

NAME: WILLIAM G. BATES  
INTERVIEWER: ED SHEEHEE  
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CAMP: DACHAU

A:: My name is William G. Bates. I live at 2569 Windwood Court, Atlanta, Georgia 30360. I was born September 29, 1922. And at the time of the liberation, I was 22 years old. My prospective profession at that time was really indefinite, because I had started college and I had a partial year at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio prior to the time I had to go into the Army. At present I am a real estate regional manager for Chrysler Realty Corporation here in Atlanta. At the time of the liberation I was with the 830th Amphibian Truck Company and I was a Staff Sergeant at that time. And in my travels in Bavaria, which is in the southern part of Germany, we liberated Dachau, which was in the vicinity of Munich, Germany.

Q: How did you first hear about these camps, Mr. Bates?

A: Actually, we had heard about the various camps, but had no idea where they were. At this particular time we were moving a good bit and we were really advancing from a town called Rothenburg, Germany toward Munich. I really think it was just a matter that we happened to be passing this general direction when our company came upon Dachau, and the time we came upon it, we really didn't know what we had come upon.

Q: Did your unit know about this?

A: No, I don't think so. I was an enlisted man. I don't believe any fellows that were enlisted men really knew that much about it. Now, it is possible that some of our officers knew about the thing.

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Q: And you got there how soon after the liberation?

A: I would say that we were one of the first American soldiers to even be in that area, and I would say that we were probably one of the first units.

Q: You would say in a matter of hours?

A: Yes, I'd say we were probably there in a matter of hours. As soon as anybody else was there.

Q: Can you give a description of the camp? What was your impression when you first got there? Sights, smells, etc?

A: We could see these tall fences with the barbed wire on the top, and we could see people lying around inside the camp. And they were all nothing but skin and bones for the most part that we could see. Of course, we couldn't determine whether they were dead or whether they were alive. And as I recall, the smell was quite bad in there. That's really about the best I can recall seeing it, initially.

Q: Could you hear them crying?

A: We heard some noises. We didn't know whether there were people that were rejoicing to see someone that was going to let them out or whether there were people that were in great agony and pain, or people that were dying, or just what the case might have been.

Q: What did the prisoners do when they saw you?

A: As I mentioned before, a lot of them we realized were dead, and there were probably a number of them that were near being dead. Those that could do anything, that I recall, would raise their hands and just sort of wave at us, mumble something, and we didn't even know which language it was.

Q: Did they give you any specific orders to stay away from the prisoners or how to treat them or anything?

A: Our lieutenant that was with us at that time told us that he thought it would be

definitely best that we didn't try to go into the camp, because none of us fellows were medics or knew anything about medicine or anything else. He felt there was absolutely nothing we could do by going into the camps. I mean whether we opened the gates or what we did, we had no food to give them. We could do nothing to help their misery. And he told us that there was great concern and they had been forewarned to be very careful about going into these camps because of the tremendous amount of diseases that were probably prevalent there. So with that none of us even tried to go in there.

Q: Did they tell you to stay away from the prisoners or how to handle them if they came up to you?

A: No, I don't recall them telling us to do anything as far as the prisoners go. I do recall them saying that if you have any kind of rations with you it would be all right to give them something like that. But at that time we were moving so fast and we had very light rations. We might have had a couple of cans of C rations or something of that sort, but we didn't have any bread or anything else that we could give them. As I recall, they also told us that they probably all would have to be fed special diets initially.

Q: How did you feel about these people?

A: Really, I don't recall having any specific feeling except that it was beyond my comprehension that there could be people in a situation like that. I believe when you are involved in seeing people getting killed a lot, it probably doesn't affect you nearly as much as if you would see this as an isolated incident and you never had seen any deaths before that time.

Q: Did their condition have an impact on you as a human being toward them?

A: The impact was that it almost made you sick to your stomach. Even though I was a young kid, it was beyond my comprehension that there was actually

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people that had been treated by anyone that way. I mean it was just incomprehensible.

Q: Did you look upon these prisoners as fellow human beings? How did you feel about them personally?

A: I think we looked on them as fellow human beings. We just wondered how anybody could possibly be in the wrong place at the wrong time to end up in a situation like this. And we just couldn't understand or comprehend how anybody could possibly be treated that way. We always thought if we ever got captured, we wouldn't get treated real bad. I think it made all the fellows wonder if we got captured, would we have gotten treated like this?

Q: Did you see any German guards around?

A: No, by the time we got there, there weren't any German guards around there, or German people, or anything as I recall . They had already fled, gone someplace.

Q: You didn't see any dead guards?

A: No, I don't recall any dead guards at all . Of course, at that time, which was near the end of the war, there were all kinds of German army units really fleeing west to get away from the Russians, so they were going in the opposite directions from us. In most cases, they were just walking along the sides of the autobahn in columns, and they still had all their weapons and all those things, and they just sort of waved to us.

Q: What about the civilians other than these? Did you see any around the camp?

A: No, I don't recall seeing any civilians right there at the camp at all. We saw them around the countryside, but I didn't see a soul around that camp. That's the thing that really struck us, that we sort of wondered if there was even anybody alive in there. And the ones that were alive were just barely alive.

Q: Did you see many Americans in there?

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A: No, at the time we got there, there weren't any Americans in there. But we were told that there was a medical unit on the way there, who would be the ones that actually got in there and entered the place and took whatever action they were going to take.

Q: In your military unit, did you get any advice or any encouragement on how to cope with the situation like this?

A: No. Like I said, we were just a company. We weren't a big unit and we had one lieutenant with us, and I don't think that he or any of the others even realized that we were going to pass this place. We were really on our way to the Munich area, and it just happened that we came by this Dachau camp. It's just the way it happened, the way our route was going.

Q: Do you remember any of the fellows in your group that had any particularly strong reaction to this experience?

A: No. I think most of the fellows there were 18, 20, 22, 25, and I think most of them had been overseas quite awhile and had seen different people get killed and I guess you might say they were really not too emotional about anything, as long as some close friend of theirs didn't get killed.

Q: Did the Chaplain or anyone ever mention this to you?

A: You mean a chaplain mention to us about the camps? No, we had a chaplain in our battalion, but in those last couple of months of the war, we never saw anybody from our battalion or we never saw a chaplain or anybody. We were just moving and we didn't hardly see anybody.

Q: Did you tell anyone about this camp and your experience there?

A: Over the last 30 some odd years that I have been out of the army, from time to time I have talked to fellows who have been in that general area. I've talked to fellows who have been in other parts of Germany. We discussed it a little bit.

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We never discussed it in great detail.

Q: Do you feel like you would like to talk about it now to some extent?

A: I find the history of WWII in Europe very interesting. I've read a lot about it. I don't claim to be a scholar on it. I have read a lot of books on the military aspect of it. I believe somebody could really open my eyes to some things that happened and some of those things that went on over there. At my age and at that time and under the circumstances I didn't realize what I was seeing or what I was doing or anything.

Q: Do you think it is important that your wife and children know about this?

A: I think that everybody in the world should know about this thing, so something like this would never happen again. That's the thing that is beyond my comprehension. It is very difficult to realize over the years that a race of people like the German people...of course I can't say the German people, but certain German people would do this to anyone, regardless of who they were or what they were. I mean I just can't comprehend in my own mind that you could dislike someone so much that you would do this to them. I can see where you can put a certain person in jail, but you feed them. You don't torture them to death. This is going back to the beginning of time -- doing things like this.

Q: Do you think that the *Holocaust* TV show was beneficial to show?

A: I just watched part of it. I am not a big TV watcher. As I recall, I really didn't watch a whole lot of that and I really wasn't all that interested in watching the thing.

Q: Is there anything people can learn from this other than the fact that it shouldn't happen again?

A: You get people from time to time that you don't see eye to eye with, that you don't like or something of that sort, but I think that it should impress man that

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the answer to a lot of these things is not to torture someone. I think things can be settled different ways than actually torturing people. In some of them, you know they were in there and they just were victims who happened to end up in those places.

Q: Did you have any personal things like nightmares or anything that came from this experience or were you not close enough involved in it?

A: I don't think I was really close enough to be involved. When I came home from service, I was never a person to let those things sit deep in my mind. I've read about different fellows waking up at night and dreaming about these things, screaming or something. But it never really affected me that way. Maybe that's just my nature, I don't know.

Q: Would you consider yourself a religious person at the time of your military experience?

A: No, I wasn't a religious person then, and I can't say that I am now.

Q: Did you have any thoughts about God allowing something like this to happen or a Creator that would let it happen?

A: No, I can't say that I even thought about that at the time.

Q: Did you have any religious attitude concerning something like this now? I mean do you think that a personal God would let something like this happen?

A: I guess. I can't say that I would blame it on God. I know that things maybe not quite as bad, but just about as bad, are happening all the time in the world now in some of the African countries and some of the Asian countries. And so I guess my answer to that would be I assume that God is still allowing this to happen.

Q: What faith are you?

A: The Bates were originally Presbyterians, and I can't say that I am really a

Presbyterian now. I am a Protestant I would say.

Q: You believe in God then?

A: Oh yes, very definitely so.

Q: But you don't believe in so much organized religion?

A: I believe in it, but I just don't participate in it too much.

Q: Did this experience have any religious impact on you at all?

A: No, I can't say that it did.

Q: Now, I really want you to think about this now. Do you think you could have kept your faith under the circumstances that those people were going through at those camps?

A: I believe that for most people that were in a situation like that the #1 thing they would be concerned about is their own survival. There are individuals in this world -- and I don't claim to be one of them -- that are so strong in their faith that they could survive something like that and still keep their faith and do, I guess, what everybody thinks you should do. But I think those people are few and far between. I think there were a lot of Americans that were taken prisoner by the North Vietnamese and the Koreans who broke down in the situation they're in. And I might even break down too. You can't tell what you would do under the circumstances. You don't really know how strong a person that you are until you get in that situation. It would be easy to say I would keep my faith and I wouldn't cooperate with them and everything else, but you can't tell really until you are put in that situation what you would do. You don't really know how strong you are until you are in that situation.

Q: Did this experience change your political views? Like man's inhumanity to other humans or ...?

A: I think it probably didn't change mine. I didn't go into the service with bubbling

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enthusiasm, because I remember saying when I was in basic training that there must be some other way to solve problems in the world besides everybody shooting and killing one another. And I think I carried that feeling and thinking through my time in the army. And I have always felt that way, even though we have had wars since the beginning of time. Evidently we will continue to have them. There should be another way to solve some of these problems without going through this type of thing that the world seems to go through, continuously.

Q: What is your attitude concerning the civil rights movement?

A: I think that the civil rights movement has its good points, and it has also got points that I don't agree with. I believe in giving everybody an opportunity to make the best thing in this life for themselves; however, I think that a lot of the civil rights movement now has gone somewhat overboard. I think that even though what has happened to the black race over hundreds of years was wrong, I don't think that we can turn the whole thing around now and repay them for all those things that were done in the past hundreds of years. I believe they should have the same opportunity as anyone else for education, for jobs, for everything else, but I don't feel as though they should have any favoritism because of things that happened to them over the previous hundreds of years.

Q: What about the Viet Nam war?

A: I guess on the Viet Nam war, I was -- you might say -- middle of the road. I could not see why we were in it. I think we made a horrible mistake of getting in it; however, I guess you might say that I was a little hawkish. My feeling has always been that if you get in a war, you get in to win or else you get out of thing. I think we made a mistake getting in it, and we made a mistake of expanding it as we did. We kept expanding it, but we didn't do anything, and if

we weren't going to get in it to win, we should have packed up and left the first day.

Q: What about the executions that are going on -- supposedly going on -- in Cambodia now? How do you feel about that?

A: Again, this is like I mentioned earlier, this is man's inhumanity to other men and these things are going on in some of these African countries. I'm sure they are going on in some of the Asian countries and I don't agree any way, shape or form to this. This isn't going to correct anything by killing somebody.

Q: What would be your reaction if one of your children came to you and said they wanted to be a Nazi? What would you say?

A: I don't have any children, but if they came to me and said they wanted to be a Nazi, I believe what I would do is sit down and try to talk some sense to them about why I don't think they should be. However, I believe that if they were set on that thing, I'd tell them if you get involved in this, don't come around and see me. I'm not interested.

Q: Did you see this experience in these prison camps as primarily a Jewish persecution?

A: No, I think the Jewish situation was one phase of it; of course, there was a tremendous amount of political prisoners in there, and there were other prisoners from other nations that were trouble-makers in prison camps that I think ended up in these places. I don't think it was just a Jewish thing. I think it was political as well as Jewish.

Q: Did this cause you to change your attitude towards Jews or humanity itself?

A: Let's see, I don't quite understand that question.

Q: Have you ever been anti-Semitic or anything like this?

A: My wife from time to time says that if I make any kind of remark against the

Jewish people I am anti-Semitic. I don't agree with her. Some people think that if you say anything is wrong with any Jewish people or Black people or Irish people or German you're anti that. I don't think because you don't agree with them 100% on everything, that automatically makes you anti-Semitic or anti-anything else. No way you can agree with them 100% on everything. I don't think.

Q: Do you feel that something needs to be done today so that something like this won't ever happen again?

A: I guess something needs to be done about it today, and probably something needed to be done about it for thousands of years, but I don't know who is going to do what about any of it.

Q: Can you start with education? Politics? Religion or what?

A: I think that here in the US, a thing like this could be accomplished, but I don't know whether it can be accomplished in maybe some of the African nations or the Asian nations. Their whole philosophy of life is completely different than ours. In a lot of those countries over there, life really doesn't mean a thing. And if you are on the wrong side of the political fence, I think this is the consequences that you might end up with. And I don't believe that except in the US and some of the more civilized nations of the world that any effort would even be made towards this. I don't think you would convince some of the communist nations to go along with some kind of a program like this, because their thinking is just completely different than ours. I don't think that I and a lot of other people in the US would have any comprehension of the Asiatic mind or the African mind on a lot of these situations. I don't think we could even comprehend what their mind thinks. Some of the things that they do in the Asian countries and also in some of the African countries to us seem to be

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completely unbelievable, but to them it is everyday routine. Life really is absolutely meaningless over there in these countries. I mean it is really in some of the other nations in Central and South America. They think nothing of shooting a political prisoner or hanging him or anything else. It doesn't mean a thing to them. I think our whole type of thinking is completely different than theirs. It's just the way we have developed over hundreds of years. I don't know if I made any sense in any of this stuff.

Q: I certainly do appreciate so very much you helping us with this. It will be meaningful and as soon as we work it all out, we will let you hear from us. Thank you.