

NAME: KENNETH BOWERS
INTERVIEWER: KAETHE SOLOMON
CAMP: BUCHENWALD
DATE: FEBRUARY 2, 1980

Q: Major Bowers, right? We've established that fact.

A: Right.

Q: We're going to ask you a few preliminary questions and then we'll go right into the reason for the interview.

A: All right.

Q: Your full name is Major K. Bowers. "K" standing for....

A: Kenneth.

Q: And your address I have down here is 110 Woodland Drive, Warner Robins, GA, 31093.

A: That is correct.

Q: Your date of birth, January 30, 1917.

A: That is correct.

Q: Your age at the time of liberation?

A: Heavens!

Q: That's a toughie when we start asking those questions.

A: I guess 21 or 22, something like that.

Q: And your prospective profession at the beginning of the war.

A: I was born and raised on a farm in Kansas. They were difficult times then, and I enlisted in the Air Force in 1939 to go to the aircraft mechanics school at Chanute Field.

Q: You enlisted in the Air Force after working on the farm.

A: Yes. And at that time, American Air Lines was buying out graduates from this school and it was a way for me to get a trade. And after one year service, you could buy out for \$120-some dollars.

Q: When you say "buy out," what are we...?

A: They would give you a discharge. And that's the reason I happened to enlist and got in that early. So I guess I meant professional Air Force...

Q: Professional military Air Force. And your present occupation is what?

A: I am retired.

Q: Your military unit at the time that you were in the Air Force?

A: The 91st Squadron, 439th Group was the outfit I was assigned to and belonged to all during the war, but during the last two months of the war, I was detached to the 19th Tactical Air Command which was Patton's supporting Air Force. We were up there at his advanced headquarters.

Q: And your rank at the time of the liberation?

A: I was a Flight Officer.

Q: Which camp were you in any way involved in?

A: Buchenwald.

Q: That gets us directly into the camp situation now. You got there after the liberation. You said earlier 4 or 5 days after the liberation. How did you get near there?

A: The guy I was working for up there at the 19th Tactical Air Command which was what the Army called G-2, Intelligence, came back in the office one day and said that Patton's troops had just overrun a camp. So 3 or 4 or 5 days later, he said, "Let's go up there and look at it and see." He had access to a staff car and it was about a 2 hour drive. He heard all these awful.... [Brief interruption in tape. Conversation resumes as follows.]

So he and I drove up that day. At that time Patton had assigned a bunch of medics to that area and I guess also some cooks, too, because as you can see [referring to his photographs], there were a lot of very, very sick people.

Q: I saw your pictures here. Do you remember the date you entered the camp?

A: Let's see, when did the war end? V-E day was what, April, wasn't it? All this would probably have been in March....

Q: March or April. You entered the camp with this one gentleman.

A: With this colonel that [unintelligible] detached.

Q: And when you entered the camp, what did you see?

A: There was a big, vast open area as you can see in this picture here. And one of the first things ...

Q: Did you take these pictures yourself?

A: Yes. They had erected this monument made out of old plywood, and I think there's some numbers on there as to how many they saw perish -- 51,000 or something like that. This was the entrance to it. [Referring to photograph] Just an ordinary looking building. But after this sign, the monument, there's a huge vast open area and then a whole mess of low barracks-type buildings. We called them barracks. Then we met this German Jew who had only been incarcerated there for several weeks and he spoke some English.

Q: This was a German Jew, did you say?

A: Yes. He'd only been in there for several weeks so he was not emaciated like some of the others.

Q: He looks awfully good. [Referring to photograph]

A: Yes, he'd only been there for a short time. Inside the long, low buildings were shelves standing six feet out from the wall, one on top of the other, and that's where the inmates slept and spent their time. He said that when they were first incarcerated they were all on work details, early in the morning until late at night, and they fed them one bowl of gruel a day. An interesting point is one of the medics that we talked to said when they first got there, they cooked up a lot of solid food for them. They lost a lot from the solid food, so they had to go back and put them on a soup type thing and gradually start feeding them.

Q: Ate too quickly and ...

A: I suppose.

Q: When you entered and you saw these layers, barracks, were there any people still alive?

A: Yes. There were a few of them around here that were still alive. Where are they? [Referring to photograph] Yes, here they are. It was harder to look at those people than the corpses in that it seemed life had gone from them. They didn't show any emotion. I suppose you could say they were really more dead than alive.

Q: You took those pictures so you were fairly near to them.

A: Oh, yes.

Q: They did not respond to you in any way.

A: No, those didn't.

Q: No overtures of welcome or no speech.

A: Some of them did. The ones that were better able to walk around. But these were just sitting there in the sun. Interestingly enough, when we did first enter, there were some of them that came up and threw their arms around us and that type of emotion was displayed.

Q: Were these severely emaciated people who threw their arms around you?

A: Not severely, but bad enough. You could tell they had been on a starvation diet. Sunken cheeks and that type of thing.

Q: If you were to go back to that period, can you remember any feeling on your part when they threw their arms around you? Was it an uncomfortable feeling? Repulsive?

A: No. It was just a shocking, stunning thing. You just could not comprehend one human doing this to another human. Incomprehensible. We stayed there for several hours and wandered around, and it gradually wore on you just what an awful, awful thing it was.

Q: What did you expect to see when you walked in there? Did you have any idea? Obviously somebody came back and reported to you that a camp had been taken over.

- A: This Colonel had had a report. Yes.
- Q: Did you expect to see what you saw?
- A: Oh, no. I don't think so. That was one of the reasons I'm so glad that I did have the presence of mind to take that old camera with me because memories fade. Talking about that, I did want to say that on the way back that evening, we noticed that we were itching and I looked at the Colonel and he was itching too so we had gotten body lice.
- Q: From the embrace of the people.
- A: And it would be an awful, awful thing to have to live with body lice.
- Q: Which is what they did for a long period of time. If you were asked to give a description of the sounds of the camp, the smell of the camp, would anything come to mind?
- A: Well, I would say the lack of sound more than anything else.
- Q: At this point, had people left already? Were there any guards when you entered?
- A: Of our people, you mean? Guards?
- Q: No, German.
- A: Oh, no. There were two SS that they caught at the time the camp was liberated and here they are. [Referring to photograph]
- Q: Oh. The two SS, obviously from this picture, were shot.
- A: No.
- Q: By the liberators? No? By the inmates?
- A: The inmates clubbed them to death.
- Q: The inmates clubbed these two to death?
- A: Yes. So I was told.
- Q: Who identified these people for you?
- A: He kind of gave us a guided tour, as well as he could, and took us all around through here. His English was so bad and then we had to work with sign language.

Q: And your German wasn't too good, either, so you had a little difficulty.

A: So as far as getting an emotional reaction, verbal reaction, it was rather difficult.

Q: The language barrier makes it very difficult.

A: [Referring to photographs] This is the crematorium here. Here's visiting allied troops here. Americans. But he said at times he'd seen flames as high as 30 meters. I think there were about 10 or 12 furnaces in there. And these bodies here were all stacked up in front of it. What these people are looking at are these corpses.

Q: These are Americans in here. So at the time you went it, you were not alone.

A: I was not a liberator, no.

Q: What were those Americans doing there at that time?

A: Some of them were assigned there to medics and cooks, that type of support crew. I suppose some of them were visitors just like we were. I understood Patton visited the camp also very shortly after it was liberated. And when they were talking to the townspeople, the townspeople didn't know anything about it so Patton had some of his M.P.'s round up the whole town and march them out there and took them through it. He wanted to make sure that they couldn't say that they didn't know anything about it.

Q: Did you talk to any German citizens at the time?

A: No, we didn't.

Q: I have some questions here as to the survivors of the camp. I don't know how much you experienced. Since you were a visitor, you certainly had no specific orders as to treatment of the people that you were going to be meeting up with. You were just kind of going through there on your own. How did the Colonel who was with you react to what he saw?

A: That's difficult to say. You were so stunned and shocked by what you were seeing.

Q: Was there much communication between the two of you as you were

walking into the camp, when you saw your first mound of bodies?

A: No, not really. What's to say, really?

Q: Right. Observing it, each for himself.

A: Right.

Q: Obviously you have pictures here. Did the conditions there make you feel in any way that you were looking at something that was less than human?

A: [Unintelligible] Because we wouldn't treat an animal that way. You see, as I understood it, this thing was a systematic starvation and that's the way they did it. They would work them until they couldn't walk or perform any manual labor any more and then, I guess, as you can see, they were just starved to death. Just look. Some of them that were still able to walk around... maybe we could blow some of these pictures up. [Referring to photograph] But, here's a fellow here -- he had so little meat on the body that you could tell where the part of the arm that has two bones in it is and the part that has just one and the same way with the leg.

Q: You remember that?

A: Oh, yes. What makes you remember is that you didn't see how he could walk.

Q: No muscle there to support the bone structure. How do you move about?

A: How can he move about? But he did.

Q: You were at the camp for a couple of hours, you said, and you kind of went from one area to the other. What do you think made you move on from one area to the other after you saw your first sight?

A: I don't know. Curiosity? Of course, this gentleman was showing us things.

Q: So he was moving you right along.

A: He was moving us around.

Q: He seemed to be quite familiar with everything that was going on there, obviously.

A: Yes. Of course, right after they were liberated they probably had a lot more

communication than they did before, so he was familiar with what went on.

Q: Did any of the survivors that you saw that were able to get around react to this gentleman here that was taking you around?

A: Some of them spoke to him.

Q: It's just sort of unusual to see somebody so well-fed, well-dressed in contrast to the totally emaciated people.

A: So healthy as he looked. Right. Exactly.

Q: You kind of wonder how he got there, when he got there, what he did to stay out of what was going on there. When you returned to your own camp afterwards, did you share any of what you saw?

A: With the people that were in the G-2 office there.

Q: That was the Intelligence Office.

A: Yes.

Q: Was it new to them, what you shared with them, or was it something that they had already seen?

A: No. We urged them if at all possible to get up there and see it.

Q: They hadn't gone there?

A: No.

Q: What was their reaction to what you said?

A: Horror, really.

Q: Had they heard anything about it? Were there rumors?

A: As I recall now, we had heard of concentration camps. But [we had no] pictures and I don't think that just verbally you could really get [the description] across. It's incomprehensible, unbelievable that this kind of thing happened.

Q: It's really difficult to absorb so how can you communicate to somebody else. You were married at the time that you were in the service. Did you write about this in any letters going home?

A: I don't remember. I suppose I did.

Mrs. Bowers: Only that you had gone in to see it. Not in great detail. It was too much.

Q: No detail. And these pictures had not gone home. You took these pictures back with you, so you [directed to Mrs. Bowers] were totally unaware, essentially, of what he had seen. What was the first time you shared what you had seen in those camps with anybody outside of your officers?

A: After I'd gotten home and found the pictures and everything, I described it to my family.

Q: Do you remember, Mrs. Bowers? I'm making you think all the way back. That's kind of rough.

Mrs. Bowers: When did you have those developed? You didn't send them to me.

A: No, I was afraid to send them because all our stuff was censored.

Q: Fear of not getting through.

A: I just kept them and brought them back with me.

Q: When did you take these out again?

A: It's been about 2 years now that I heard about this World War II Glider Pilot Association reunion, and for years all these pictures were in an old cigar box just helter-skelter. In making plans to go to this Glider Pilot reunion, we dug them up one cold, gray Sunday afternoon. I started putting them in order as much as I could. This was before the television movie "*Holocaust*." Then a high school kid had some kind of a project to interview people who had been in combat in World War II so she brought her little tape recorder and did the interview. Then I happened to think about those pictures and I said I would let her borrow them to show them to the class, so they came out again. Of course, when we go to these Glider Pilot reunions we always take them. Everybody takes whatever memorabilia they have to reminisce and relive experiences.

Mrs. Bowers: They usually have a "War Room" set up with albums and
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things like that.

Q: Is that right? So you obviously attended the Glider Pilot reunion.

A: Yes.

Q: Were there many such pictures from the camps?

A: No. Very few glider pilots got in to see anything like that, and I wouldn't have had I not been detached up to the 19th Tactical Air Command. That was pretty close to the front. The troop carrier was always way back.

Q: So those are really unusual pictures that you have. You really didn't hear too much about the camps by mail or anything like that. Do you have children?

A: No children.

Q: I was just going to ask you whether or not they knew.

A: From what I've read and from accounts that I recall then, I suppose that this was not the worst one. I understand some of the others -- you may know more about that -- were much more cruel.

Q: Auschwitz was pretty bad. Dachau. But Buchenwald was really one of the worst.

A: Oh, it was?

Q: Oh yes. Definitely.

A: I've never been able to talk to anyone to compare.

Q: Definitely was one of the worst camps. Right in line with the worst camp. Really.

A: I once had the idea that possibly it wasn't in that they didn't gas anybody.

Q: But there were very torturous things going on with the women and medical experimentation.

A: I wanted to mention something that came to mind about a thing that almost killed me. When we got up close to the two Nazi SS types, one of the inmates of the camp kicked the corpse. And that to me would express hatred more vividly than anything that you could possibly imagine.

Q: That must have been something for you to see, and you weren't able to talk

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to the inmate. I guess humanity left them all. When you exist in such an inhuman way for a period of time, you lose your humanity. Did you ever have any nightmares about this experience?

A: No. I can't say I did.

Q: We're going to go on to some of the religion questions that we would like to include. Do you consider yourself a religious man now?

A: I think so.

Q: Did you at the time?

A: Yes.

Q: Were there any conscious thoughts about God, or religion, at the time that you entered this camp?

A: No. None that I recall.

Q: Any irreligious thoughts?

A: I don't know what you mean by "irreligious."

Q: [Thoughts like] is there a God? Questioning the existence of God, the idea of good.

A: No, I don't know. You just couldn't fathom how one people could do this to another people. A lot of times after combat you have second thoughts about "what am I doing here" and all this, but knowing that we were a part of eliminating that kind of thing made you feel that maybe this whole thing was worthwhile and I did make a contribution, however insignificant it was.

Q: Did you see a lot of death of your own fellow soldiers around you during the war?

A: I don't know what you mean by "a lot." I saw enough.

Q: Any at close proximity... shot, killed.

A: I gave morphine to one of the kids who rode in the glider with me who was hit in the abdomen and I'm sure he never made it.

Q: That was death, too, and now we have the kind of death that you viewed here in the Buchenwald concentration camp. Was there ever a difference for

you in how you looked at death? You may have seen it from one of your fellow soldiers and [you saw] the type of death you were viewing here [at the camp]. Was there a difference or was it all just war?

A: I guess it's all just war. Or a part of war. I know some of the guys who got killed...I don't know. You don't think about it a lot because you don't know when the next mission is coming up.

Q: It's a difficult question. It's just that sometimes you have a flashing memory of what you may have thought there at the time. What is your religion, if I may ask that?

A: I'm Lutheran.

Q: Did your religion have any effect on your attitude toward the Nazis?

A: By "Nazis", do you mean the Germans, the SS, or what?

Q: The SS - the Nazis.

A: I don't suppose we gave it a whole lot of thought. We flew gliders and made invasions and there was always the very real possibility of being captured. We were always told never to surrender to the SS. The Wehrmacht, the regular German Army, was O.K. You might survive, but the SS, no. Of course, they told us how to identify them.

Q: So there was a real difference between...?

A: I don't know. I'm not tying in with religion but we had been told then that there was a difference. But I don't believe that I really thought that much about it until I saw what the SS had done. Then I think that you just wonder how Hitler and his henchmen could get a breed of men like this that could do these things.

Q: Did what you saw there have any effect on your political point of view?

A: In what regard?

Q: The civil rights movement, the Viet Nam War, the Mid-East situation.

A: I'm sure it did, but how could I know the difference.

Q: In other words, there are no correlated thoughts such as: Look what

happened here....

A: And could it happen again. I suppose maybe you thought about that sometime during the civil rights struggle, with some of the beatings and things like that.

Q: Did you think of what occurred at the Buchenwald camp as any particular type of persecution? As a Jewish persecution, as a general persecution for anybody who disagreed with the Nazi regime. Do you remember thinking of it or even discussing the camp situation in relation to a particular type of persecution or was it always war and this was the Nazi's way of dealing....

A: This was Jewish persecution there. Of course, we had been told that some political prisoners were put into these camps. I had no personal knowledge that this happened. I believe that's all I can elaborate on that.

Q: Can you relate any of the feelings that you may have had about Buchenwald and the experience there, with part of it having been a Jewish persecution, to the situation in the Mideast today? Do you have any personal feelings about it?

A: I don't know what you're driving at. I am real elated that Egypt and Israel are at least talking to each other, exchanging ambassadors, and I think there's a light at the end of the tunnel, so to speak, in that regard. I don't understand all I know about the PLO movement and all of that, why such intense hatred exists in that area. I do know that there's a tremendous amount of refugees in that area yet. I guess there's two sides to the issue and I suppose I would tend to favor the Jewish side in that, knowing that they left their homeland and went to another strange place and started up a new country. I have a tremendous amount of admiration for them in doing this because when you pick up with what you can carry and go, that's courage.

Q: Do you think this could happen again?

A: I should hope not.

Q: I suppose we all hope not. In any way, shape, or form.

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Q: I suppose it could. I mentioned that one instance of hate. On a mission into southern France, we had some German prisoners who we were walking up the street, and one lady came out of the house and spit on one of them. You don't see that every day. I hadn't. Especially for a woman to do it. What her experiences had been, who knows? Also, we saw hatred between the Japanese and the Koreans. I was a year in Korea. To answer your question I suppose it could happen again somewhere, maybe not to the Jews but to... it may be happening right now in Afghanistan.

Q: There are very few World War II veterans who have had a chance to really share what they did experience in these camps. What is your reason for being willing to share this experience now?

A: After the TV thing on the Holocaust [NBC television movie "*Holocaust*"], some people tended to discount it [by saying] it's just T.V. It's put on and all that stuff. The reason that I wanted to share this and make whatever contribution I can make is to help corroborate the fact that it did, for sure, exist and it was as bad as portrayed.

Q: You watched "The Holocaust"?

A: Oh, yes.

Q: How did you feel about this movie?

A: I thought it was a very good thing.

Q: Was it overdramatized? Underdramatized? Too realistic? Not realistic enough?

A: I thought it was done very well. I really did. I heard some commentators talk about it. Of course, they had some pros and cons but I thought it was [well] done.

Q: When you watched, were you with anybody else or were you watching it just by yourself?

A: We both watched.

Q: Do you have any friends that watched it that you know of? Did you discuss

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it with them at all?

A: I discussed it with Helen Frank, who is Jewish. I told her I was coming up here to talk to you.

Q: Had she seen it?

A: Yes. I never did hear anybody really pan it. I heard some people were skeptical about some of the things.

Q: It really did an awful lot to make the T.V. audience aware that the Holocaust really did exist. Do you yourself feel a need today to try to see to it that something like this doesn't happen again? Obviously, your contribution here is an indication that you are certainly doing your job, but are there any other avenues that you would consider important to pursue to be sure that something like this would not happen again? Politics and education and religion. Family to family.

A: I would like to think that I would do whatever I could.

Q: Do you see it appropriate to teach the history of the Holocaust in the churches? As being appropriate, in adult education.

A: I would certainly think it would be appropriate.

Q: Do you belong to a church?

A: Yes.

Q: Has it ever been taught in any way in the Church -- in adult education, in a Sunday School class -- that you are aware of?

A: Not that I am aware of.

Q: Anything from the pulpit, in any way?

A: Not that I recall.

Q: Do you think that from the pulpit would be an appropriate place to review some of these goings-on, when talking about prejudice, hate, love...

A: I would certainly think it would be appropriate.

Q: Was there anything else that I didn't cover with you that you think you'd like to share? Were these pictures taken within those few hours that you were

there?

A: Oh, yes.

Q: What are we looking at here?

A: Bones. That's out behind the crematorium.

Q: Just a mound of bones behind the crematorium.

A: Human bones.

Q: The wreath?

A: That was there when I got there.

Q: It looks like they're pretty new, too, those wreaths. Aren't they? You didn't witness any mass burials.

A: No. None at all.

Q: Well, I do want to thank you very very much for being part of our project and sharing your experience with us.