

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with John Mulholland
April 4, 1991
RG-50.031*0048**

PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with John Mulholland, conducted on April 4, 1991 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.

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JOHN MULHOLLAND

April 4, 1991

Time-coded notes for Interview with John Mulholland

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Q: Mr. Mulholland, what was your place of birth and your date of birth?

A: I was born in Chicago July 21, 1919.

Q: What was the date you enlisted in the Army?

A: I enlisted around July 5, 1942.

Q: That was right after your graduation from Marquette University.

A: Yes.

Q: And what was your serial number?

A: 16098649.

Q: What was your rank at the time at which you saw Dachau?

A: I was a second-lieutenant.

Q: Could you briefly name and trace the movements of your unit from the time at which you landed on the continent?

A: We were called "Infra-recon" and were attached to the fifth and third armored divisions.

Q: And the duty of this platoon was to ...

A: To reconnoiter. I was at first stationed in England and trained there for about three months and in late 1944 landed in Le Havre...

Q: Which was when?

A: This was approximately in late December of 1944. Once in the theater of operations our duty was to go on patrol and call in Artillery fire, once we had located enemy positions. We were then pulled out and sent south across the Rhine, towards Mannheim, where the Neckar river begins, and the Rhine goes down towards Heidelberg. My mission was to reconnoiter enemy communications. This went from January to March, at what point I got a call from the seventh to go and see how Ulm was. I got into Ulm without encountering any resistance and from there on was ordered to go to Munich, which had been heavily bombarded since it was considered the birthplace of the Third Reich. I did not know that there was a town between Ulm and Munich.

Q: Where there any other units in this area at the time?

A: There were big stations in Stuttgart, but there was nobody in Munich at the time. I was supposed to go to Munich, but I never got there. From Ulm I got out on the Autobahn and it rolled so great that we just kept going and I eventually ended up in Czechoslovakia. But the Third took Munich and the Seventh took Heidelberg, and I was between in between them and going down the Autobahn. Suddenly I could smell what reminded me of the Chicago slaughterhouses, back when we had the livestock down there in the South side, The smell was, as I found out later, that of burning hair.

Q: And you think that this took place sometimes on early April?

A: Oh yes. We didn't rally liberate that area until a little later in the year, but me, my sergeant and a couple of my guys took a break from the Autobahn and left the platoon there.

Q: Because of this odor?

A: Yes, we thought we would get something to eat. It smelled like it was a slaughterhouse and I thought we'd go off for a side of beef or something... It wasn't at all however. There came the village or town or whatever you want to call it, of Dachau, and there we found that twirling barbed wire fence, and there was a moat and over the moat there was a bridge, But the bridge was permanent, it was not a draw-up bridge, but I was sure now that it was well secured, that they just didn't want people to get out of there, alive. If it had been a concentration camp--and maybe it was--but by the time I got there to my experience it was purely and simply a camp to kill people. I did not however, go into throughout the thing to learn if there were reasons, such as you mentioned, that maybe there were some very serious medical practices performed there, to see how long a body could withstand ice-cold water or whatever. The people that had been running the camp were already gone. I think they knew that the war was over and they were just waiting... and it did end the following month.

Q: So you came up to the wire...

A: Oh yes, we barged against the wire, blew it up, the sparks flew like mad because it was electrified and...

Q: Did it seem like this was the main entrance into the camp?

A: Well, I didn't, but a couple of my guys did.. They went into one of the ... or the least they came back and told me there was a shower place in there that wasn't connected to water at all, but was connected to poisoning gas and...

Q: Did they see any bodies?

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A: I got sick. I didn't ask any questions. We were very close as guys and they said "Let's go!" and asked: "Will we tell the other guys?" and I said: "We will eventually, but let's just roll away, because we have got to communicate back." So actually I just didn't communicate that I had been in Dachau. When we came back about a month later a couple of guys went on up and it was already being prepared to be a memorial to ... I don't know, a memorial to hate or whether it's a memorial to... it's a fun place to have a memorial ... perhaps to have people understand the complications that those who were destroyed there had... If it stand as a memento of how bad human can be if for whatever reason driven to it. I suppose it is something that has a value... personally I would say destroy it, because it is just too bad.

Q: Going back to the time when you were there: These bodies that you saw, they were on gallows?

A: Oh yes, They were dead, we cut them down.

Q: Were they mutilated in any way?

A: It looked like they had been stabbed a couple of times. But there were about five to six Polish POW's with the striped trousers and so on, and I had this young chap, this Jewish chap, that was in my platoon and he was able to understand a lot of their conversation. They asked me for weapons, so I gave them some. They were very happy that we showed up, because it was hard to distinguish between German- and American helmets. If I was going to be the first American you saw, you wouldn't be sure that I wasn't a German, because their helmets were shaped almost like ours.

Q: So did they, the inmates, at first run away?

A: No, didn't. They came creeping out. These guys were rather...they were pretty brave people. They knew that if we blew up that fence...they knew I was on the different side than the guys that had put it up, but whether they could tell...I imagine they knew we were Americans...It was just a devastation experience even though I didn't go in but I could see the ovens. They were cooking...

Q: So that was ...

A: That was where the smell came from.

Q: And there was smoking pouring out?

A: Oh sure, Yes.

Q: How far away would you say, where these ovens.

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A: From the entrance? Not too far, I'd say a couple of hundred yards, maybe ... and the other thing was that everything was inside this moat and this barbed wire, I just don't know much about it. I was there, yes, in my opinion, what little I saw was evidence that there were devastating things going on there before I got there. But you can't blame all the civilians in that community. I don't even know if you can't blame all the civilians in that community. I don't even know if you can blame all the German civilians, but this little nucleus of the SS and the Swastika-group and the...I think we ought to learn from it, that we - if you can learn this much - we must be very careful of the outlandish groups that have strong ways of making their own law, and essentially, I think it needs good review for some stupid people that we are doing some rather catastrophic things to groups of people who can't defend themselves and they very quickly go free later and start all over again.

Q: Did you ever speak to any German civilians?

A: Oh yes, well I had an interpreter. I went into Mossbach and became the information and Education Officer for that battalion.

Q: And because you stayed there in capacity you talked to some of the people...

A: To a lot of people.

Q: Did you ever ask them about the camps?

A: Oh sure, but Auschwitz was the one that got most of the publicity. I think it (Auschwitz) was more of a concentration camp. That's what Egon Tien, my interpreter, told me, who was captured in France and then I got him. (German POW assigned to Mr. Mullholland.)

Q: So what did the German civilians say about the camp? What was their...

A: I must say that I'm not so sure... it was never publicized, obviously... I'm not so sure that there was a high percentage of the German people other than maybe the educated, who were the more affluent, who maybe had to be involved somewhat in the politics of the country at the time in order to...For the purpose of self preservation. I imagine they knew. I was not aware of Auschwitz, I was not aware of the northern concentration camps, I was never aware of the Polish concentration-camps: you know, the Ghetto on Poland, in Warsaw I believe. I had to read about that when I came home.

Q: The men that went with you into the camp...

A: The four...

Q: Yes, the four, what were their reactions and ...

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A: Very violent, one of them opened the door to the shower-room, to what looked like the shower-room, but you could see the gas-jets. There weren't any people in there. One of them said that the ovens were working. I have to presume that he opened the door. It was strictly a high-pressure gas. It was an instant situation, there was no further torture, if there had been any torture. It was just revolting to think about, and I was only 25 years old and that's not all that old to stumble on that kind of garbage.

Q: Did you ever ... you said that you had decided that you weren't going to communicate with the other members of the platoon...

A: But I did though...

Q: Oh, you did?

A: Oh yes, I had to. I felt that maybe more qualified people should take a look at a thing like that and I wasn't qualified to make a judgment as to what had gone on there and so I just told the platoon leader.

Q: And when were you shipped back to the US?

A: After I had been in Europe for 30 months.

Q: When you came back, did you talk about what you had seen at Dachau with anybody?

A: No, not until now.

Q: Why was it that you didn't talk about it?

A: I suppose for one I didn't understand it too well, also it's one of those things that I'd rather forget, to be honest. I'm sure a lot of the people, not only in Dachau, but in whatever community in the wide area is called, they want to forget it, not because - I don't want to say it didn't exist, but if you keep worrying about those atrocities it can affect you emotionally. I believe it did affect me emotionally. I was sent for rest and rehabilitation to a skiing lodge.

Q: And you think that part of that might have been what you saw in Dachau?

A: Sure, absolutely. I went down to Olbiach and skied for almost a month.

Q: Why then do you think that now you were interested in at least discussing it?

A: I don't mind discussing it. It's far enough behind me. If this helps to possibly remove that hazard even in the remotest possibility in the future, then fine, if it just makes people more upset, then I would not be interested in being here. I watched "The Day After" and I stood in Germany, when this country popped off two atomic bombs. Even more than this, what upset me the most is

to see the further part of it, the majority size of the army on both sides are very young people. I'm a boxing-fan and I know that not everybody knows how to defend themselves. And if a country can learn how to defend ... if they see a thing like this going on in their country - I don't care whether it's in Africa or where it is - blow it up! Hopefully it's empty, but blow it up.

Q: To get rid of that evil, of the ...

A: People. It's a very, very evil thing for any community, let alone a country, to think that they have a right to manipulate your body, and for no cause to eliminate it, your life. Maybe this is my own catholic training, I went to a Catholic Grammar school and High-school, or it is just the Christian part of it. I say blow it up. If I would go back to Germany on a holiday I wouldn't go to Dachau. I would go to Munich or Heidelberg, but to Dachau no possibility. That may disagree with what you want to hear...

Q: No, not at all, because you know, there are different ways of looking at it. I think the fact that they made it into a memorial is... you know, they wanted to caution future generations. Want to show them what people can do...

A: Well, my way is not really that way. I would say that...there's got to be a couple of old SS troopers hanging around that go:"Hey, there's my kind of place...". It's so barbaric, it has to remind you...Why is the Coliseum in Rome? Now maybe it is a memorial to the way Christians were used in sport, maybe if I had a say I'd go to Rome and blow it up. You see I don't consider it a memorial to something honorable and that's what... but then I'm not qualified to seriously disagree with you. I haven't studied it enough. I have raised my four children to be Christians and I presume that regardless of your faith, that your approach to your family-life is what we would call Christian, and you know, just don't shoot the other guy just because you feel like shooting somebody, and I can't say much more.

Q: I think that what you said before about remembering this to hopefully prevent something like this from happening again...

A: It's the only reason I'm here.

Q: That's really why were doing this.

A: Thank you.

Q: Thank you.