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COURT-MARTIAL CASE FILES  
RELATING TO THE AHESSE CROWN JEWELS CASE@  
1944-1952

Introduction

On the thirteen rolls of this microfilm publication, M1899, are reproduced the court-martial case files relating to the AHesse Crown Jewels Case,@ 1944-1952. These files are part of the Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army), Record Group (RG) 153.

Background

During Allied air raids on Frankfurt, Germany, in October 1944, the Hesse family, led by Prince Wolfgang of Hesse, decided to hide ancestral and personal property at the family castle, Schloss Friedrichshof at Kronberg (Kronberg Castle). A large box was constructed into which were placed the jewels of the House of Hesse, the property belonging to Prince Richard and his wife, Prince Cristoph and his wife, and Prince Wolfgang and his wife, as well as jewels and other property belonging to Princess Margarethe, the dowager Landgravin of Hesse. A hole was dug in the basement of Kronberg Castle. Once the box was placed in this hole, it was covered with concrete. An inventory of the contents of the box was created.

Sometime between April 10 and April 20, 1945, Kronberg Castle and its adjoining buildings were occupied by American forces. The castle was requisitioned for use as an officer=s club, and the establishment was turned over to the Mess Section, HQ Command, United States Forces European Theater. Captain Kathleen B. Nash was appointed AMess Section@ representative from June 1945 until February 1, 1946, and was essentially the officer in charge of Kronberg Castle.

Captain Nash discovered the cache of jewels and property in November 1945. The box was unearthed, and the contents placed in her sleeping quarters. The box contained pieces of jewelry, loose gemstones, silver, tableware, and books. The value of these pieces was subsequently placed at over \$2.5 million.

Major David F. Watson and Colonel Jack W. Durant were frequent visitors to the officer=s club and with Captain Nash conspired on how to keep the property and smuggle most of it into the United States. Meanwhile, members of the Hesse family were informed of discovery of the hiding place. When the family and their representatives contacted Captain Nash on several occasions to seek assurances that their property would be returned, she promised them that it would be once the castle was vacated.

Nash, Durant, and Watson were apprehended by military authorities after they returned to the United States and tried to fence the jewels. Nash and Durant were married in a successful attempt to prevent Nash from having to testify against her new husband. The three were charged with violating the following articles of war: 61 (Absent Without Leave), 93 (Larceny), 94 (Frauds Against the Government),

95 (Conduct Unbecoming an Officer and a Gentleman) and 96 (Bringing Discredit Upon the Military Service). Nash, Durant, and Watson were tried in separate court-martial proceedings held in Frankfurt, Germany, and Durant=s trial was carried over to Washington, DC, between August 1946 and April 1947. Each was found guilty of at least some of the specified charges, and all of them were sent to prison.

On August 1, 1951, Headquarters European Command issued the following press release:

The Department of the Army, in cooperation with the Department of the Treasury, today returned to their owners the Hesse jewels, which have been in the custody of the United States since 1946....Involved in the turnover were jewels filling two 22 cubic foot Army safes and consisting of more than 270 items. Among the jewels were: a platinum bracelet encrusted with 405 diamonds, a platinum watch and bracelet with 606 diamonds, a sapphire weighing 116.20 carats, a group of diamonds weighing 282.77 carats, a gold bracelet with 27 diamonds, 54 rubies and 67 emeralds....

#### Records Description

The records consist of the following court-martial case files:

- 1) Court-Martial (CM) #317327, Kathleen Nash Durant
- 2) Court-Martial (CM) #319747, David F. Watson
- 3) Court-Martial (CM) #324235, Jack W. Durant

The files contain transcripts of the three trials. The record of trial@ includes arraignments, pleas, testimony, opening and closing arguments, findings, and sentencing. The files also contain witness depositions, pre-trial investigative reports, descriptions and photographs of prosecution and defense exhibits, and related correspondence. Records relating to post-trial motions, such as motions for new trials or petitions for clemency, are also included in these files.

#### Related Records

Scattered additional files relating to the Hesse Crown Jewels case can be found in Plans and Operations Division (P&O) files, 1946-1948, in RG 319, Records of the Army Staff; Mail and Records Branch files, in RG 389, Records of the Office of the Provost Marshal General, 1941B ; and 1947 (formerly) Classified Central Decimal Files, in RG 407, Records of the Adjutant General=s Office, 1917B .

Records of the Provost Division in RG 389 contain approximately 4,000 pages of background materials from the Army investigation into the Hesse case. The files contain reports, affidavits, correspondence, glass negatives of evidence, newspaper clippings, photographs, orders, and subpoenas.

In the early 1950s the Hesse family brought suit against the Secretary of the Army to recover \$28,000 in cash that had been embezzled by Jack Durant. The money was used as evidence in the Durant court-martial. As a result of the lawsuit, the money was eventually returned to the Hesse family. Litigation case files also in RG 153 contain approximately 2,500 pages relating to this case. Designated AConsolidated Hesse File, Including JAGL 54/7974," the records include copies of some of the material from the original Jack Durant court-martial.

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