For a single execution two ropes hung down for the warders to hold onto as they stood on plank bridges over the drop to support the condemned man with the palm of their other hand under the person's elbows, so as the prisoner dropped their hand would fall away. There were two wall mounted handrails for the warders to hold onto for double executions.

The ground floor cell was the drop room with a gate to the yard through which the body was brought out. When Sid Dernley assisted at an execution there in the 40's, he recalled how clean and tidy it all was, even the wooden floor being varnished. It is thought that the trap door release mechanism at Wandsworth was unusual and not the same as at Pentonville.

The first diagram shows that the two trap doors were released by withdrawing bolts from the ends of the two doors, positioned on the centre line, unlike the more normal arrangement, shown in the next drawing, where one trap door had hinges only extending the width of it, while the other had hinges extending right across the drop, with their ends resting on a slotted drawbar, the hinge ends lining up with these slots when the lever above was pushed.



The trap release mechanism at Wandsworth prison. When the lever is operated the drawbar moves in the direction indicated by the arrow, moving the catches outwards, releasing the trapdoors.



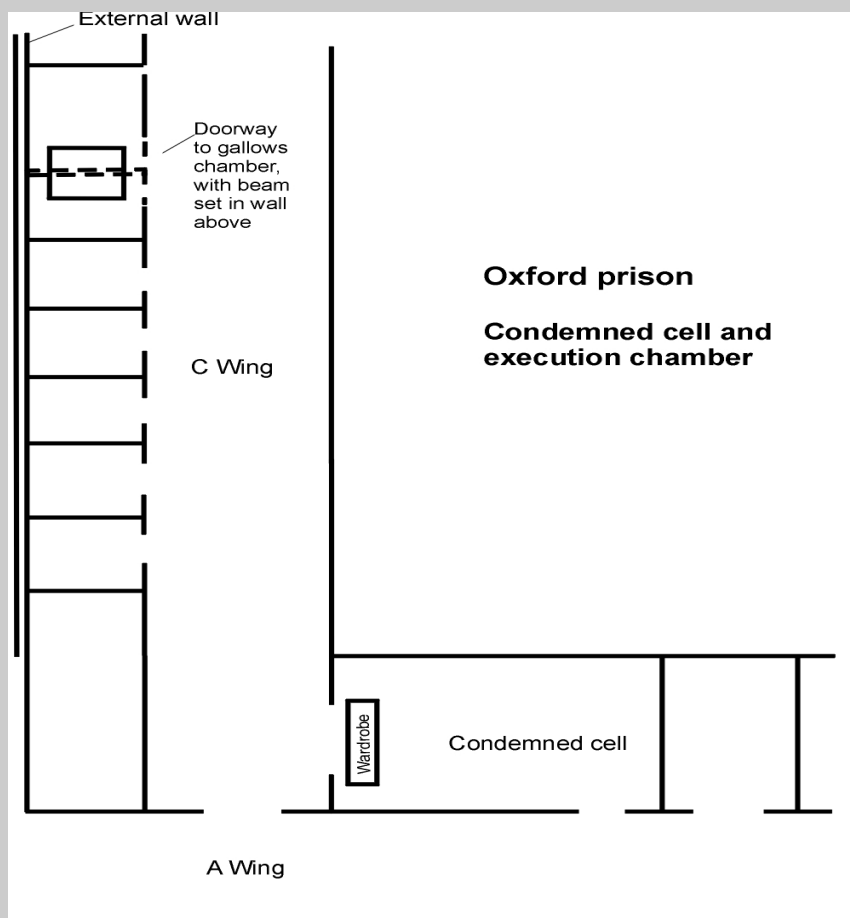
Traditional release mechanism with hinges extending across the trap doors (Diagram: R. Clark)

Gallows used to execute British soldiers convicted of murder

Six of the soldiers were hanged at Wandsworth and the gallows used was as described above. James McNicol was hanged at Pentonville, also described above. The layout of the Condemned Suite at Durham, constructed in 1925, is very similar to that at Wandsworth, with a small lobby, formed from a single cell with double doors in and out, separating the condemned cell, formed from three cells, from the execution room which had been formed from two cells.

No details of the gallows at Dorchester, Durham, Norwich and Walton prisons have ever been made available, but it is assumed they were of a similar pattern to those at Wandsworth and Pentonville.

The layout of the condemned suite at Oxford prison, where Harold Hill was hanged is rather unusual, see plan below. In most cases the gallows room was adjacent to the condemned cell or separated from it by a lobby. At Oxford the condemned cell's entrance was in A Wing, with a door way leading out into a corridor into C Wing. Hill would have had to walk down this corridor past a number of cells, turn left into the execution chamber and left again onto the gallows.



The American Military prison at Shepton Mallet in Somerset

Under the provisions of the Visiting Forces Act (1942) 16 men were hanged at Shepton Mallet. To enable these executions to take place a new brick built extension was added to one of the prison's wings. The two story red brick structure looked totally out of place against the weathered stone walls of the original building. A new British style gallows was installed on the first floor of the building and two cells within the main building converted into a condemned cell. Again there are no photographs of the interior of this extension and we have to assume that it was of the standard pattern, as at Pentonville with the trap doors of sufficient width to permit double hangings, of which there were three.



The new execution building at Shepton Mallet

The gallows at Hameln

It is officially reported that the gallows erected at Hameln was in the West wing of the main prison building. This wing was kept separate from the rest of the prison. The gallows was again modelled on the design of the one at Pentonville prison which had trap doors wide enough to permit double (side by side) hangings which were the norm for men at Hameln. A total of 191 men and ten women were executed on this gallows. Once again there are no photographs available, but since it is known that the split beam was installed in the second floor, above the execution chamber, it seems unlikely that it was supported by wooden uprights but rather by brackets set into sockets in the walls.

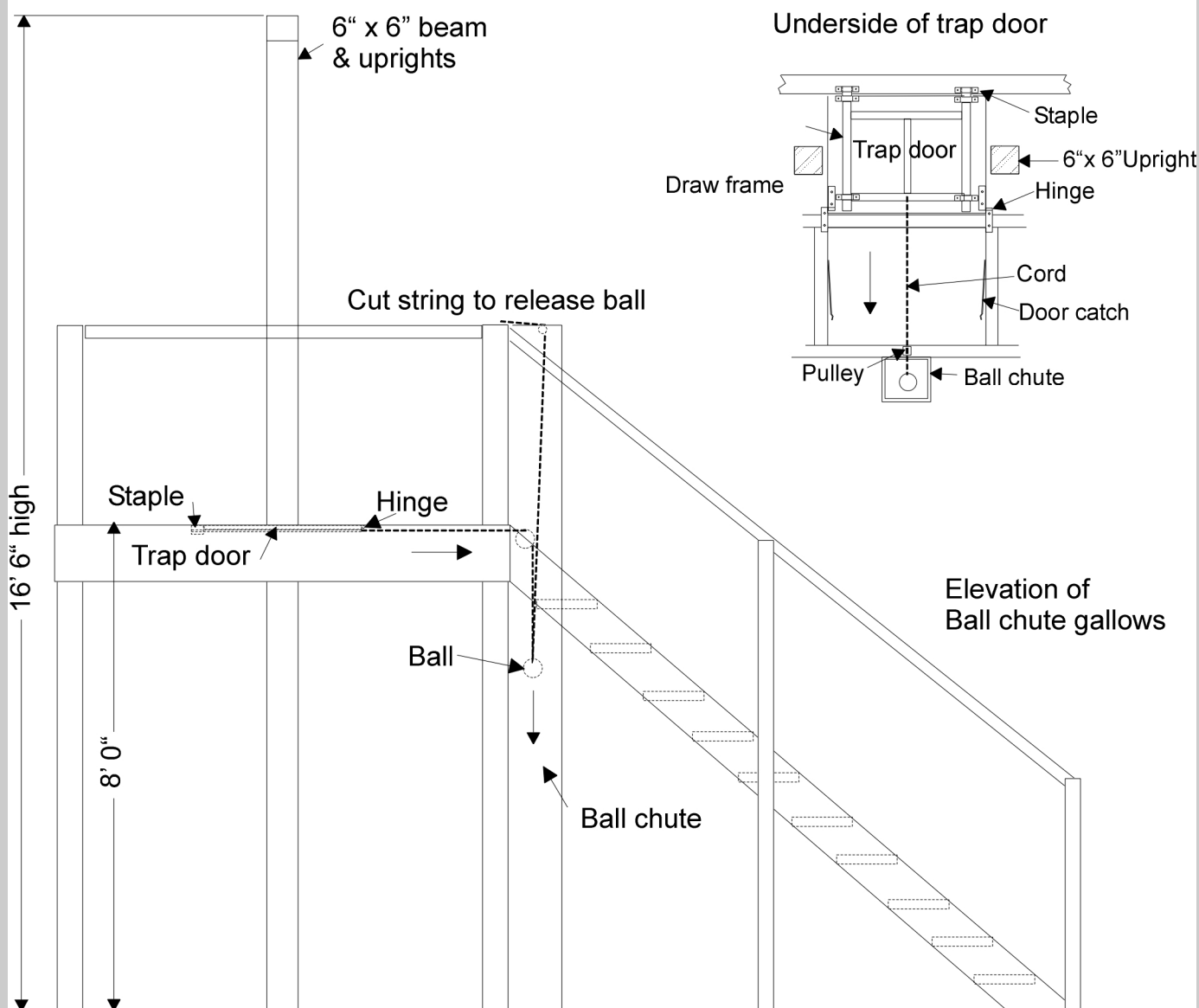
US Army gallows at Bruchsal, Landsberg, Nuremberg and Rheinbach in Germany and in France and Italy

In most cases a very traditional style of wooden gallows was built in a yard of the prison, having a platform containing one or two trap doors, wooden uprights and beam. The platform was reached by climbing 13 steps. Various trap door release mechanisms were used.

Bruchsal

From surviving photographs it is possible to determine that this gallows had six inch square uprights supporting the six inch square beam which had a metal eyebolt at its centre for attachment of the 13 coil noose. The uprights appear to be very close together, perhaps only 3' 6" apart, certainly little more. A tarpaulin hung down from the platform concealing the hanging prisoner. The single leaf trap door was released by a "ball chute" mechanism, housed in a wooden structure, adjacent to the staircase at the front of the gallows.

Ball chute gallows

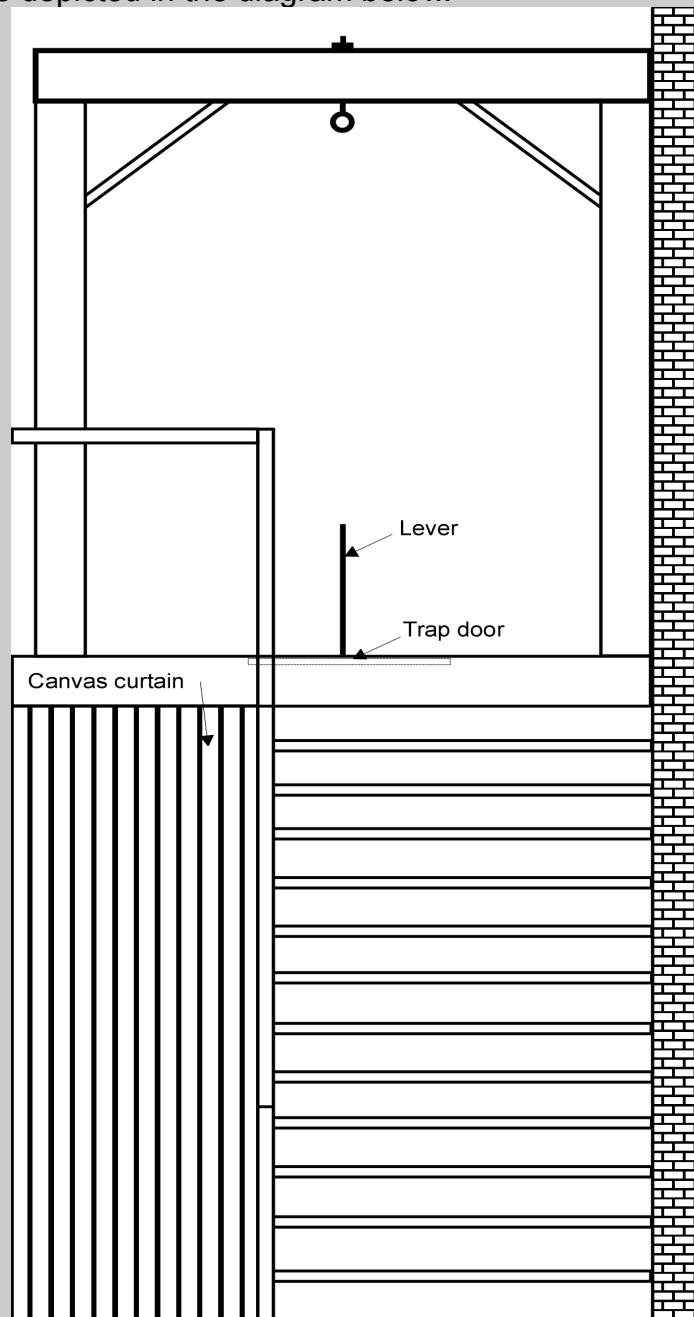


The heavy ball was attached to the trap door by a cord and pulley mechanism and dropped down the chute when the string supporting it was cut by the hangman.

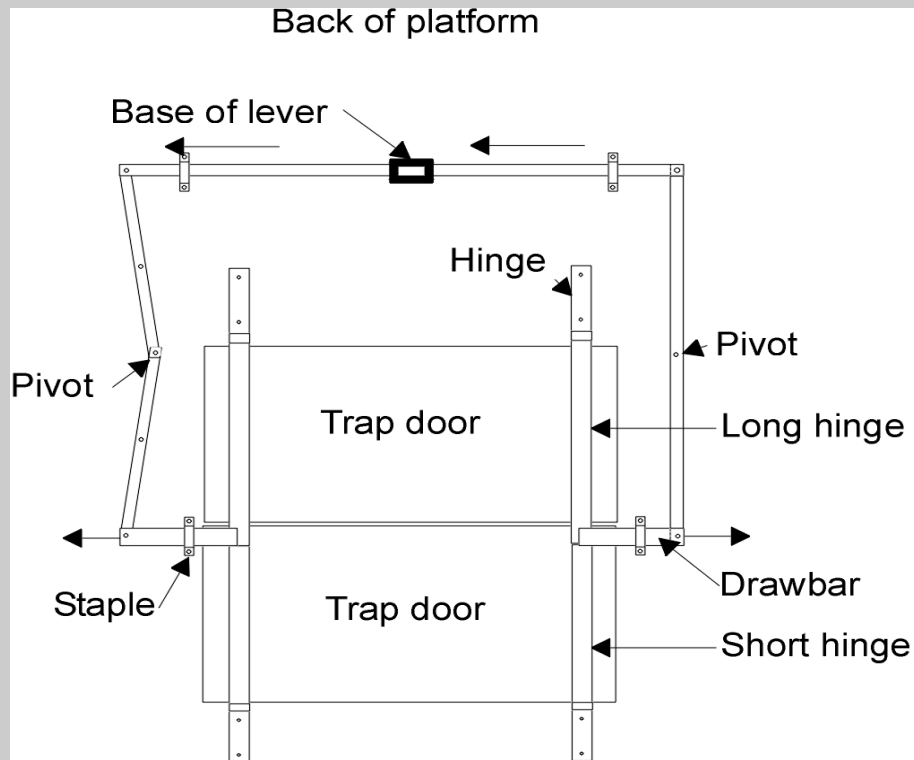
Landsberg

It is unclear whether there were more than two open air gallows at Landsberg. It would appear that Reichhart's gallows, on the right, was the original one and was modified by the fitting of a new, unpainted, handrail to the steps for the first hangings on 19 November 1945. By 10 December, the handrail had been painted black and cross braces had been added between the beam and uprights. The uprights are considerably further apart than those at Bruchsal, perhaps nearly eight feet, almost the width of the platform, which was about 8 feet square and eight to nine feet from the ground, reached by a flight of 13 steps. (See photo on title page)

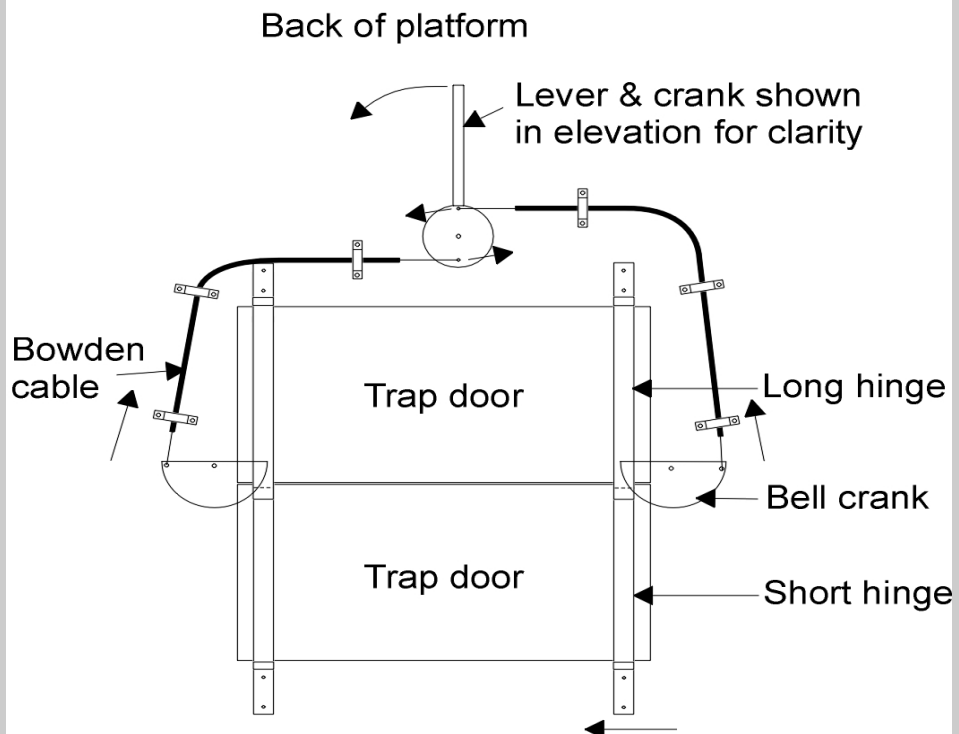
The beam appears to be deeper than the one at Bruchsal, at around 10 inches. At its centre was a steel eye bolt to which the rope was tied. There were several possible release mechanisms for the double trap doors, two of which are depicted in the diagram below.



Reichhart's gallows at Landsberg



Possible method using levers



Possible method using Bell cranks and cables

It is clear from surviving photographs and videos that the trap door hinges were unequal in length, with the hinges of one door running a few inches under the other and resting on a drawbar at each end. Unfortunately there are no actual photographs of the mechanism. It is clear from videos of actual hangings that the lever to release the traps was at the back of the platform, behind the prisoner who was turned to face the stairs which he had ascended. The opening appears to be about three feet square. Beside the steps was a canvas curtain, which was drawn back to allow examination and removal of the prisoner.

Woods' gallows, as used for the May 1946 executions, appears to be a mirror image of Reichhart's.

Little is known of the gallows used for the last seven hangings here, carried out in 1951, other than they were set up in a "loft" and were not in the open courtyard. A photograph was taken of Oswald Pohl standing on what appears to be a double trapdoor arrangement, but no other details are discernable.

Nuremberg

Very little detail is available on the gallows set up at Nuremberg as no photography was permitted. Three were built at Landsberg under the direction of Master Sergeant John C. Woods and were of a sectional construction, comprising the uprights and the beam which was bolted to them, the eight foot square platform and the staircase. According to Stanley Tilles, the sections were painted olive green so that they would not arouse attention on their trip by trucks to Nuremberg. Here they were re-assembled, a procedure that took 11 – 12 hours. The overall height was 15 feet and the platform was eight feet above the ground. The beam had an eye-bolt at the centre for attachment of the rope. Woods had designed a latch mechanism to catch the trapdoors as they fell to prevent them swinging back and striking the prisoner.

Rheinbach

There is only one surviving photo of the gallows at Rheinbach which shows that it had a single trap door with a ball chute release mechanism similar to the one at Bruchsal. This trapdoor appears to be about three feet square and is caught by a latch mechanism when opened.

US Military Disciplinary Training Centres in Europe

Few details of the gallows at these remain. But the execution report for German spy Günther Ohletz, who was the first to be hanged at DTC Paris, states that this gallows was of the ball chute type and that the executioner cut the string to release the trap. It has been reported that the gallows used in France and Belgium were transportable as they were used for executions carried out near the crime scene.

Peninsular Base Section at Aversa in Italy

The gallows at Aversa was a large permanent wooden structure within the stockade. There is a photograph of it about to be used to hang Louis Till on Monday, July 2, 1945. From this we can see that it had 13 steps leading up to the platform with heavy wood uprights supporting the beam to which the rope was tied, possibly to a hook or eyebolt. The uprights are quite close together, estimated at 3' 6". The trapdoor(s) was released by three soldiers (shown in the above mentioned photograph) underneath the platform, pulling moving wooden levers pivoted on the stair risers and attached to ropes that in turn were attached to the release mechanism. The uprights for the handrail continue to a level above the beam and form a high level frame. One wonders whether a tarpaulin or similar could be fixed to this in the event of inclement weather.