

Richard Coughlin
Stalag Guantánamo

After dinner one night during my third trip to the base, I returned to my room and channel surfed until I hit upon a scene from a black and white movie I had not watched in many years. It was near the end of the film, *Stalag 17*, the story of American POWs being held at a particularly nasty German Camp that was administered by a rather odious Commandant. In the movie, William Holden plays a POW wrongly suspected of collaborating with the Nazis. He is beaten severely when a pair of fellow prisoners are shot trying to escape because it is believed that he disclosed the escape plans. When I tuned in, a high profile American pilot, a Major Dunbar, had just been delivered to the camp and was awaiting transfer to the hands of the SS for transport to Berlin. The evil prison commandant, anxious to promote his own career, was determined to break Dunbar and obtain a confession by any means. Dunbar was, of course, portrayed as a strong willed hero, unwilling to wilt under the onslaught of what was meant to depict torture and inhumane conduct by the Nazis. To that end, Dunbar was not allowed to sit; he was sleep-deprived, thirsty and hungry. He was on the edge of confessing due to his desperation for comfort and desire to relieve his distress. When a Red Cross official unexpectedly happened upon the scene and ended the interrogation, the “Geneva Man[’s]” warning about post-war punishment for war criminals was dismissed with a laugh. Holden eventually clears himself by revealing the real traitor, and leads Dunbar to freedom.

The next day, when I resumed my meetings with men who would have given almost anything for the intervention of the “Geneva Man,” I wondered whether those responsible for this loathsome, shameful place had ever seen the movie, and, if they had, would they too laugh at the warning.