

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Grant Grimm
July 28, 1983
RG-50.031*0023**

PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Grant Grimm, conducted on July 28, 1983 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

GRANT GRIMM

July 28, 1983

Q: When and where were you born?

A: January 29, 1921, in East Chicago, Illinois

Q: When did you enter the army?

A: October of 1943

Q: Were you drafted or an enlistee?

A: I originally tried to enlist as a pilot but was rejected due to eyesight and went back home to await the draft and wound up in the Air Force after all.

Q: What was your serial number?

A: 35562374

Q: Your rank at the time of the liberation of Buchenwald and also the unit to which you were assigned?

A: I was a sergeant in the 430th Fighter Squadron of the 474th Fighter Group of the 9th Air Force tactical unit.

Q: When did your unit land in France?

A: Approximately two months following D-Day--we were operating out of England at the time.

Q: Could you briefly trace the movements of your unit from that time?

A: We went to France to a combat-engineered airstrip near Saint L. At the time Saint L was under heavy bombardment. Our job was to support the progress of the First Army, and so we had to keep close to them, both for the conservation of fuel and for the quickness of action once we were called on by the ground troops. We went through various fields, finally winding up in Northern France, near Reims. From Reims we went to a couple of different airfields in Belgium, about 50 miles from Brussels. From there we went to Germany and passed through the Ziegfried Line. We went to a second field not too far from Leipzig and near Weimar. Weimar, as we ultimately learned, was only three or four miles from the Buchenwald camp.

Q: And what date did you arrive there at that field?

A: I believe it was April 23, 1945, quite close to the end of the war, and as we found out later, quite close to the liberation date of the concentration camp Buchenwald. On May 8, several friends and I got into a jeep and went on up to Buchenwald.

Q: Before you went up there, did you already have some knowledge of the concentration camp?

A: Some knowledge from the transfers into our air force group, from the armored tank units, from the infantry units, and I had photos that one of the armored group people had given me.

Q: Can we show these? 1032 (PHOTOS OF PILED-UP BODIES SHOWN ON SCREEN)

Q: So you had some idea of the horror you might be encountering there?

A: Exactly.

Q: Do you recall what your first impression was upon seeing the camp?

A: When we came upon the camp of course the security measures there the Germans had taken to prevent escape became obvious, with the double rows of electric wire, barbed wire on top, dogs patrolled the area between inner and outer fences, guard towers over the entrance to the camp, where there was a sign that proclaimed something that we didn't understand, something about working-- arbeit (ph). And once into the camp, why, we immediately saw what I refer to as inmates, since they had been liberated and no longer considered prisoners, wandering around wearing the black and white striped uniforms. These pictures you saw are the emaciated skeleton bodies and what we saw, perhaps even more horrible than this, were these people walking around--alive, but they looked just like the dead bodies. Their eyes were shrunk into their heads, you could see every bone in their bodies, their knees were large protuberances, the skin just covered the bones on their legs and their thighs and their arms and their shoulders, and their breastbones just stood out, all their ribs--just a skeleton with skin on it--and you wondered how they could even walk. Of course, they did have some difficulty walking, and this was prevalent throughout the camp. There were many nationalities in this camp and it seemed each pretty much stuck to itself, and we were struck by the fact that the Russian contingent looked to be in the best shape physically. They had a fire outside and they were cooking on this fire and talking their language. They did not show the same emotion at seeing is as the others nationalities did, some of whom attached themselves to us--they were obviously very well-educated people and very articulate.

Q: Did you speak to them?

A: We spoke with them and they took us around the camp. Among the things that we saw was a building with a gallows out back and what looked like a window well, but which was actually a chute about 14 feet deep into which they dropped these people, whether they were dead or alive. Some of these people had to have been alive because when we went down there we could see that there were iron pegs in the wall just below the ceiling, and they had been hung there--how I don't know--but the wall had been freshly whitewashed so you didn't see any blood, but maybe three or four inches above the floor was a groove in the wall, which was a result of these people kicking with their heels as they struggled, hanging from these hooks, and they dug a little channel

in the wall. There was an elevator or hand-operated lift. They would put these corpses on it and take them up to the next floor, the crematorium. I saw two furnaces that had three doors in each, and each of these chambers held three bodies, so you were talking about eighteen they could do at one time. Off to the left, facing the ovens, was a wooden coffin with a lid on it. When we took the lid off inside was a corpse. I don't understand why that corpse was still there, but it was a sight that really...beyond description, almost black, a man of about fifty years old. He was lying there stark naked, and I can remember--and since I don't think purity of words in this interview is particularly a boundary here--I remember his penis laying over to the side and just stark naked. I can't understand yet why he was still there. And the doors to the ovens were open and you could look inside there and see ashes and bones of incomplete cremations. We were told, and we could see, that there were ducts leading from this that heated the HOE barracks. The lamp shade that was made of tattooed skin by the wife of the Commandant, was in evidence. There was a table that was made of fingernails which had been extracted. They had extracted all of the gold out of people's mouth, all of their clothes were taken and shipped off to other parts of the country, we were told. We visited a barracks or sleeping quarters, a large building, and inside you could see that it wasn't fit for animals to live in during the harsh winter, because the siding was just boards laced against boards and cracks had developed, and the wind must have whistled through there in the zero cold. There were bins, like storage bins for mufflers in a muffler shop, with wooden flooring and in each slept three to six people. Each of the barracks was supposed to hold up to 1500 people. When they wanted to go to the toilet facilities, they had to go to a separate building, like a barn, with a concrete floor. When you walked in, it was drafty, and I can imagine having to go out there in the dead of winter and pull your pants down and relieve yourself with those conditions. In the middle of the room was a deep pit and all around the pit was a low railing about 18 inches high, and the top part was rounded and worn from use. They would have to sit on this and relieve themselves into that pit. Now the inmates were forced to go down into there with buckets and bail this out--they passed it down the line like a water brigade. Many of these people were so ill when they went in there that they actually fell into this pit and perished in there. It was a vile building. Another building that we saw was the hospital or more like a clinic. We saw various rooms there. I would like to refer to my own notes here.

Q: This is a diary that you kept throughout your time there?

A: Yes, this is not actually a day-to-day diary because I didn't have the time, and actually it was against regulations to keep even this, because I had field position and so on, and if this had ever fallen into the wrong hands I could have been court-martialed for this. (Referring to notebook) "In the hospital I saw jars of pickled human organs and shrunken heads and one head cut in half vertically. In one ward I saw a living skeleton suffering from starvation, dysentery, and typhus. You could see them lying in their own dung. The room smelled awful. There are even kids of 5 or 6 there." I understood that they did experiments of all types in this hospital. I remember a double bunk with a man on the lower bunk with his back to us, he didn't even move, and his bed was full of excrement, and it was on his back and his buttocks, and the place just reeked, it was terrible. You had people dying every day. While we were there, these people that died, they had civilians from Weimar who they made come into the camp and carry these people laid over poles to where they were going to be buried. The civilians were crying and vomiting, it was not a

pleasant task for them to have to do. They took them to a common burial sight where bulldozers had dug out. People were dying all the time, I heard up to 200 a day. These people were happy to see us and wanted to talk. They obviously needed food, cigarettes--although giving a cigarette to somebody in that condition you'd think if he's is not dead that probably would kill him, but at that point it made no difference--we gave them cigarettes. There was no question the camp had been abandoned quickly. They still had some of HOE troops in some cells there, and they looked arrogant, like they would take over again. One of them spit through the grating opening. He didn't say a word, contempt on his face, no remorse or fear, no human feeling at all, and I guess that goes with what we saw, no human feeling. Life was absolutely cheap, the cheapest commodity around. There was no question in my mind that these people had suffered for a long time because you don't become this emaciated looking overnight or in a week or in a month and how they could walk is just incredible. You can write about it and you can look at pictures such as those but your mind is not conditioned to accept it. You have to see it and if what I am doing here today can in any way perpetuate the fact that this happened and help dispel any claim that it never happened I am pleased to be here otherwise O am not delighted to be here because it was a terrible experience but just think of what it was for them.

Q: Do you recall any particular conversation with the inmates?

A: Well a good deal of what I have recalled here did come from the inmates. We, of course, did not have the first-hand knowledge of who, for example, honed out the train pit, but you can bet that the guards didn't do it, so it is perfectly credible. You could believe anything you were told because the surroundings and the atmosphere, everything was there, the whole ambiance of the camp was horrible. There is no question that terrible things happened there. People aren't going to tell you that they were starved and be lying. When you look at them and could see it and you wonder how they are living even now, when they looked no better than a corpse that you see in these pictures.

Q: What was the effect of the camp on the men that you were with?

A: Disbelief. An unwillingness to really believe it. An incapability to really grasp it. After all we were brought up in America a society that has groups to prevent cruelty to animals. Then to go over and see that kind of cruelty and treatment to human beings. In our society you just can't accept this. Even after having seen it, it sobers you, you develop a hatred in your own mind. You realize that if given the opportunity and Commander Kork were standing there, you might auction off the opportunity to end it for him. That goes against the grain, too, we are not brought up as killers. We are trained in the services to do this if you have to. And after you are over there for a while and you have abandoned any hopes that you are going to get home, then it becomes easier. And I would have no compunction personally, you know you can question your right to kill another man, I could. I could kill him. There was no question in my mind that I could.

Q: After you left Buchenwald, where were you then stationed?

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A: We were at a camp for a short time and then we were sent to Nice, France in a motor convoy and we went through Metz, which is on the Franco-German border and encountering the obvious hatred in that border town had for us.

Q: You never had the opportunity to talk to any German civilians or military personnel about the camps, did you?

A: No. Fraternizing was strictly forbidden by the army regulations, it was punishable by court marshalling. After you saw Buchenwald you would not want to talk to them anyway. Because I can't believe that the people in Weimar did not know what was going on there. The smoke coming out of the stacks had a smell to it. There was a smell all over the place. They were not that far from Buchenwald that they couldn't have suspected it.

Q: Even when you were there several weeks later the smell remained?

A: Yes.

Q: How far away from the camp could you smell it?

A: I don't know, it probably depended on the wind. But remember also, that at the time the crematoriums were not operating.

Q: When did you return to the U.S.?

A: In October of 1945. I was in the service for 3 years to the day, 21 months overseas.

Q: Then when you came back you were in a camp in Indiana?

A: Yes, Camp Attenbury. And when we were in the chow line before discharge we were served by German POW's in American uniforms, which did not make us feel very good about the U.S. Army allowing this to happen. At the time the Air Force was the Army Air Corp, now it is a separate unit. But this made us feel bitter towards the Army and the government who would allow this, treating POW's, who looked well fed and they were,(?) After what we had seen over there. It is ironical.

Q: Did you speak about the camps with any of your relatives here, who were not in the army?

A: Yes, I spoke to them about it. It is difficult to speak about it and even now a feeling wells up in me. And understand that I was not a liberator, one of the first in the camp. And what these people must have seen, I heard it took some people 25 years before they could talk about it. I gave you a name of another man who was a liberator. According to his relatives he couldn't speak about it for 25 years. In my case, I had written about it and I found that my family didn't really grasp it. I showed them the pictures and then told them about it and they believed it, but you have to have seen it and I imagine that that is one reason why they would have kept Buchenwald a

memorial. I won't forget what I saw of it and it was a belated view of it. Again, I had no part in the liberation of it. But the events are still vivid in my mind.

Q: Can you describe the changes in the events that seeing Buchenwald made in you, the type of impact that made in you in terms of change of outlook.

A: I was younger when I went overseas, and I was impressionable. I was naive and was not sophisticated. I was married and I had a child that was one year old before I saw her and when I came back I was different and my wife was different. This led to differences between us that ultimately wound up in our being divorced. I surely made changes in me. I would rather be in a position of doing for other people than having them do for me. But I know how cheaply life can be regarded in the minds of man. I have learned that man will do inconceivable things and I am not ruling out the fact that this could be happening in other countries. I believe it is. Reports out of Russia and other countries say it is happening there. There is apparently going to be no end to it. But while I had mixed feelings of Vietnam, in WWII we were there to end the war, I didn't want to be in a war. I didn't want to take a chance with my life. I had a life to live, I was only 21. Today, I believe the best in people, but there is always the expectation in the back of my mind, so I won't get shocked that people can be bastards. It is there, we don't know who it is in. I cannot accept the view that if I was ordered to participate in such an event that I would do it. I could kill, but I don't think I could do what they did. Whether it is a trait that is inherent or a characteristic of those people or not, I don't know what to say. I am sure that there are some good Germans, but we also know that there are some bad ones.

Q: So what you saw was proof that people are capable of doing anything?

A: Right.

Q: Could you sum up the reasons that brought you to come today and to relate your experiences?

A: In the first place, I don't think that what I have told you was any particular value compared to what you could hear from a liberator. You received my name from a woman I car pool with. She asked me to come down for an interview for the Holocaust Memorial foundation. I said yes. I thought I saw, in any small way you find what I told you valuable to your project, then I want to contribute it. Because while we may not prevent what happened from happening again. I don't think that the events that occurred in Germany in WWII, as personified by these concentration camps should ever be allowed to happen. They should be documented, recorded, and pictured. There are people living today that were not alive at that time so to them they cannot grasp the enormity of it. As indicated on the tape when I received it there are sound problems from this point on that prevent any ability to hear what is being said.