Trouble at the Lordsburg Internment Camp

John J. Culley
TROUBLE AT THE LORDSBURG INTERNMENT CAMP

JOHN J. CULLEY

At approximately 3:30 a.m., in the pre-dawn hours of 27 July 1942, as 147 Issei internees arriving from other camps marched through the inner gate of the United States Army internment camp at Lordsburg, New Mexico, an army guard escorting two stragglers shot both men shortly after they passed the guard house at the main entrance. Hirota Isomura died immediately, and Toshiro Kobata died within three hours. Humble and ordinary men in life, in death they were largely forgotten, a footnote to history. That they were undistinguished men should not obscure their significance, however. Not only are there unresolved questions concerning the shooting of Isomura and Kobata, their death is also related to broader issues of importance.¹

To begin with, the question persists of whether the shooting of Isomura and Kobata was justifiable under military regulations or an act of unjustifiable homicide. But beyond this, the event calls attention to an overlooked aspect of Japanese-American internment during World War II. While the evacuation of Japanese Americans from the west coast and their relocation and detention by the War Relocation Authority is widely known, the earlier Justice Department program that interned selected individuals, including many Issei (first-generation immigrants born in Japan), as dangerous enemy aliens remains largely unknown. It is even less well-known that until June 1943 the United States Army maintained the prison camps that housed these interned civilians. An effort to understand why Isomura and Kobata were shot leads to questions about the army’s ability to effectively administer and staff such camps, and about specific problems encountered at Lordsburg. In addition, in the broadest sense this fatal shooting raises questions concerning
the government's attitude toward interned enemy aliens. Did the government adequately safeguard the lives of these civilians, or did government policy prejudicially endanger their lives? A close examination of the shooting and of the circumstances surrounding it will shed light on these issues.²

The Lordsburg Internment Camp, the site of the shooting, originated in January 1942 to serve the needs of the enemy alien control program of the Justice Department. Beginning on 7 December, the FBI arrested thousands of aliens previously targeted as potential threats to national security. Many of the aliens arrested were of Japanese ancestry. The Immigration and Naturalization Service held them in temporary detention until each received a hearing before an Enemy Alien Hearing Board, which could order the person to be either released, paroled, or interned for the duration. The Justice Department created more than one hundred such hearing boards, one in each federal judicial district. The Alien Enemy Control Unit of the Justice Department, which sat in Washington, D.C., administered the program. When a hearing board ordered a person interned, the Immigration and Naturalization Service surrendered its temporary custody, and the United States Army assumed responsibility for permanent custody. In mid-June 1942, the just-completed Lordsburg camp began to receive Issei transferred from temporary INS detention camps at Santa Fe and elsewhere.³

In its physical facilities, organization, staffing, and relative isolation, Lordsburg was a typical Army prisoner-of-war camp. It was located six miles from Lordsburg, a small town of 3,800 in the remote southwest corner of New Mexico, eighty miles north of the Mexican border and twenty-six miles east of the Arizona state line. The Southern Pacific Railroad provided the main transportation connection. The high altitude, 4,200 feet, and the arid climate produced a countryside typical of the desert Southwest. There were no trees to be seen in any direction, only greasewood and mesquite bushes, and mountains on the far horizon. The camp covered two square miles and consisted of a main area measuring 2,600 feet by 1,300 feet enclosed within a double barbed wire fence, with watch towers and floodlights. The main stockade was divided into three compounds, which were subdivided into four company areas each containing eight barracks, a latrine, a recreation hall, and a mess
hall and kitchen. In addition to the main stockade there was a large enclosed recreation area contiguous to the east side and another fenced area adjacent to the southwest corner of the main enclosure that contained the hospital. All told, the camp had more than 150 buildings, had cost approximately three million dollars, and had a capacity of 3,000 men. 4

In early 1942 the army realized it lacked not only the physical facilities but also the administrative policies necessary to handle large numbers of prisoners and hurriedly drafted regulations to govern prisoner-of-war camps and civilian internment camps. The Geneva Convention of 1929, to which the United States adhered, provided the basic guidelines for the treatment of prisoners of war and interned civilian aliens. The army envisioned that a civilian internment camp with a full complement of 3,000 would be organized into twelve companies of 250 men. Each company would select a leader, and they, in turn, would choose a camp spokesman. Regulations charged company leaders with maintaining their area in a clean and orderly condition, relaying orders, and allocating work. The type of work the administration could require internees to do was defined by the provisions of the Geneva Convention. Even so, by mid-July the 613 Issei internees at Lordsburg were locked in an angry dispute over the issue of work with army administrators. 5

The number of army personnel at a prisoner-of-war or internment camp varied according to the number of prisoners. In July 1942 the military staff at Lordsburg was relatively small, for the camp held less than one quarter of its full capacity. It was commanded by a lieutenant colonel assisted by a first lieutenant as adjutant. The full complement allotted to a camp consisted of the commander and the administrative staff, in addition to one Military Police Escort Guard Company for each 1,000 internees. Ordinarily, a military police company had three officers and 132 enlisted men divided into rifle, machine-gun, and shotgun squads.

In general, military police units suffered from a very low reputation. From the beginning of the war, the army staffed these units with men who were physically unqualified for combat duty. Postwar studies found that during the war the military police had the worst opportunities for promotion, the lowest status, the least
Camp layout taken from "Record of Trial by General Court-Martial, The United States vs Private First Class Clarence A. Burleson." Courtesy Department of the Army.
pride and job satisfaction, and the lowest educational level of any branch of the army. These units contained many cast-offs from other branches as well as officers destined for terminal or dead-end assignments. The official army history concluded that prison camp commands tended to be dumping grounds for field grade officers who were found to be unsatisfactory for other assignments. Without belaboring the point, one may note that the command of a small civilian internment camp in the southwestern desert was not a choice assignment nor one reserved for an officer of notable promise, ability, or merit.6

Lt. Col. Clyde A. Lundy, camp commander, was fifty-nine years old and a veteran of almost forty years of army service. Lundy was first commissioned in 1917, after serving many years in the cavalry as an enlisted man. Lundy's adjutant at Lordsburg was 1st Lt. Richard S. Dockum, a thirty-five-year-old civil engineer recalled to active duty at the start of the war. In later years, Dockum described Lundy as a colorful character who relished the role of the typical army officer and who put on a show as he walked around with his boots and riding crop, accompanied by his dog. Dockum also recalled that Lundy was fond of the old, formal entertaining of the peacetime army and that consequently every Saturday evening the officers' club featured a party. This recollection is fully supported by stories in the local newspaper that describe an apparently endless round and variety of social affairs, including formal dances, luncheons, buffets, picnics, mountain outings, cocktail parties, bridge luncheons, cocktail suppers, hunting trips, antelope dinners, masquerade parties, and barn dances, which Lundy presided over for the benefit of his officers and their wives. Another view of the camp is presented by Herbert Nicholson, a Quaker who visited Lordsburg and who has charged that the camp commander was frequently drunk. Admittedly Nicholson was an elderly man writing long after the events, and he did not identify the camp commander by name, but Dockum relates that the office safe contained nothing but liquor and that while no drinking was permitted before sundown, after the flag was lowered Lundy would initiate a round of drinks in which "the sky was the limit." Dockum also related a revealing incident that occurred as Lundy moved his personal effects into his office. As he unpacked his volumes of army
regulations and put them on the shelf, Lundy remarked that in his view regulations were meant to be broken. In time, this attitude led to his early retirement and perhaps contributed to some of the difficulties experienced at the camp.⁷

The Lordsburg camp was already in a state of high tension when Isomura and Kobata arrived on 27 July. Several weeks before their arrival a dispute over work rules erupted into a confrontation between the internees and the administration. The internees, dissatisfied with the work rules, wired the Spanish ambassador on 1 July and again on 11 July asking that a Spanish representative visit the camp. Any telegram sent by the internees to the Spanish Embassy was routed first through the Aliens Division of the Provost Marshal General’s Office, which then referred the telegram to the State Department for action rather than sending it directly to the Spanish Embassy.⁸ On 17 July the internees attempted to send another telegram to the Spanish Embassy stating that:

WE WIRED TO YOU TWICE URGENT STOP CONDITIONS GETTING SERIOUS SINCE THEN STOP ALL JAPANESE INTERNEES CONFINED IN BARRACKS UNDER SPECIAL GUARD WE REQUEST TO SEND YOUR REPRESENTATIVE AT ONCE PLEASE ANSWER.⁹

Alerted by this message, on 20 July the provost marshal general, Maj. Gen. Allen Gullion, ordered Lundy to airmail to his office an explanation of the conditions that prompted the internees’ telegram.¹⁰ Lundy submitted a brief reply that contained only the barest facts but that nonetheless revealed the extent of the crisis. Lundy briefly reported that following regulations the internees had been organized into companies with elected mayors and barracks leaders, that they were given physical exams and graded according to their physical ability, and that pertinent paragraphs of the governing regulations were posted in all barracks. But, continued Lundy, the mayors had rejected his reasonable requests for work details, claiming it was too hot for any work in the afternoon and arguing that no details should be required outside the compound unless it was rated as Class 2 labor and paid for at the regular rates. Since
13 July the internees had furnished no work details. As a disciplinary action, Lundy had confiscated all radios, suspended all canteen credit, and, except for cooks and helpers who were given time to prepare meals, confined all internees to their barracks with only two hours open air exercise daily. Lundy said he intended to replace the elected mayors and barracks leaders with appointees who would be more cooperative.

The internees presented a different and more complete view of the matter in a protest entitled “The Fundamental Question,” which the Spanish Embassy transmitted to the State Department. The internees contended that their difference of opinion with Lundy over the type of work that could legally be required was the source of the difficulty. They argued that under the Geneva Convention internees could only be required to work within their own compounds and that work outside the compounds must be strictly voluntary; they rejected Lundy’s position that all work, irrespective of whether it be inside or outside the compound, must be done by the internees. They protested that Lundy forced them to clean the army garrison’s mess-halls, latrines, infirmaries, and dance-halls, as well as work on the grounds, in the cemetery, and load supplies in town, all of which was work performed outside the compounds and without pay.

When Lundy had refused to meet with the mayors of two of the internee companies on 21 June the internees wired the Spanish Embassy requesting the dispatch of a representative and, pending his arrival, agreed to furnish laborers for work outside the compound during the morning hours, provided that no labor be required in the afternoon hours. The internees reasoned that since they averaged sixty years of age and were not accustomed to either manual labor or the excessive heat of the region, that working in the intense afternoon heat was dangerous to their health. Under this agreement, from 2 July until 13 July the internees furnished 75 to 130 men daily for morning work details outside the compound. Then 2nd Lt. Ervin W. Mitchell, the main prison officer, ordered the internees to furnish men for an afternoon work detail. They refused to obey, and at this point the administration confiscated all radios, discontinued all canteen service, stopped all mail service, and confined all internees to their barracks twenty-four hours a
day, except for short intervals for visits to the latrine and for meals. All lights were out at eight o’clock, and all barracks doors were closed, day and night. This was the atmosphere of the camp when the train carrying Isomura and Kobata arrived.\textsuperscript{13}

The shooting of Isomura and Kobata ultimately produced a record of 217 pages, consisting of sworn testimony given on three occasions: at a hearing held on the afternoon of 27 July at Lordsburg, at a pre-trial investigation on 3 September, and at a court-martial held on 10 September. This testimony describes in detail the events surrounding the death of the two men, but there was only one surviving witness to the actual shooting, Pfc. Clarence A. Burleson—the man who pulled the trigger.\textsuperscript{14}

Trains bringing internees to Lordsburg usually arrived between two and three o’clock in the morning at a railroad siding about three miles from town and near the main entrance of the camp where a detachment of guards would take custody of the new arrivals and march them three miles to the main compound. On 27 July the garrison prepared to receive 147 internees from Bismarck, North Dakota, expected to arrive at 1:45 A.M. The officer of the day, 1st Lt. Harold C. Stull was to receive them at the gate of compound three. First Sgt. John A. Beckham of the 308th Military Police Escort Guard Company detailed Sgt. Truman C. Fambro’s section to furnish the guards, and Private Burleson and the twenty-three other men of the section were awakened just before midnight and told to report to the supply room to draw arms. Four guards drew Thompson sub-machine guns, while Burleson and the others were armed with twelve gauge riot guns. Sergeant Beckham told them that:

They were to allow none of them to escape; that if and in the event any Aliens attempted to escape, that they should give them a command to “Halt” and if and in the event, they did not obey the command of “Halt” they were to shoot them. I made these instructions definite. Informing them clearly that they were, under no circumstances to permit any of the Aliens to escape, and that was why they had their guns. All the guards have always been definitely instructed that they were to permit no Aliens to escape, and they were to use all necessary force to prevent them from escaping.\textsuperscript{15}
Aroused to watchful vigilance by the exhortations of their first sergeant, the detachment marched off to meet the train, which arrived at the siding at 2:00 A.M.

Shortly before the train arrived the army officer in charge of escorting the arriving internees appointed Senmatsu Ishizaki to serve as interpreter for the group, and subsequently Ishizaki was referred to as the group’s leader. After detraining, Ishizaki relayed Sergeant Beckham’s instructions to the group to line up and to stay on the paved highway as they marched into camp. When Beckham learned that two of the men, Isomura and Kobata, were ill and would be unable to keep up he had them drop out of formation. Sergeant Fambro then ordered Burleson to bring the two men into camp, staying six to fifteen feet behind them and letting them walk at their own pace and rest when necessary. Fambro, in the presence of Ishizaki, conversed with Isomura and Kobata in English and told them that they must stay on the road. The main column, led by Beckham, Fambro, and Ishizaki, moved across the highway toward the main entrance of the camp, with the heavily armed guards marching as flankers. As Burleson and the two internees moved out, they were followed by Pfc. Joseph F. Kelley, an MP who had encountered the group at the railroad siding as he returned from his duty in town. Fambro had pressed him into service as the rear road-guard, and Kelley maintained a position thirty steps behind Burleson in order to direct any approaching traffic.16

The main column had gone perhaps 150 yards when they were overtaken by Lieutenant Mitchell who was driving in from his quarters in town. Mitchell drove to the head of the column where he enquired about the two stragglers and then dropped back to see if they were under proper guard. He then returned to the head of the column where Beckham hopped a ride on the running board of the car and they drove to the gate of compound three. At approximately 3:15 A.M. the main group passed around the ninety degree left bend in the road and reached the gate of compound three where Lieutenants Mitchell and Stull and Sergeants Beckham and Fambro formed them up for a head count. After counting the group of 145, Stull opened the compound gate and ordered the column through, counting them again as they passed. As the head
of the column entered the compound, the internees already imprisoned there welcomed the newcomers with loud greetings, shouts, and cheering. 17

Meanwhile, around the bend in the road and some distance in the rear, Isomura and Kobata had stopped four to six times to rest, the last time just after passing the manned guardhouse, which marked the main entrance to the camp. Burleson testified that Isomura and Kobata seemed restless, talked to one another and appeared to argue between themselves, and that they walked at an erratic pace, sometimes fast and sometimes slowly. As they approached the first building on the camp, one of three engineer's buildings, Kelley called to Burleson that he was falling out for a drink. As Kelley stooped over a fire hydrant some seventy-five feet east of the road, he heard tumult coming from the direction of the compound and then he heard two shots. However, Kelley did not hear Burleson shout "halt," nor did he see what happened, and so for this critical moment, one has only Burleson's uncorroborated testimony. 18

According to Burleson, the only surviving eye witness, after Kelley called out that he was stopping, Isomura and Kobata began talking and then walking faster. Then, as shouting came from the main column that was out of sight down the road, the two internees broke off the road to the right and ran west toward a barbed wire boundary fence. Burleson swore that he twice called for them to halt and that when they did not, he fired on the first man. When the second man continued running toward the first, Burleson fired on him, and he fell. Burleson stated that he was "pretty excited" when he fired, and that because of the moon it was very light and that he could see extremely well. He did not examine the bodies and did not know if they were dead or alive. 19

In the immediate aftermath, after Kelley heard the shots he ran to Burleson with his weapon ready. When Kelley saw the bodies by the fence he told Burleson not to move while he ran for help. Simultaneously, Neely W. Marsalis, a civilian watchman, also heard the shots and stepped out the front door of the engineer's head-quarters building (building F) where he saw Burleson in the middle of the road and two bodies over by the fence. Kelley then ran up to Marsalis and asked for help, and the two men drove to the
compound looking for an officer. At this point a number of people who either heard the shots or had been told about them began to converge on the scene. Aside from Kelley, Sergeant Beckham was the first to arrive on the scene, followed in order by Lieutenants Mitchell, Bond, and Stull, Sergeant Fambro, and Colonel Lundy. Lundy later testified that he was in bed, but awake, when he heard a cry of "halt," followed by two rapid shots. He was the only person who claimed to have heard the cry "halt," but all of the witnesses who viewed the scene testified that they found Burleson standing in the middle of the road and that the two bodies were adjacent to the fence, west of the road. 20

First Lt. Phillip Bond, a medical officer, arrived on the scene with Mitchell. Bond stated that he found one man perhaps one foot from the fence and the other about five feet from the fence and five feet north of the first man. After quickly determining that the man closest to the fence (Isomura) was dead, Bond examined the second man (Kobata) and concluded that his legs were paralyzed and that he was in a state of shock. Kobata groaned and asked for water several times, which Mitchell and Stull brought to him. After Kobata was moved to the infirmary he continued to call for water and was very agitated, even begging Bond to give him medicine that would kill him. Bond administered a shot of morphine to ease his pain and concluded that he was in a stable condition. During this interval Lieutenant Stull talked to Kobata and asked his name, which Kobata gave and even spelled. Kobata also told Stull that he did not know the other man's name. Meanwhile, Isomura's body had been left in the field under guard while Mitchell made arrangements with a local mortuary to remove it. At this point Bond, the physician, left his patient and supervised the removal of Isomura to the mortuary. There Bond examined the body and at approximately 5:50 A.M. returned to the infirmary where he found Kobata in extremis. But the physician was too late, for even as Bond examined him, Kobata died. His body was taken to the same mortuary in town. No autopsy was performed on either body, but Bond's cursory examination found that they were both well formed Japanese males who had apparently died of gunshot wounds. There were nine puncture wounds on the upper left quadrant of both bodies; Bond did not determine how many of the wounds were
entry wounds and how many were exit wounds. Burleson had been armed with a Stevens, twelve gauge, pump-action shotgun, loaded with three double “0” shells. Each shell had nine pellets.\(^{21}\)

On the afternoon of 27 July a board convened at Lordsburg under army regulations to investigate the death of the two internees. The board, consisting of Capt. Arber J. Warren, Lt. Edward C. Strum, and Bond, heard testimony from Stull, Beckham, Kelley, and Burleson. After brief hearings the board found that Isomura and Kobata “died as the results of Gunshot [sic] wounds inflicted [sic] at the hands of PFC Clarence A. Burleson, . . . who was acting in the performance of his duty under legal orders of a superior authority.” The board recommended that a general court-martial try Burleson so that “his guilt or innocence may be forever established.”\(^{22}\)

The court-martial occurred 10 September at Fort Bliss, Texas, and produced a more extensive record. Burleson was twenty-nine years old and had a wife and two daughters living in San Angelo, Texas. He had enlisted on 14 May 1942 and was assigned to the 309th MPEG company, and he had arrived at Lordsburg on 6 July. The prosecution charged him with manslaughter, to which he pleaded not guilty. Seven Japanese internees testified or gave depositions, but none had witnessed the shooting, viewed the bodies, or visited the scene of the shooting. None of the Japanese physicians in camp examined the bodies. However, some of the internees who testified had not only known Isomura and Kobata for the previous five months at Bismarck, some had known the two men for decades. Hiroshi Aisawa, who had known Kobata since 1919, testified that the deceased man had suffered from tuberculosis for the past sixteen years. Fukujiro Hoshiya had known Isomura for more than two decades and testified that a fall suffered on a fishing boat ten years previous forced Isomura to walk slowly in a bent or stooped position with his head down. Several witnesses who had spent the last five months with Isomura and Kobata corroborated this testimony. But the defense maintained that the health of the two men was not relevant, and the prosecution failed to point out why it was relevant. The strongest challenge to the defense came from Ishizaki, who stated that they were not the kind of men who would run away and that he did not believe they were shot while trying
to escape. Ishizaki noted that there had been a strike in the camp and that the internees had been confined to their barracks for more than ten days. He charged that Isomura and Kobata were shot as an example. Unimpressed by this accusation, the court-martial board acquitted Burleson upon both the specifications and upon the charge. From the army’s viewpoint the case was closed. Two weeks after the court-martial Burleson was promoted to corporal.

Meanwhile, back at Lordsburg, the simultaneous dispute over work rules, which had existed before the shooting, continued. Since this crisis had determined the camp’s atmosphere at the time of the shooting and since it also illuminates Lundy’s abilities as a commanding officer, it must be followed to resolution. The argument centered over the distinction between class I labor and class II labor as defined in the basic army document governing the treatment of prisoners of war and civilian internees, which the army had issued on 23 April 1942 and which was intended to comply with the requirements of the Geneva Convention. Class I labor could be required of all POWs and civilian internees and was to be performed without pay. It included all labor necessary for the maintenance or repair of the camp (including work on barracks, roads, walks, sewers, sanitary facilities, water piping or fencing), all labor incident to improving or providing for the comfort or health of internees (including work connected with the kitchens, canteens, hospitals, garbage disposal, or camp dispensaries), and all necessary labor connected with the internal economy of the internee companies, including serving as cooks, tailors, bankers, and other duties. Class II labor included everything that did not fall into class I, for example, labor on projects carried on by the federal government, by a state government, or by private business. Performing class II labor earned wages, and POWs could be directed to perform this labor provided it was within their physical ability. But there were also limitations on the utilization of prisoner labor. Prisoners could not be used in any work that was directly connected with military operations; they could not be assigned inherently unhealthy or dangerous work; they could not be worked longer hours than civilian workers doing similar work; they could not be employed as servants by members of the armed forces, and civilian internees could not be required to perform class II labor without
their voluntary written consent or request. This last point was the heart of the matter, for the internees claimed that all work outside the immediate vicinity of their compounds was class II labor, which they could not be forced to perform without their consent. The army disagreed.25

On 18 September the Provost Marshal General’s Office sent Lundy a copy of “The Fundamental Question” and the accompanying Spanish Memorandum No. 352, along with the department’s own comments, some of which supported Lundy and some of which did not. The PMG noted that the demarcation between required work (class I) and voluntary work (class II) was not a physical line, such as a compound fence, but an operational definition, that is, whether the labor was for the benefit of the internees and the camp in general. Loading and unloading quartermaster supplies in town, which the internees had protested, was endorsed, but the practice of limiting labor to morning hours only, a situation Lundy had temporarily accepted, was rejected. Lundy was also rebuked for failing to meet with the internee leaders, and he was reminded that internees under disciplinary punishment had the right to send and receive mail. The PMG ordered Lundy to submit another report to the department, responding fully to the specific points the internees raised.26

Lundy’s response was his definitive statement on the dispute, but even so it was only two pages long, vague, and imprecise. He blamed the crisis on barracks lawyers and “a few Jap agitators stirring up trouble in the compounds,” and he justified his initial refusal to meet with internee leaders on the grounds that they had not submitted a proper application for a conference. Lundy restated his position that all work necessary to maintain the camp was class I, and he revealed that he included in this the cleaning of the staff’s administration buildings, the recreation hall, and the latrines. When the internees, provoked by agitators, refused to supply work details on 13 July, Lieutenant Mitchell had imposed the maximum punishment allowed by regulations and the Geneva Convention and confined the internees to barracks. Here Lundy became rather vague and noted that “after a brief period of this punishment” leaders stated that the internees desired to work and when the matter was put to a vote, only one company refused to work. This
company was moved to a separate compound and left in confinement and “after a short time, they, [sic] too desired to work, and have been working ever since.” Lundy transferred all those he considered agitators into this disciplinary company. In conclusion, Lundy asserted that the complaints expressed in “The Fundamental Question” did not reflect the majority opinion of the internees.27

The PMG agreed with Lundy’s interpretation of the work required of the internees with one exception; he was ordered to stop using internees to clean garrison mess halls, infirmaries, dance halls, and latrines. The State Department also accepted this position and so informed the Spanish Embassy. At this point Lundy had weathered two crises, the work dispute and the shooting of Isomura and Kobata, with no apparent blame attached to his command. On 23 November the War Department promoted Lundy to full colonel, but his troubles were not over.28

The Lordsburg camp held two classes of prisoners who were not supposed to be there, a number of Japanese military prisoners of war, and a small group of American military personnel under disciplinary confinement. On Thanksgiving Day of 1942 an American garrison prisoner attacked one of the internees, Dr. Uyehara. The official Japanese protest charged that the camp commander had refused requests to move some twenty American military convicts and that one of the convicts, while drunk, intruded into the internees’ quarters and wounded Uyehara in the back with a knife. The State Department response did not mention the number of convicts, nor the knife, but described the incident as a “fracas” in which Uyehara was knocked down, “but was not injured to an extent requiring medical attention.” Nonetheless, the department’s response noted that the convicts were removed and the individual who attacked Uyehara court-martialed, and that the commander of the camp (Lundy) had been given a written admonition and subsequently removed from command.29

Indeed, Lundy’s command at Lordsburg ended on 17 December 1942. The exact circumstances in which the army relieved Lundy are somewhat confused, but apparently various irregularities involving the canteen profits and Lundy’s penchant for social life provided the cause. A confidential State Department report made after a visit to Lordsburg on 9 August by the Spanish consul and
Whitney Young, a State Department official, was strangely silent about the shooting of Isomura and Kobata, but criticized Lundy's handling of the work dispute, and also noted that the commander was withholding from the internees the personal funds that had been in their possession when they arrived and remittances they had received after their arrival. Thus the internees had only their grant of ten cents per day with which to buy coupons to spend at the canteen. Lundy assured Young and the Spanish consul that he would change this policy and allow internees to buy canteen coupons up to ten dollars per month from their personal funds. The State Department report also noted that any profit from the internees' canteen should be expended for the benefit of the internees. 30

In an interview given in later years, Richard Dockum, the camp adjutant, stated that Lundy was relieved from command because of irregularities arising from this last point. Under the army's old system of "rationed savings" any savings from the funds allocated for the mess, along with the profits from the post exchange, went into a special entertainment fund. According to Dockum, Lundy used these funds improperly, favoring the needs of army officers over those of enlisted men, and of all army personnel over the Japanese internees. 31

Evidently the Red Cross tripped-up Lundy when he appropriated band instruments for the officers' club that had been sent for the internees use. Dockum's account is not entirely clear, but evidently 8th Corps Headquarters had doubts about Lundy and sent in his successor, Col. Louis A. Ledbetter, with instructions to look for specific irregularities. After Ledbetter inspected the records thoroughly and found irregularities, he asked for an inspector general's investigation. Again according to Dockum, the Army allowed Lundy to retire rather than press formal charges against him. Lundy retired in September 1943 with the rank of full colonel. 32

The departure of the feckless Colonel Lundy was not the end of all controversy over the camp. In February 1944 the Japanese government lodged a second protest over the shooting of Isomura and Kobata and also protested that between April and June 1943 three instances of unwarranted use of firearms had occurred. The three cases alleged by the Japanese government involved a captain
who fired his revolver to make the internees work faster, a guard in a watch tower who fired at an internee when the internee sought the return of a ball, and a guard who fired on an internee for approaching the fence. In November 1944 the State Department responded to all of these protests. Regarding the shooting of Isomura and Kobata, the State Department’s final comment was that “while this Government regrets that Mr. Kobata and Mr. Isomura lost their lives in their attempt to escape, since they failed to stop when warned, the guard acting in the performance of his duty, had no other recourse than to shoot.”

The State Department narrowed the three cases of unwarranted use of firearms to two. It admitted that during a work slow-down, “an American captain in charge of the internees fired a shot from his pistol to attract the attention of the internees in order to address them and tell them to proceed with their work,” for which the captain was reprimanded. The alleged incident in which a guard fired on an internee who sought the return of a ball was denied, and the department maintained that in the third case, the guards had been alerted to expect an escape attempt and when an internee approached one of the gates, a sentry fired a warning shot at a nearby telephone post. The sentry “was relieved from further duty of this nature.” Obviously the State Department sought to put the best face on these events, but there are other perspectives.

In concluding this analysis of the problems at Lordsburg, one may suggest that these difficulties stemmed from three general problems inherent in the army’s role as custodian of interned civilians: (1) the army’s lack of recent administrative experience with prison camps, and with civilian prisoners in particular, (2) the decision to apply the same regulations to military and civilian prisoners, and (3) the shortage of first-rate officers and men to staff these prison camps.

As noted earlier, at the beginning of the war the army was not prepared to care for either military prisoners or for the civilian internees it had assumed responsibility for in an agreement of July 1941. Although large numbers of military prisoners did not materialize until 1943, the confinement of civilians interned as enemy aliens was an immediate and pressing problem. The army hastily constructed nine civilian internment camps, physically identical to
prisoner-of-war camps, and in April 1942 issued a set of regulations that governed both military prisoners and interned civilians. These civilian internment camps gave the army firsthand experience in prison camp administration that could later be applied to prisoner-of-war camps, but no precedent existed for the civilian camps, and this lack of experience partially accounts for the difficulties at Lordsburg.\textsuperscript{35}

Secondly, it is significant that the army applied the same regulations to both military prisoners and civilian internees. But regulations designed to control military prisoners of war were not necessarily suitable for governing a population of middle-aged civilian internees with different characteristics and attitudes. For example, the army sanctioned the punishment imposed on the Lordsburg internees during the work dispute, which allowed camp commanders, in accordance with Article 54 of the Geneva Convention, to deal summarily with ordinary disciplinary matters by suspension of privileges or by confinement in barracks for a period not to exceed thirty days. That army regulations allowed this type of punishment, however, does not mean that confining a group of middle-aged civilians to shuttered barracks in a desert environment during the hottest month of the year was wise or appropriate.\textsuperscript{36}

The shooting of Isomura and Kobata also illustrates the consequences of applying the same regulations to military prisoners and civilian internees. At issue is the method of preventing escapes. The army regulation stated that if an internee passed a defined limit or attempted to escape, the guard should call: halt! If the internee failed to halt immediately and if there were no other means of preventing escape, the guard should fire at the internee.\textsuperscript{37}

The State Department, which was concerned with the consequences of mistreating interned enemy aliens, was highly critical of this regulation. A State Department report of August 1942 noted that although the army’s "possibly overly strict shooting orders" had resulted in three deaths in as many months, and might lead to mistreatment "or more probably to the death of Americans in Japanese hands," nonetheless the army was not disposed to modify these orders by authorizing guards to fire a warning shot before they shot to kill. In contrast, the Justice Department regulation that the INS followed in its temporary detention camps directed
guards not to shoot if the prisoner could otherwise be captured. The State Department report concluded that:

An examination of the Army’s reports on the shootings gives the impression that the Army’s shooting rule comes close to making death, rather than up to 30 days arrest as provided in Article 54 of the Geneva Convention, the penalty for attempted escape.38

In this regard it should be noted that the Issei and other civilians interned as enemy aliens were not deliberately or prejudicially subjected to life-threatening treatment. They were simply treated in the same manner as military prisoners of war. During the course of the war a maximum of 425,806 prisoners of war were held in the continental United States. Most of the 2,828 who escaped enjoyed less than twenty-four hours of freedom, but as of May 1945, fifty-six prisoners had been shot and thirty-five of these men had died. Commenting on these fatal shootings, an army study concluded that some were unjustifiable and that in such cases, “the guard usually proved to be a person of inferior caliber.”39

A third point must also be considered. It is a truism that laws and regulations, be they harsh or lenient, are shaped by the men who administer them. Thus the treatment of prisoners may depend as much on the character and intelligence of their guards as on official policy. As noted earlier, military police companies and prison camp commands tended to be dumping grounds for less qualified men and less competent officers. The commander at Lordsburg, Colonel Lundy, seemed more interested in preserving the formal social life of the peacetime army and in enjoying the privileges of rank than in the more arduous aspects of command. Moreover the guards at the camp were generally not rated for combat duty because of age or another disqualification. Unfortunately, then, the Lordsburg internees were not only subject to military regulations, but also to military administrators of questionable competence, ability, and character. These factors are not irrelevant to the case of Isomura and Kobata.

Even after a close examination of the circumstances of the deaths of the two men the event is still puzzling. Several witnesses testified that the two bodies were found by the fence some thirty-six feet
west of the road; evidently Isomura and Kobata had left the road and moved in the opposite direction from the lights and noise coming from the compound. The question is, why? Several internees testified that Isomura and Kobata, especially the former, would have found it very difficult to run. One may also ponder the likelihood that the two men would have attempted to escape into the middle of an unknown and forbidding desert. But assuming the truthfulness of Kelley's testimony that he did not see the shooting, the only surviving witness was the man who pulled the trigger, Burleson, and he testified that the men ran for the fence in an effort to escape. Given the inconsonant nature of these facts, an element of skepticism and uncertainty remains. It is certain, however, that for whatever reason, Hirota Isomura and Toshiro Kobata met a violent and premature death on a moonlit night in the New Mexico desert.40

NOTES

1. Hirota Isomura was a single man, born 11 November 1883 in Japan. He had lived in the United States for thirty-seven years and was a fisherman. His last residence was 243 Cannery St., Terminal Island, Calif. Toshiro Kobata was a single man, born 2 June 1884 in Japan. He had lived in the United States for eleven years and listed his occupation as laborer. His last address was Route 1, Box 57, Brawley, Calif. See State of New Mexico, Department of Public Health, Certificate of Death, Nos. 3185, 3186. Since federal law denied naturalized citizenship to all Issei, Isomura and Kobata were aliens, but it is not clear why the government considered them dangerous or disloyal. No facts about their lives in available records support such a conclusion. Efforts to locate Justice Department records on the two men through Freedom of Information Act requests have been unsuccessful.


8. B. M. Bryan, Chief, Aliens Division, PMG, to Special Division, State Department, 15 July 1942, File No. 740.00115 PW/855, with enclosure “Telegram: Kawdee, Sugimechi, & Mihara to Spanish Ambassador, 11 July 1942,” RG 59, NA, Wash., D.C.


14. For the hearing of 27 July 1942, see “Proceedings of Board Appointed To Investigate The Deaths of Two Japanese Internees in The Lordsburg Internment Camp, Lordsburg, New Mexico, Which Occurred [sic] on July 27, 1942,” 27 July 1942, RG 389, NA, Wash., D.C. (hereafter cited as “Proceedings of Board,” RG 389, NA, Wash., D.C.); the depositions given on 2–3 September 1942 and the court-martial testimony are found in U.S., Department of the Army, United States Army Judiciary, “Record of Trial By General Court-Martial, The United States vs Private First Class Clarence A. Burleson” (hereafter cited as “General Court-Martial, U.S. vs Burleson”). The following paragraphs that discuss the shooting are based on these sources.

15. For the quotation, see “Deposition of Sgt. Beckham,” 3 September 1942, “General Court-Martial, U.S. vs Burleson.”


24. “General Court-Martial, U.S. vs Burleson,” passim, Lordsburg Liberal, 25 September 1942. In describing the aftermath of the shooting, Dockum said:

we had our Colonel Bell, who was from the Eight Army Corps Headquarters in camp at the time, making an inspection. He went down the next morning to look around and picked up the shells as souvenirs. He told Colonel Lundy that they ought to strike a medal for this boy who did the shooting. The people in town just went wild over it. They took up a collection around the town and gave him free meals, free drinks, and all that. . . . Unfortunately he didn’t get a chance to take advantage of all the free stuff in town because he was kept confined to the post. He did, however, get the money that was taken up for him, eventually.

See Clark, “Those Other Camps,” p. 58.


29. For the Japanese Government protest, see U.S., Department of State,


35. The army had more than 4,200 civilians in custody long before it had a significant number of POWs. In addition to the civilians in the continental U.S. that the Justice Department arrested, the army also held in custody civilians arrested in Hawaii, Alaska, and other U.S. possessions under army authority. In June 1943 the army transferred all civilians in its custody to the custody of the INS. See “Historical Monograph: POW Operations,” pp. 19, 25, 51–52, 271–72, Tab 6.


40. After the army transferred all civilian internees to INS custody in June 1943, Lordsburg became a prisoner of war camp for Italians.