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Institut für Zeitgeschichte Archiv

157th Infantry Association



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DACHAU AND ITS LIBERATION

PROLOGUE

By the morning of April 29, 1945, the war with Germany was nearing its final chapter. The once mighty German war machine was disintegrating rapidly. On that day, elements of the United States Seventh Army were approaching Munich, Germany, in preparation for the final assault on that city. At that time, I was a lieutenant colonel commanding the Third Battalion, 157th Infantry Regiment, 45th Infantry Division.

At daylight on that morning pursuant to orders given to me earlier, I began an attack towards Munich in my assigned sector with two rifle companies in the assault element. Shortly after the attack began, I received a coded radio message from the regimental commander ordering me to proceed immediately to take the Dachau concentration camp. The order also stated: "Upon capture, post an airtight guard and allow no one to enter or leave."

At the time I received the order, it was not feasible to extract the two assault companies from the attack. I therefore directed the commander of Company I, the reserve company, to attack the camp. Dachau was not included in the original operations order for the day, but from my map I determined that it was only a mile or so off to my left flank. I advised the company commander that I would accompany him and would attach a section of machine guns from Company M to his command. A forward observer team from the 158th Field Artillery was already with the company. A small motorized patrol from the regimental I&R Platoon was also dispatched to the Dachau area.

At that time, I knew virtually nothing about Dachau, except that it was a concentration camp near the city of Dachau. In order to set the scene for the events that followed, a description of what I learned subsequently about that infamous place seems appropriate.

In 1933, the first of the German concentration camps was established adjacent to the small city of Dachau, not far from the much larger city

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of Munich, Germany. Political opponents, Jews, clergymen and so-called "undesirable elements" were to be isolated there as enemies of the NAZI regime. It was organized and operated by the SS and Gestapo, whose specialty was terror and brutality.

The camp was constructed originally to imprison about five thousand persons, but soon outgrew that number. In 1937, the prisoners were forced to begin the construction of a much larger camp. It is not known how many prisoners passed through the gates of the camp between 1933 and 1945, but a reasonable estimate places the figure at around 300,000.

From the outside, the camp appeared to be an ordinary military post, surrounded by a high brick wall. It was garrisoned by several hundred SS troops and Gestapo agents who lived in comfortable quarters. On the far side of the camp from the main gate was a large rectangular confinement area, surrounded by a water-filled moat, a high barbed wire fence and guard towers. Within the confinement area were thirty-four wooden barracks, some of which were used for administrative purposes and the remainder to house the prisoners. Two connected larger buildings just inside the only entrance to the confinement area contained the kitchen, laundry, storage rooms and the "camp prison." In this dual facility, prisoners were tortured, flogged, hung at the stake, and executed. This infamous complex now houses the camp museum established by the present German government.

Each of the prison barracks was constructed to house 208 prisoners. At the time we arrived on April 29, 1945, each of the barracks contained the impossible number of about 1,600 inmates, many of whom were dead or dying when we arrived. The several barracks used as infirmaries were also filled with the dead and dying.

Also within the camp area was an "experimental station" operated by a Dr. Rascher. It was in this station that gruesome medical experiments were practiced on hapless prisoners. A Professor Schilling caused prisoners to be infected with various diseases, such as malaria, in order to observe their reactions and resistance. Various bio-chemical experiments were also carried out. Agonizing deaths were usually the common result.

Every morning and evening, the prisoners had to parade on "roll call square." At any time that a prisoner succeeded in escaping, all the remaining prisoners were compelled to attend a subsequent punishment roll call, lasting a full night and half a day. Prisoners who managed to escape were usually recaptured. They were then confined to the penal barracks for special treatment by the SS and Gestapo personnel -- torture and often death.

Outside the confinement area, but within the post area, was a rifle range. It is known that at least six thousand Russian prisoners of war

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were executed on this range. Only God knows how many others were executed there in similar fashion. While we were occupying the camp, one of the prisoners took me to a small area reserved for the execution of German officers suspected of plotting against Hitler. I was told that several German officers had been executed there in the few months before we arrived. They were forced to kneel down with their hands tied behind their backs. They were then dispatched by a single pistol shot in the back of the head.

It is not known with any certainty how many prisoners died or were executed at Dachau. It is known with some certainty that over thirty thousand human souls perished there. The actual number may have been over fifty thousand.

THE LIBERATION

It was in this atmosphere of human depravity, degradation and death that the shocked soldiers of the 157th Infantry Regiment first set foot on the morning of April 29, 1945. The initial shock was experienced even before entering the camp. The first evidence of the horror to come was a string of about forty railway cars on a siding near the camp entrance. Each car was loaded with emaciated human corpses, both men and women. A hasty search by the stunned infantrymen revealed no signs of life among the hundreds of still bodies. Few words were spoken as the grim-faced soldiers deployed in battle formation towards the camp itself.

As the main gate to the camp was closed and locked, we scaled the brick wall surrounding the camp. As I climbed over the wall following the advancing soldiers, I heard rifle fire to my right front. The lead elements of the company had reached the confinement area and were disposing of the SS troops manning the guard towers, along with a number of vicious guard dogs. By the time I reached the confinement area, the brief battle was almost over.

The scene near the entrance to the confinement area numbed my senses. Dante's Inferno seemed pale compared to the real hell of Dachau. A row of small cement structures near the prison entrance contained a coal-fired crematorium, a gas chamber disguised as a shower, and rooms piled high with naked and emaciated human corpses. As I turned to look over the prison yard with unbelieving eyes, I saw a large number of dead inmates lying where they had fallen in the last few hours or days before our arrival. Since all the many bodies were in various stages of decomposition, the stench of death was overpowering.

During the early period of our entry into the camp, a number of Company I men, all battle hardened veterans, became extremely distraught. Some cried, while others raged. Some thirty minutes passed before I could restore order and discipline. During that time, the over thirty

thousand camp prisoners still alive began to grasp the significance of the events taking place. They streamed from their crowded barracks by the hundreds and were soon pressing at the confining barbed wire fence. They began to shout in a unison which soon became a chilling roar. At the same time, several bodies were being tossed about and torn apart by hundreds of hands. I was told later that those being killed at that time were "informers."

Within about an hour of our entry, events were under control. Guard posts were set up and communications were established with the inmates. We informed them that we could not release them immediately, but that food and medical assistance would arrive soon. The dead, numbering about nine thousand, were later buried with the forced assistance of the good citizens of the city of Dachau.

Fearful that the inmates would tear down the gate to their prison area, I posted a number of soldiers at that point. While I was standing near the gate, three jeeps from the 42nd Infantry Division approached the gate area. Apparently someone, without my knowledge, had opened the main gate to the camp area. The first jeep contained Brigadier General Linden and a woman reporter. The general informed me that the reporter wished to enter the compound to interview the inmates.

At that time, a sea of inmates was pressed against the gate, awaiting an opportunity to get out. I advised the general that my specific orders were to prevent anyone from entering or leaving the compound, until otherwise advised by my regimental commander. While I was explaining this to the general, the woman reporter ran forward to the gate and removed the restraining crossbar. The prisoners immediately surged forward, creating a brief period of pandemonium. I ordered my men to open fire over the heads of the prisoners and rush the gate. After a brief struggle, the men closed and secured the gate.

It had already been a most trying day. I therefore requested the general and his party to leave and directed one of my men to escort them from the camp. The good general was a dandy who carried a riding crop as his badge of authority. As my man approached the jeep, the general laid a blow on the man's helmet with his riding crop. I then made some intemperate remarks about the general's ancestry and threatened to remove him and his party from the camp by force. He then said I was relieved of my command and that he was taking charge. I then drew my pistol and repeated my request that he leave. He left, but only after advising me that I would face a general court-martial for my actions.

In the meantime, the men of Company I had rounded up a number of SS troops who were dispersed throughout the camp area. From these prisoners we learned that most of the Dachau garrison, including almost all of the officers, had fled the scene the day before our arrival. Only about two hundred were left to guard the camp. We captured most of

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those, but some were also killed. The regimental history book contains a picture of these captives, accompanied by Lt. Walsh, the Company I commander, and Chaplain Loy. Fate was much kinder to these captured SS men than they were to the inmates of Dachau.

Later that day, Major General Frederick, the 45th Division commander, and Colonel O'Brien, the regimental commander, appeared on the scene and I took them around the camp. I also told them of the incident with General Linden. General Frederick advised me that he would be able to take care of that matter.

Late that afternoon, I was relieved at Dachau by our first battalion. I immediately reassembled my battalion and prepared to resume the attack into Munich. We entered Munich the next day. A few days later, the war with Germany came to an end.

Back at Dachau, the first battalion was relieved by a unit from the 42nd Infantry Division. Perhaps it was this latter relief that gave rise to the false claim that the 42nd Division liberated Dachau. Or perhaps it was the bold excursion of General Linden into Dachau that generated such a claim. I wish subsequently that the 42nd Division had been there first.

EPILOGUE

With the war over, the regiment then organized for occupation duty in an assigned sector of Munich. About two weeks later, General Frederick came to my headquarters and informed me that General Linden was trying to stir up trouble through the Seventh Army Inspector General. He said he thought he could handle the matter, but he considered it advisable that I leave for the United States at once. He further informed me that the 45th Division had been selected to participate in the expected invasion of Japan and would soon be returning to the states in preparation for shipment to the Pacific Theater. He said that he would see that I was reassigned to the division when it returned to the states.

Placing a command car at my disposal, the general instructed me to report to the transportation office at LeHavre, France, where orders would be waiting for my transportation to the states. I left the following morning, accompanied by three of my most trusted soldiers, namely, Albert Turk, my driver; Karl Mann, my German language interpreter; and Carlton Johnson, my runner and rifleman. It was a long trip to LeHavre, taking several days.

I eventually located the army transportation office on the docks at LeHavre and informed a sergeant there of my mission. He immediately went to a telephone in the back of his office and made a call. I sensed trouble and so informed my men. Within a few minutes, an MP lieutenant appeared and courteously informed me that I was under arrest. He stated

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that he was under orders to escort me back to Seventh Army Headquarters in Bavaria. I suddenly had the feeling that General Frederick had not been able to take care of the Dachau matter after all.

I politely informed the lieutenant that I would not submit to an arrest, but that I would voluntarily return to Seventh Army Headquarters. Glancing around at my three men casually standing by with loaded rifles, he agreed to my proposal. He then gave me the name of the small town near Augsburg, Germany, where the army headquarters was located. We then began the long trip back, although we dallied for a few days in Paris.

Some days later, I reported to army headquarters in the small town near Augsburg. There I learned that the Seventh Army Headquarters was being deactivated that very day. I was informed that General Patton had been appointed military governor of Bavaria and had established a headquarters in Augsburg. The very unfriendly and displeased G-1 of Seventh Army curtly told me that my pending court-martial was now in the hands of General Patton. I left immediately for Augsburg.

The following morning I reported to General Patton's Chief of Staff and arranged for an appointment with the general that afternoon. At the appointed time, I reported to the general. He then said to me: "Colonel, I have some serious court-martial charges against you and some of your men here on my desk." I replied that I had never been advised of any specific charges, but that I would like to offer an explanation of the events that took place at Dachau.

The general paused for a moment and then said: "There is no point in an explanation. I have already had these charges investigated and they are a bunch of crap. I'm going to tear up these goddam papers on you and your men."

With a flourish, he tore up the papers lying in front of him and threw them in a wastebasket. He then said: "You have been a damn fine soldier. Now go home." I saluted and left. The whole interview lasted perhaps three minutes. I then rejoined the regiment in Munich and heard nothing further about the matter.

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