

This is November 1994. Next spring, we will be, at the time, 50 years after the liberation of the concentration camps during World War II and that period of time called the Holocaust. We have still with us, fortunately, men who served in the United States Army and who were the liberators of some of the camps.

This is Mr. Del Cooper from Dayton, Ohio, who I will speak to today about his experiences at that time. Mr. Cooper, you were a Daytonian by birth. And when were you born, and when did you join the service?

Yes, I am from Dayton, born on First Street here in Dayton, Ohio. And I've lived in this area all my life. I'm 71 right now. I joined the service in January of 1943 in an anti-aircraft outfit.

I joined up at Columbus, Ohio. I went through the draft boards here in Dayton as a volunteer. I have a V in front of my number. And I was sent to Columbus, Fort Hayes and then from there up to above Chicago at Fort Sheridan-- which I think is closed now-- in an anti-aircraft outfit. And then from there, I took a couple of years training with the anti-aircraft and all over the country, maneuvers out in Oregon and California.

And then in December of 1944, they pulled a lot of us out. I always said they pulled the healthy ones out. I don't know how healthy I was, but they pulled us out and sent us to several different units. And I happened to be sent to the infantry at Camp Van Dorn, Mississippi and from there over to Camp Swift, Texas as an infantry replacement or trainee.

And you still have your uniform and your medals from that period of time.

Yes, ma'am. The uniform I have is the second one I got, really. The first one would be a blouse. This was the Eisenhower jacket here. And on it is the accouterments of my rank that I ended up with as sergeant. I was a PFC. I thought I was going to become a professional, and I went and asked for a raise one time, and they made me a sergeant, believe it or not.

Anyway, that uniform-- the blouse itself-- was tailored by a German prisoner of war. I was so small, and he tailored it down to me, cut the lapels and so forth down. Next to it is a field jacket, and next to it is the shirt of that period of time.

In it is markings which designate the Little Star, because several people had their laundry done by the Germans after the war. And you had to know whose clothes was which, you know?

Sure.

And there's no great medals. As I say, it's just who you were with and so forth. One little unique thing about it I would like to point out is inside the jackets-- both those jackets-- is a little holster I had. They disarmed us pretty much after the war, because they didn't know what we would do. And I always carried a .25 automatic. I said, they'll never disarm me. I had a right to protect myself.

And at what point did you go overseas?

I was a late, thank God. I was late. I went over, left the middle of March 1945. And I was up with my outfit in the first part of April of '45. And like I tell about, they just passed Frankfurt almost to Fulda. And I told everybody I saw all I wanted to see and more in what little time I was there. As an infantry replacement, you're on the front all the time, except you do leapfrog, regiments do, which I--

Right. So you saw a lot of wounded and dying men, too.

I saw wounded. I didn't see too many dying. I'll frankly tell you, I didn't want to go look at our own men dead. I was afraid I would become afraid--

Sure.

--if I started seeing too many of our own people. But a little later, I'll tell you a little later as we talk. I saw all I wanted to see a little bit later.

Right. And then at what point did you-- had you heard anything about camps where people were being--

Concentration camps?

Concentration camps you had--

Oh, yes ma'am. Yes ma'am. I fully believe that we knew more than most of the Germans. See, it was handled by the SS, a special outfit of the Germans. And I think that we men knew more-- and women, Americans-- about the concentration camps and the Germans.

Now, they knew about concentration camps because of their own people or maybe their neighbor. But they really, in my opinion, didn't know all that much about the death camps. If you knew too much over there, you know, they'd kill you.

So tell us how you got to that day and that point.

As I said, we were moving fast. The Germans were pretty well whipped by the time I got over there. And like I say, thank God. But we were moving very rapidly. An example, I picked up that Hitler book over there, and I picked-- which is an original. I picked up that Nazi flag. As we went along, we never stole anything. It was always liberated.

And then we were headed right into Czechoslovakia. I was with the Third Army. And then they shoved US south, or east, or whatever you would call it into Austria. And I think we went across in Austria on a dam. And we stayed-- you want me to go right into a telling you?

Tell us.

We stayed-- I stayed in the neatest, cleanest little apartment you ever saw. We didn't stay outside. We were infantry, but at that stage of the game moving, we threw the Germans out if there were any there. Usually they would disappear, and we would just have access to the house, and we would try to get in and get fresh food, because we were eating rations all the time.

And we stayed in Lambach, Austria. And, of course, it didn't mean anything to me, you know.

The names.

But anyway, I went down the next morning. Like I say, the cleanest, neatest little apartment ever you ever saw. I went down the next morning to the railroad station, and, like I say, we had just come into town. And my captain was there. They had our field kitchen set up in the railroad station, and they had hot water where you could make some coffee.

And I stepped through the little narrow railroad station. And just as I stepped through, I saw something to my right. And I looked down, and here was a, I guess, 13 or 15-year-old boy in a striped pajama suit. And, of course, we had heard some of this kind of stuff, you know?

And he was scratching himself and all this. And I thought, my goodness. So I stepped back in the station, and I said to the captain, who, by the way, I still see now and then-- Captain Swoop from Alabama. I said, sir, what is that out there? And he says, Coop-- he says, there's a concentration camp about five clicks down the road. He said there's going to be a truck come up here after a while. He said, would you help? Now, this is my captain. I'm a PFC.

Right.

But this is the way we talked to each other. He said, would you help break open? We said we captured that train out there. Would you help break open the car and take a load down of food? I said, yes, sir. The captain is talking.

So the truck came, and we broke open the car, and we loaded it with food. And from there on, I started down the road with the three enlisted people in the back, including me, and one enlisted driver, and a major who had gone along. And we started seeing people just out along the road as we went quite a ways away from the railroad station. And this all just junky and this and that, you know?

And then we started smelling something. And I was raised around here, and this is farm country, as you know. And I never smelled anything like this in my life or since. And I told someone earlier that after 40 some years of contemplation, the odor of evil is the only thing I can tell you. Because rotting bodies and all this, we--

It wasn't like anything you ever experienced.

Never had I ever smelled anything like that. And I'm sure any one who was near one of those places as a fresh individual would tell you the same thing. That odor-- you never would forget it.

So we went in-- turned off the road, and went in, and it was unbelievable what we were getting into. It was a rainy-- about like we have outside, a little bit rainy and misty. And we started seeing bodies laying all over and just no meat on them. You know, that's flesh, I know, but no meat. I'll put it in quite basic vernacular.

And they started crowding around us at the truck, and we actually became apprehensive that they were going to overwhelm us. They were just almost beyond reasoning. And they knew we were Americans. And I would-- the next morning-- I'll just go on if you'd still like.

Do you remember the date of that first day?

Yes, ma'am. It was the 5th of May, 1945, because here's a letter that I wrote to Joanne, my wife, who I had just married for-- when it was on the 6th of May, 1945. This letter is in a museum, the Center for Holocaust Studies in Brooklyn. And the mess kit I wrote it on is there. The boots I wore in the camp, the little yellow cloth Jewish star that one of the inmates gave me is also there.

OK.

And, of course, I have some of this other stuff. Someone will end up with it someday. Whoever does, it doesn't do me any good anymore, you know?

And anyway, it was a shock. I was 21 years old, and, like I say, we had heard about these places and so forth. But you never dreaming.

Now, during the war previously, we had gone through what I called a slave labor place. Now, there is a heck of a difference. And I never will forget. These people came boiling out of this enclosure, and I was on a truck. And one fella had cut his arm, obviously had cut an artery, too. It was spurting blood. And he was so happy, waving his arms and so forth. And we were ducking the blood. We didn't want-- we wanted to stay halfway clean. But they were in pretty good health. These people I'm talking about, they were Hungarian Jews.

Hungarian Jews.

Hungarian Jews is what-- some of the inmates who spoke English-- I'll read this in just a second. And there was no mistaking what they were saying or what we were saying to them, because we were understanding fully what we were all saying. The human excrement was all over, and the bodies laying around. And this was a satellite. The name of the place was Gunskirchen, a satellite of Mauthausen, and which was now on down a little bit farther. I don't know whether the Russians or us actually captured that.

Now, it so happened this was my last move forward of the war, because the Russians were just down the road. And what we did back in those days, you pulled up and stopped. Of course, I'm a PFC. I don't know this at the time. You pull up

and stop so you don't start shooting each other through mistake. And it was my last move of the war. And ma'am, it was a long day.

I got up the next morning, and I came out of the [INAUDIBLE], and I wrote this letter to my wife, if I may read it, please.

Sure.

The original copy, or a copy of the original, is over there. Joanne typed this. I can't even read my own handwriting even today. But anyway, that copy is up, the original letter.

Where did you write this? Like back when you went back to your unit, you were--

When I finally was able to join my unit that night. Remember, I was separated from them.

Right.

I was given as job to do by the captain. It was about 9:30 when I finally caught up with my unit.

And you thought you had to--

The next morning-- the very next morning when I got up, I thought.

You had to get those feelings out.

Oh, my God. I thought-- I said, will I ever remember these details, never dreaming that 50 years later I could sit here with you right now, and without even reading this pretty well tell you? So this is what I said to her basically. It's about 10 or 11 pages long, so I won't go into all that.

Yesterday, I went to a concentration camp. From what I saw with my own eyes, everything I heard about these places is absolutely true. Here it is, and I happened to be hearing a little about it.

The report came to us of this concentration camp being five kilometers down the road. It happened that we captured a whole German supply train the night before, so four of us loaded up a truck with food and took it down. I want to tell you now, I never want to see a site again as we saw when we pulled in there. 14,000-- and in the letter, by the way, I said 1,400. 14,000 starving, diseased, stinking people. It was terrible. I'm 21 writing this.

Most of them were Jews that Hitler had put away for safekeeping. Some of them had been in camps for as long as eight years. So help me, I don't see how they stood it. No longer were most of them people. They were nothing but things that were once human beings.

As we pulled off of the highway into the camp, we had to shove them off of the truck. And I almost feel ashamed in saying this, but I told you, we were so afraid they were going to overwhelm us. They were so glad to see us. We had the first food that had been taken in there for a month.

Now, this was not an old place, Gunskirchen. It was a satellite, like I say, from Mauthausen. Mauthausen was where they had the ovens, I guess, and everything.

The people, for the most part, were dirty, walking skeletons. Some were too weak to walk. They had had nothing to eat for so long. Some of them were still laying around dead where they had fallen. Others would fall-- fall over dead as they tried to keep up with the truck. We were moving slow, as we didn't want to run over anyone.

We stopped to start unload-- as we all [INAUDIBLE]-- to start unload the food, and we really had a time. We tried and tried to keep them from crowding us so we could unload, but they were just about beyond reasoning.

Finally, about four of them who spoke English started getting a little order for us. Even then, we had to get off the truck and start shoving them out of the road. You could stand right in front of them and wave your arms for them to move over, and they would just stand there, look right in your face, and cry like a baby. It was really a pathetic scene.

Finally, we took out our guns and pointed them in their faces. And that over there is one of them I took out. And we knew we weren't going to do anything with the guns.

Right.

But they still stood there and bawled. They were past being afraid of even a gun. We fired a few shots up in the air, and still we couldn't clear them. They just wouldn't believe that we had food for everyone. We pulled on further back into the camp after about a half an hour, and the fellows who spoke English started getting some order.

By the way, I asked a couple of those. I said, why are you people in such good condition compared to the other ones? I was a little suspicious they might be a guard or something. And they just said that they were able to get out and work a little on the farms, I guess before they were sent into the camp. I don't know.

Then we started to unload. We picked out about 15 to help us. How those skinny fellows ever lifted those boxes is beyond me. They were heavy for us to lift, but they got them off. While we were standing outside the truck, a number of them came up and touched us-- I want to show you how that happened-- as if they couldn't believe we were actually there. Some of them would try to kiss us even. And then as a little aside, I said they must have been bad off, trying to make it as light as I could.

Sure.

But they would come up, and I have to demonstrate this, because we're not used to this. You know, we're no big stars or anything. Kind of panting.

[PANTING]

Really, like to see if they're real.

(WHISPERING) Just to touch us.

Yeah.

And that flag is what we represented.

That's right.

Some of them would come up, grab you around the neck, and cry on your shoulders. Others would just look and cry. Some of them would throw their hands up in the air and pray. They were mostly the ones who were too weak to stand.

I remember one old man sitting on a big boulder or something. And his legs here we're about the size of my wrist. And he just like this. And you never forget something-- I never knew I'd remember anything like this, you know?

I recall one woman who could only cry and point at her mouth. And one of the reasons I do that, she was dark. My mother was dark, like you are, and she kind of-- this lady kind of had some of the facial features. And that tore me up, you know?

One fellow must have felt that he should give me something. As he had nothing of value, he gave me his little yellow star that designates a Jew. And that's up in Brooklyn. I gave it to them. I hope it still has the smudges on it and so forth. I'll send it to you in another letter.

All of them wanted American cigarettes. Now, on the way down, we'd thrown away-- you know, you always stuff your pockets with your rations. We had thrown away and given away, and then we start having them so they could have a puff. I had given all but four of mine away on the road coming to the camp, so I had the four so at least eight of them could get a few puffs. Everybody wanted American cigarettes, by the way.

Finally, everything was unloaded. And, by the way, they wanted water, some of them, worse than food. And that's where I really learned the value of a drink of water, even though I'd put in time on the desert and everything. But you can hardly stand, and you want a drink of water, you know, before we gave them food.

Finally, everything was unloaded. As a major who went with us couldn't get much order, left everything up to we four enlisted men. The major, he might have been Jewish. He was torn up. He was really torn up. I felt sorry for him.

I estimated we had 2,400 cans of chow aboard, so I explained to one of the fellows, put two persons to a can. I might have killed some there, I don't know. That was an awful lot of food, even for one man.

You see the conditions these people were in. Too much food all at once would probably have killed them, but we tried to rationalize, you know?

That's right.

He was only a kid. The cans were about the size of a regular can of peaches, so that was plenty for a starter. Someone, I didn't know who, had slept 500 eggs aboard. I took one of the guys, and told him to start with the children, and give them one egg apiece, and if they had any left to give them to the women. The men, if you could call them that-- now, I don't say in a detrimental way.

I understand. You just meant they were--

Sticks standing there-- could eat the meat. He told us people were dying at an average rate of 150 per day at this camp. They just stacked them up in a pile if they died in the barracks. If they died outside, they left them there. I know. I saw them. Now, I did not go in the barracks. They just-- I didn't have time.

There were four barracks for 14,000 people. Room space was 1 yard per person, just enough room to sit down. And there were two latrines for 14,000. And if you have dysentery, you can't make it to a latrine. You're going to like those-- everybody will tell you it's all over the place. That was part of the stench, obviously.

Some of them were too weak to go the latrines, so the barracks had to do. What a mess. There was human refuse ever place. I had enough on my boots to be a walking sewer pipe. On top of this, they had no water. They had to stay off the roads and so forth. That was another thing we had to tell them. Stay off the roads, please. We didn't know this was our last move of the war, and I told them, you're liable to get us killed if our supplies can't get to us.

Those that could walk wanted to travel. You can imagine how that would have been with them on the roads with us. The young people who were at this camp will probably never get over it. They will be stunted for life. Now, this is a conjecture on my part, obviously, as a 21-year-old.

Right.

I don't know how they are today. You may see pictures of this back home as they put a call through for photographers. Don't know whether they went or not as after we left, we didn't go back. Instead, we got a better idea. Why truck the food in there when the tracks ran close by and we had a whole train of supplies? Also, an engine with steam up and an Austrian engineer. So we moved the whole darn-- and I said damned in the letter, I think-- trainload down close to the camp, enough food and other articles last them until they were strong enough to go on their way.

Later in the day, that pistol over there has significance after we left this place. I was riding in a Jeep with some-- I didn't

know who they were. Remember, I was separated, ma'am, from my outfit.

Right.

The captain gave me a job to do, and you did it in those days, the best you knew how. Later in the day, we stopped at a farmhouse. See, we ate as much as we could off of the people over there if we could, because rations get mighty old after a while.

Right.

We stopped in a farmhouse, and I think there was a couple of other fellows and myself in this Jeep. And, of course, no top on it, and the roads were muddy, and just nothing but a walking mud pile.

And we went in the place, and there was a French DP. That's displaced person. A lot of people don't know that. And I can't speak French and have a hard time enough with English. But anyway, he came up to me and grabbed my sleeve. And he said, SS, and he held up two fingers.

Now, the SS, as we knew them, were the bad boys, because we knew they were the ones that were the shock troops and this and that and so forth. And I said to these fellows-- I said, oh, Lord. I said, this man says there's an SS out here, two of them. I'll go with him.

So that pistol over there, pulled it out, and I had two of them-- pulled two of them out. And as I stepped out the back door, here's German soldiers washing their feet. So my God. And I jumped back in, and said, hey, there's Germans outside the door.

So we made them put their boots on and so forth. And these guys held them, and I went with this French DP out towards the barn and so forth. And we peeked around the corner, and here was a fellow standing. He was bare from the waist up, young fellow, probably not much older than me. He had on civilian trousers.

And the French DP said SS. So I took that pistol and another one, which I no longer have, and I put them behind me like this. And I walked out towards him. And he kept looking at me, just like you're looking at me.

And I can tell you in the basic language I used, or smooth it over. But I walked up to him, and I said, in German, to him-- pretty bad German-- Deutsche [GERMAN] And he kept looking at me and never said anything.

And I stepped up to him, whipped that pistol out, and put it right on him like this. And I said, you're a blankety-blank SS man, and I started to squeeze the trigger to kill him. And I'm thinking in my head, you SOB, raise your arm. That day, I found out the difference between murder and killing. I could kill you if I had to, but I can't murder you even today, and that would have been sheer murder.

So one of our guys stepped back and said, shoot the SOB, Cooper. And I stepped back, and I said, you shoot him. Well, he couldn't either. Of course, we do try to play fair most of the time.

Face to face, yeah.

Anyway, I went like this to him to drop his trousers. And underneath the civilian trousers was the dark SS uniform. So I knew had I shot him, I was really shooting an SS man. So we took him with us.

And I say, you know that SS man I captured later? He never came so near to dying in his life. I pointed my pistol right against his heart, but I just couldn't shoot him down in cold blood. Some of the kids ask me, did you kill anybody? And I said, well, I think so. And I said, at least one. But I never murdered anybody in my life, and I'd hope I never do. I lost my nerve when I started squeezing the trigger-- too much like murder.

Then I said to her that-- and this I mean as much today or more as I did back then-- there are two things about all this I

want to tell you. I never again want to see anything like this happen to anyone. I wish 130 million Americans could have been standing in my shoes that entire day. It was a long, long day.

And, like I say, I never dreamed I'd be sitting here 50 years later and be able to speak to someone like this. And Joanne, like I say, we had just-- I'd had a five-day delay en route, and we'd just gotten married. And here she is getting all this, probably wondering, my God, what's he up to? But it was our last move of the war, it happened to be.

And then I went back with the Army occupation into Germany. I was there, and I came home a year later, 30th of April when I finally got home, 1946. And we, by the way, that 71st Infantry Division, we were alerted to go to Japan. And thank God for Harry Truman. And I don't mean to be despairing to the Japanese people or anyone.

By the way, I have the highest respect from the German soldier. He really did his job. There wasn't any doubt about it. But the SS, you'll never hear me say anything good about them.

So you don't know after that day what happened. That was the day that you were involved directly.

Yes. Yes, I know what was involved. In fact, I know one of the people that stayed. We had a medic, Doc Nicholson, and he lives in California right now. He became a medical doctor, by the way. And I have seen him, I guess, at one of our 71st Infantry reunions. But he stayed for quite a while.

To help.

To help. See, we were troops moving up.

Sure.

And the medics-- thank God we had them, by the way-- really were one tremendous help.

How did that one day-- that long day-- affect you? In all these years, you obviously have never forgotten that moment.

Somebody asked me that question once, said, well, didn't that affect you? You know, I had never thought about it in that light. Naturally, I guess it affected, but you still have to steer a steady course if you have any sense. You can't be vindictive and all this.

And I guess nobody ever wants to fool with that flag, not while I'm around. Because if they were 9 feet tall, I'd tear right into them. I couldn't stand that.

And another thing, four years ago I went to China with a tour group. We were supposed to go five years ago when they had the Tiananmen Square. And I'll apologize to the Chinese government now for what I'm about to say, if it hurts them in any way.

But I took some dirt from my vegetable garden right over here in Beaver Creek, a couple of miles from where we're sitting. And I sterilized it in case I was caught. I didn't want to get the--

Trouble.

Yeah, in trouble. So we were having Peking duck in Beijing. And I excused myself from the table and went down on Tiananmen Square. And I spread the dirt. I took 100 1990 Lincoln pennies-- Liberty, in God we Trust, and so forth-- just innocuous little things that makes me feel better after experiencing something like this.

So it has affected you. I mean, here you're a very humane person, and you saw real inhumanity that you can't explain.

It was insanity along with inhumanity without a doubt. No, we don't. You have to steer a steady course. You'd have to be a real-- like I brought that weapon in here. Within the last month, there's been a lot of shootings around at schools.



Right.

Well, I certainly-- I've had that 50 years, and I don't-- hopefully never have to use it with anyone.

Right.

No, you think about it from time to time. But when you first came home, you had the career to get started, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

Right.

So you didn't have time to think about things like that then. And I honestly think that we knew more about those places than the Germans themselves-- than most of the Germans, other than the ones directly involved.

Involved.

Because if they asked too much, they went in the concentration camp themselves. They knew about concentration camps, but the death camps. I was in Auschwitz a couple of years ago, and, in fact, I have a rock back there I picked up over there.

Right.

And there's not much left it either.

Well, the American people thank you and all the soldiers that have gone into the camps as liberators. And we record these stories so that people will remember and it won't happen again.

I hope not.

Thank you.

Mm-hmm.