

NAME: WILLIAM CARTLEDGE  
INTERVIEWER: LORRIE MELL  
CAMP: LUDWIGSLUST, GARDELEGEN INCIDENT  
DATE:

Q: I would like your full name.

A: William Ned Cartledge

Q: And your address.

A: It's 1271 Vista Valley Drive

Q: And date of birth.

A: October 1, 1916.

Q: How old were you at the time of the liberation of the camp?

A: About 30 years old.

Q: And, at the beginning of the war, what were your career goals? What were you planning on doing?

A: I was in the cotton business, and I had planned to pursue the field of cotton merchandising.

Q: What is your present occupation?

A: I am a salesman with Sears Roebuck & Co.

Q: And what was your military unit at the time you went into the camp?

A: The 89th Chemical Mortar Battalion.

Q: And your rank at that time?

A: A First Lieutenant.

Q: Now you are going to tell me which camps you went into.

A: The first time I witnessed anything of this nature was at a place called

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Gardelegen, an incident which was reported, I believe, in *Life* Magazine. After I came home from overseas, I did see some of the pictures of the Gardelegen incident, but these photographs that I have here are the ones that some of the fellows in my outfit took. Not me personally, but we developed them ourselves since they weren't what you would call top notch photographs, but they do record some of the horrors of these things. And the Gardelegen incident was a case where the Germans had about 500 political prisoners and as the Allies moved in, they were moving these prisoners back so they wouldn't be liberated by the Allies. I don't know why this particular group was so important to them, but anyway they got to the point where they couldn't continue to carry these political prisoners so they just decided to exterminate them. I don't know exactly who they were but we were told at the time that they were political prisoners. So they put them in this airplane hangar in the small airstrip in which there was straw on the floor, covered with oil, and they put them in there and set the straw on fire, and as the people tried to break out of the building, they were machine-gunned down. At the time we got there, the bodies were stacked up six or seven deep, mostly concentrated at the doors. Most of their clothing was burned from their bodies there and they were laying there. The Army came in and made the local German citizens in that area bury the bodies.

Q: What kind of reaction did the German local citizens have to what they were seeing at this incident?

A: It seemed to be a very matter of fact type of thing. I was told that one German refused to bury these people and he ran and he was shot by

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one of the American soldiers. I didn't actually see the incident, but that was told to me when we went down to visit this particular spot.

Q: How many people were burned in this hangar?

A: About 500.

Q: And how long after the incident did you arrive?

A: We arrived probably the next day after it had occurred, but we came back on the second day to take the pictures. Some of the bodies had already been removed when we took the pictures themselves, but there were still quite a few bodies there.

Q: Is there any other information around this particular incident that you want to be sure and include?

A: No. We just happened on it by accident. We weren't sent. With Ludwigslust, which was an actual concentration camp with buildings and barracks provided for prisoners, it was different. They asked if any of us wanted to go there to witness this. At that time we were attached to the 82nd Airborne, and, as a matter of fact, they encouraged us to go so that we would get some nature of the enemy which we were fighting. The war was not over at this time, and naturally they were interested in impressing on the American soldier the nature of the enemy.

Q: You say "they?"

A: Our command. I am assuming it came down from somewhere to our battalion commander who passed the orders on to us.

Q: About what date was it that you went into Ludwigslust ?

A: Ludwigslust was probably, I'd say, in March.

Q: Of 1945?

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A: Of 1945, yes.

Q: The Americans had moved in prior to your arriving there?

A: Yes. I was not one of the first soldiers there, but there were still a number of prisoners there. I was appalled at the appearance of these people who seemed oblivious to everything. They just sat around up against the walls with big, glassy eyes staring at us, and there were ambulances coming to take them away. In talking with some of the medical personnel, this one doctor told me that probably not many of them would survive, that their condition was so bad. They had been in starvation so long that probably not many of them would survive even though they were living at the time.

Q: What did they look like to you?

A: They were just almost like skin and bones. They had on their traditional striped uniform even though some of the uniforms were torn and worn, and you could see the bones, like at the knees, which were just like a big knot in the bones. Skin and bones so to speak. And the faces just real thin and emaciated looking and cheeks hollow, and the thing that impressed me most was the large eyes. They just almost looked through you. They didn't look at you, they didn't seem to be aware of us walking around looking at this place. Inside some of these buildings was a type of latrine which was very primitive. It was just like a big concrete pit, even though it was built up from the floor, and it only had like two logs or two rails across the top for seating. One of the soldiers there told us that they had talked with one of the prisoners and he said that the prisoners were quite ill and frequently they would be up on these poles and the Germans would

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come through and push them off into this cesspool.

Q: What else did you see at that camp? What did you learn?

A: It was almost incomprehensible that one human would do another one that way. It was hard to comprehend and hard part to sink in and to understand why people would do things like that, but there it was. There was no contradiction as to what happened there. I mean it was evident to those of us who saw it, and I saw enough that I didn't want to see much more of it. But near there supposedly was another camp. I didn't see it but some of the other fellows in my outfit saw and reported it. They said it was for Jewish women only, and apparently they were still inside this enclosure, even though the Americans had just arrived there. Nobody had let them out or anything. They were starving practically, and the soldiers said they had some K rations and things and they threw them over the fence. There was a mad dash for these things. Candies and anything that they had they threw into the fence to these people. They apparently had been without food for quite a number of days, but had not been released from the camps. The Germans had a lot of prisoners from other countries who worked on the farms, who were not imprisoned, and who seemed to be quite content with their role. Maybe they knew there would not be much chance of their escaping from Germany, but these people in this general area didn't seem to be disturbed by these incidents. What few we came in contact with didn't seem to know much about it.

Q: The people that lived there or were working there?

A: The slave laborer.

Q: That were not in the camp?

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A: That were not in the camps. They didn't seem to be aware too much about what was going on in the camps and the nature of the treatment of these people. We counted a few of them that did speak some English; as a matter of fact, one man had worked at the Ford Motor Co. in Detroit, Michigan. He was a Yugoslavian and he had been home some time prior to the war. When the war broke out, they conscripted him into the Yugoslav Army, and he was captured by the Germans and made a farm laborer. But he didn't seem to be aware of much of the nature of what was going on around.

Q: What was your reaction and the reaction of the men in your unit when you went into the camp to see it?

A: I think most of them were just shocked beyond belief. They just couldn't comprehend it.

Q: Did you talk about it?

A: We talked about it some, and especially when we had the pictures made, but most people would more or less just shake their heads. It was almost inconceivable that this could happen.

Q: When you did talk about it, the little bit that you did talk about, what kind of things did you talk about?

A: Average soldier things. We'd say, "Can you imagine those sons of a \_\_\_\_\_? They were just horrified by the treatment.

Q: How do you feel about the prisoners that were in the camp? These skeletons that you described.

A: There really isn't any way to describe it except that it was just something that was almost unbelievable. That's about all. It's been quite a long time ago. Maybe I could have described my feelings a

little better then, but it was absolutely revolting. I just couldn't really couldn't grasp it all. I have never forgotten the appearance of those people that just sat along the walls, propped up against the walls and just sat there, didn't move, didn't say anything to anyone, just sat there.

Q: When you use the word "revolting", you are talking about the situation or the people?

A: Towards the situation more than anything else. I only had sympathy for the people, but it was a little late for that. Even though I realized what a terrible experience they had, they were beyond the point of my help. Medical help would probably help some of them, but a medical officer told me a lot of them would never survive.

Q: Let's go back a little bit. We talked about your being at the camp. When was the first time you recall hearing about these?

A. I think pretty much having read in the paper prior to going overseas. I remember hearing about concentration camps probably well long before I was ever in the Army, but it didn't really make a lot of impression on me at the time because there was not any vivid details given of these camps. I didn't hear anything about the quantities of the numbers of people that were involved. I didn't imagine that it was in the millions. I thought maybe a few thousand something. I don't think many people in this country knew, but I realized that it was going on and to some extent the nature of Hitler's German government. I, frankly, am not one of the ones who say well, this was only the Nazis and maybe a lot of good Germans had to do this and had to do that, because they were ordered to. I have not quite excused

the German people as a whole for these atrocities myself. That may be a prejudiced or unfair view, but that's still my point of view.

Q: You condemn the whole German people for this kind of thing?

A: Yes.

Q: From what you saw?

A: Yes, I am sure there were some people who couldn't help it, but I am sure there were a lot of people who could have had some influence that didn't make any attempt to do anything about it.

Q: You think more, perhaps, could have been done than actually was?

A: Yes.

Q: So you knew something about the camps. You had heard and read before you went.

A: Yes.

Q: And yet I am getting the impression that what you saw and what you expected to see were two different things.

A: Yes . I was not prepared for that type of thing.

Q: You have already told me about what the prisoners did, about how they just ignored you. Were there any German guards left there when you reached the camp?

A: No., I didn't see any of the Germans there. I am sure they had left before the troops got there, because Ludwigslust is across the Elbe River and the Germans didn't want to be captured by the Russians and they fled by the thousands . We just met them by the thousands coming to the river. There were only military pontoon bridges there and the Americans wouldn't let them cross the river. And they were just like for miles and miles, all along the banks of the river there. I

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had one picture which was taken from the *Saturday Evening Post* in describing this exodus. I was in this particular area when this picture was taken right here. They came by the thousands. I don't know if this is pertinent to the situation, but we had one officer of Polish background and he held great hostility towards the Germans. When they'd ride along in their bicycles, he and one of our sergeants would go out there and take their bicycles away from them and make them walk. He'd throw the bicycle over to the side and tell them to get on down the road. We weren't trying to take the prisoners. They were just going to go to one area. They were told to go to one area and stay there.

Q: He didn't have much sympathy for them.

A: He didn't have much sympathy. He didn't want them to ride, he wanted them to walk, and any that complained he gave them a good boot and sent them on down the road. I don't remember if he had been to the concentration camp before this or afterwards, but some of the soldiers had very definite feelings against the Germans and would probably have inflicted some form of physical punishment on them if it had been left to them.

Q: What was the source of these ill feelings?

A: Just the general nature of the Germans themselves. The soldiers had learned of things, learned about the nature of things and the Germans

Q: The nature of what things? I would like you to give some specifics. I know what you mean.

A: Perhaps having heard of the concentration camps. Not actually seeing them at this time, but they had seen the Gardelegen incident. This

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was after the Gardelegen incident.

Q: The Gardelegen incident was where they burned the people?

A: Yes, this was before we viewed the Ludwigslust thing. We saw the Ludwigslust camp probably more towards April. The Gardelegen thing was probably in early March.

Q: You received some negative reactions from some of the enlisted men toward the Germans.

A: Yes, and as I said one of the officers was of Polish background. He was quite bitter towards the Germans and he wanted to wreak a little vengeance on them if he had had the opportunity. Of course, military law would have forbid it, but he got by with as much of it as he could.

Q: You said earlier that the higher ups, the officers, sort of wanted the men [unintelligible].

A: I think it came down from the higher command that the men shouldn't be ordered to go, but should be encouraged to go so that they could see the nature of these things and remember them. The war wasn't over then. I am sure the higher command wanted the soldiers to be well aware of the nature of the enemy. I think in some ways Americans always kind of had admiration for the Germans -- their scientific knowledge and intellectual contributions to the world. And to see the other side of the people was what the command had in mind.

Q: Did you have any other contact with the German civilians, other than knowing that they were involved in burying some of the survivors of this other place?

A: Yes, being the Executive Officer of my company, it was my job to get

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housing. When we'd move into an area where Germans were living, it was my job to pick out the houses that we wanted the troops to occupy, and the German civilians couldn't stay in the houses that we were occupying and had to leave. Sometimes you encountered people who seemed to have a fear of you as a soldier. But generally speaking, I don't believe the German civilians really feared the American soldiers. But they very definitely feared the Russians.

Q: You make a distinction between the feelings of the German soldiers and the German people and the Russians. What was the feeling of the German soldiers towards the Americans?

A: I didn't have really enough contact with them to know, because by the time we would get there, the Germans would already be gone. Once or twice we picked up a few prisoners around in farmhouses and things like that, but we actually didn't encounter a lot. There was one instance when we did go to one farmhouse where the prisoners were hiding. This was down below Essen. We had bivouacked near a cemetery. We always liked to go around and pick up a few fresh eggs and maybe a little wine, if we could find it. My company commander and I went down to the cemetery and we went over to a nice little cottage which was outside the confines of the cemetery. It was a beautifully landscaped cemetery, almost like a park, and as I was walking along under the low hanging branches of a tree, I saw some fresh earth. So I went over there to see what could be buried there. I started sort of poking around in there and I came on a bayonet hidden in there. When I took the bayonet and started digging, I found ammunition and pistols and rifles and things wrapped up in cloth. I

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didn't think anything about it, but I did take the bayonet with me. I went to this house and when I walked in there with that bayonet, the older man there, who was probably around 70 years old, obviously recognized it. I didn't connect it with him at all, but he was frightened and the women in that house were absolutely frightened to death of us. They were shaking they were so frightened. It turns out there was what they call the *Volkstrum* which was the People's Army which was to resist the Allies. Even though Germany was conquered, they were making provisions for them to continue to resist the Allies.

Q: The people may have been a part of that.

A: Yes, and they were probably the ones who hid these rifles and pistols and ammunition over there in the cemetery. They thought that we were coming for them, but we weren't. We were looking for eggs and wine.

Q: After having visited Ludwigslust and after having see burned bodies at the airstrip, was there any particular reaction you noticed from some of the men you were with?

A: No, other than the comments.

Q: But I am talking about beyond that point in time. Did they have any difficulty in dealing with that experience in any way that you were aware of?

A: Not that I was aware of, really. There was a comment about it almost to the point of disbelief, but there was some cursing every once in awhile about them.

Q: It came up from time to time, even after that?

A: Yes, yes at times, but as I recall there wasn't a great deal of

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conversation about it. Those people, hard as it was to accept, they accepted it, didn't have too much comment about it. My outfit has a reunion every year. I haven't been every time, but usually someone brings their album, and there will be some of these pictures in there, and they will make comments about it or something.

Q: So you have had some opportunity to talk about this in more recent years with some of the same men?

A: Yes, just this past summer we had our reunion in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and there were two or three fellows who brought their albums along. I didn't bring mine along, but we were looking through them, commenting on the things, and said you remember this and you remember that. Not any one of them have forgotten it. I'll put it that way. Not any of them.

Q: Prior to coming back from the war, did you write hom about what you had seen at the camp?

A: No.

Q: Why not?

A: It just wasn't anything that I really wanted to. I told about it after I got back home and I had the pictures.

Q: Who did you tell then?

A: I told my mother and father and my sister who was still living at home.

Q: You talked about it with your family.

A: Yes, I talked about it with my family but not a great deal. The pictures were shown and they realized how horrible it was. I think it is sometimes hard for them to comprehend. Even seeing it, it's hard to

comprehend.

Q: What was your purpose when you came home in sharing this with your family and your sister?

A: I suppose just to let them see the nature of things that happened sometimes in the world . I didn't think it out beforehand. It was just matter of fact exposure of them to these pictures and things and I have had people since then say "I don't want to look at it" and "How horrible. But they don't pursue it much further.

Q: Why are you willing to talk about this now to us?

A: I heard your appeal on television and to me it was an unforgettable thing and I just thought if I could make some small contribution to the program that I would be happy to.

Q: It's unforgettable for you. What is the message for other people?

A: The message for other people is we don't want to ever suppose that people are not capable of very inhumane treatment of other people, that you can't assume that everybody is going to treat every one else like they'd like to be treated, and that as a result of political propaganda and other types of propaganda, an entire people can be persuaded to commit quite terrible things. Maybe a social atrocity so to speak.

Q: Are you aware that there are some people that don't believe this really happened? They think it's propaganda.

A: I suppose there could be some people, but it would have to be a very ignorant person, a very prejudiced type of person.

Q: Prejudiced meaning they just don't want to know?

A: No, they don't want to believe that. They think, as you say, it's a lot of

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propaganda.

Q: I thought I'd just throw that in. It's hard for me to believe too. Did you consider yourself a religious person at the time you viewed these things in Germany?

A: That is a hard definition, I would have to get your definition of religious.

Q: Within your definition.

A: I am a Unitarian, and I consider myself a religious person in the sense that I do have moral values and I do believe that as a people we must have moral values to survive and get along in the world and I do believe that if Americans are guilty or were guilty of the same thing, it would be part my guilt too. I do social commentary woodcarvings, and I did a thing on the Calley incident in the Viet Nam War, which was a little bit different. A similar thing in a way, because the reaction that a lot of people in this country had to Calley's killing those people was that it was all right because in the first place, they were not our kind of people, and secondly they were Communists, and that it is all right to kill people that are not our kind of people.

Q: And you think the same kind of thing was true in Germany?

A: Yes, because the Jewish people were not true Germans. It was all right to kill them. And I think we are not too civilized ourselves. I think Calley was singled out probably and he probably didn't get the punishment he deserved, but at the same time, he got more punishment than a lot of other people who I'm sure did things as bad as he did. I think the statement that this Captain who prosecuted Calley made with reference to this was great. I kept it for a long time

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-- it was a clipping out a magazine -- but I've lost it since. He was calling to our attention that if we have any moral values at all, we must punish people who do things like that, even though it was done as an act of war. He was saying we cannot tolerate people who commit those type of atrocities.

Q: And you kind of identify with that?

A: I identify with that completely.

Q: Do you think you are perhaps more religious in that sense today than you were in 1945?

A: That is a matter of degree and that is....

Q: A hard question.

A: A hard question, because I could never be that cruel. I don't have that kind of feeling towards people. Sometimes I get upset with people, but I certainly don't hold grudges against them over a long period of time. I do not hold a personal grudge against the German people, but I still think they were responsible and should be held accountable for the conduct of their country.

Q: Just as you said you feel the guilt as an American of an American's conduct?

A: Yes, I do.

Q: Quite a statement. You touched a little bit on the Viet Nam War and related incidents to Germany. What about something like the civil rights movement? Do your experiences in Germany affect your thinking about the civil rights movement in any way?

A: I have always been regarded as a liberal and I am still of the opinion that people should have equal rights under the law. But I realize too

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that we are not perfect and, as a matter of fact, I think now there is as much prejudice against black people because of the pressure that has been brought on by the government in job situations in particular, where black people have been promoted over capable white people. I think the job should go to the most capable person, white or black, and I don't believe that to promote a person who is not capable because they are black or Spanish-American is any more fair than it was when we didn't promote a black person because he was black. I think it is the same type situation, and I firmly believe that if that policy is continued the prejudice against the black people will continue to grow. It is not being solved by the fact that you got a certain number of black people in high management as opposed to ten years ago or fifteen years ago. There are lot of capable black people who are doing good jobs in management situations. There are also some who don't belong in those situations, and that's the situation that these people that I talk with every day will tell you. Being a salesman in Sears hardware department, you don't get to talk to people very long at times, but it doesn't take them long to tell you just about where they stand on situations.

Q: You're seeing that the so called "reverse discrimination" is creating as much dissension as the other side of the coin -- segregation

A: Yes.

Q: And you see this as a danger to our political system?

A: I am no prophet, but I think if we were to have a severe depression, in which a lot of people were out of jobs, you'd see the Klan increase considerably and would see a lot more of the type of activity that the

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Klan participates in.

Q: Are you saying that in bad times a scapegoat is needed.

A: Yes, that's what I'm saying.

Q: Is this what happened in Germany?

A: Yes, I think that was true, I really do. In other words, it's easier to get crowds to hate somebody than it is to love them. You can get up a crowd to go hate somebody or participate in some kind of violent group, but it is sometimes pretty hard to get a crowd to go out and do some good somewhere.

Q: I'm going to turn this tape over, and we will go on and do the other side. Okay?

[End of Side One. Conversation continues on Side Two as follows]

Q: [Unintelligible] if one of your children said to you they want to join the Nazi Party?

A: I just don't believe that my children do that. I would want them to explain why.

Q: What kind of things would you say to them?

A: As parents we are very open discussing things of this nature, and we're just like everybody else. We do make jokes about the blacks and ethnic groups at times. We are all guilty of that, but we understand what the nature of our joke is about. We don't think that that should be part of our attitude and treatment of these people, and I'll say this about Jewish people. They tell more stories relating to Jewish people than anybody else. They can laugh at themselves, because they are great comics of the world. I heard somebody say you have to have experienced or witnessed tragedy before you can be a

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good comic. But at the same time, I believe my children would not ever come into the Nazi Party.

Q: It's kind of a hard question for you to answer.

A: Yes.

Q: Did you see the situation that was happening in Germany in the camps as primarily a Jewish persecution?

A: To me it was primarily, but there were other people involved. I was told a lot of these people that were in this Gardelegen incident were not primarily Jewish people, but were Dutch or French, or people in their political life who were opposed to the German occupation and resisted the German occupations and didn't cooperate with the German occupation. I think the Germans didn't want to release them even though by the time of the Gardelegen incident, the Germans were pretty sure that they had lost the war. They could have just as easily released them and let them go back toward the Allied lines.

Q: Why do you think the Germans didn't want to let them get away?

A: Because I think they felt that they were their enemies and would be their enemies in the future and they wanted to exterminate them. They were tired of hauling them around, and I don't exactly know how to describe the attitude they had toward people not of their own kind. They were not of any value to them.

Q: Did what you saw in the camp leave you with the need to insure to do something today to make sure something like this doesn't happen again?

A: Yes. This is what I do in my art work. This is one of the voices I have.

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Q: I would like to read that when finished

A: I am not an articulate person, not a great speaker. I can't get up before a group and expound my ideas about things, but through my art work I can. I do social commentary type things though and this was one small voice that I had. Though I've won maybe three awards from my art work, it is not the kind of art work that's on display at every place you go. I have art work that's won awards that I have stored out there in the back. I have pictures of it. One of my pieces won an award at the Arts Festival of Atlanta, and it has been on display two or three times in public places. But that's my small voice, and I am still pursuing that even though woodcarving takes considerable more time than a painting does of that nature. I remember having read somewhere, maybe in *Art in America*, several years ago about an art critic who said "artists didn't do enough social commentary things." As a matter of fact the man who made the statement was the man who was the judge of the Arts Festival in Atlanta when they purchased my piece.

Q: Your social commentary piece.

A: Yes. I don't have a picture of it, which I wish I did. Judy Alexander is going to have a show of my work in the next two or three months and maybe one in New York too. Art shows are commercial enterprises and they need to earn money, but I don't think my work is going to be the kind of stuff that sells to the public, because it is not living room art.

Q: Seems like you don't want to let go of it anyway. Did you do anything on the Holocaust?

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A: No, I didn't.

Q: Couldn't quite handle it.

A: No, I haven't come up with the right kind of idea for that.

Q: Before we finish our tape, is there anything that you wanted to tell me today that we haven't touched on, is there anything you want to add to what we have discussed so far?

A: No, but I do believe that your project is worthwhile in that we should keep alive the idea that all of us are responsible, that you can't say those were the Nazis who did this or that in this country it is the Klan who is doing that, or that's some other group other than me, and I think that is the important thing. We must, as horrible as it is, remind people that it's pretty easy to get a group to go off to hate somebody and to do injury to somebody who is not their own kind.

Q: I thank you, Mr. Cartledge, for all you shared with us today .