

This is January the 31st, 1995, and we are at Wright State University Television Center. Since this is the 50th anniversary of the liberation of the concentration camps from World War Two, we are interviewing a liberator. Today this is Bernard Mellman, who was a corporal in the United States Army. Mr. Mellman, where were you born, when did you go into the service, and then you'll tell us how you got to the point of being in Europe at that time.

I was born in Columbus, Ohio. And at the age of-- I had a normal childhood. At the age of 18, I enrolled at Ohio State University. At that time I joined the ROTC program. And that was in the artillery.

Also at that time, in September of 1942, I joined the enlisted reserves because, at that time, that was an automatic deferment to finish your college education. I went to classes for two quarters. And it seemed like that every day another seat would become empty because the students, the male students, were enlisting in the-- or being drafted into the armed forces.

Finally, it got to me, and one day I went and applied for active duty. And on March the 18th of 1943, I went on active duty with the armed forces. I was sent to Fort Sill, Oklahoma to take basic training in the artillery. This had a strong point of my life of what happened and why I feel I'm still here today.

I didn't know that being in the ROTC program was an automatic application, and also being in the reserves was an automatic application to go to Officer Candidate School. So when I finished basic training, I went before a group of colonels after I was called in and asked why I felt I would be a good officer. I was 18 years old and still wet behind the ears. And I said, well, I thought that, with proper training, I felt that I would, with a little more confidence, I could become a good officer.

They told me about the ASTP program, Army Specialized Training Program, and they were in desperate need of engineers. So I thought, well, I think I've got the mental capacity for that. So I accepted it. And I attended, in 1943, Syracuse University and University of Illinois until they finally closed down their program. They decided they had enough engineers.

Then I made an application to become an army pilot. I ate my carrots. I passed the physical. And then they told me they closed down that program because they had enough pilots, bombardiers. So they shipped me to Camp Gruber, Oklahoma, which, in 1943, was activated-- which, in 1943, the 42nd Infantry Division was reactivated.

This was MacArthur's, General MacArthur's division in World War Two--

Right.

--which he became famous for. At that time it was a soldier-- the division consisted of soldiers from all states of the Union. That's why they call it the "Rainbow." And General Collins was the general that reactivated the 43rd-- 42nd Infantry Division in Camp Gruber, Oklahoma.

So in 1940-- the latter part of 1943 and 1944, I spent in training. I was assigned to an infantry division. And I went through full combat training with the-- and that I don't remember. Was a 222nd or 232nd Infantry Regiment. I went through village fighting, everything there had to become a combat soldier. They had, at sometime in 1944, they sent overseas soldiers from the artillery. And they needed replacements.

So I was transferred from the regiment into the artillery. And as it turns out later in combat, our infantry battalions took a tremendous beating. And one of the fellows that I became very friendly with, Bernie Comiskey from Chicago, he stayed in the infantry. And when I went to see him when we were in-- in somewhat of a reserve in combat, I went to see him, and he was lost in action. And it could have happened to me. We--

You received your uniform about this--

I received my uniform at that time. And that's the uniform of the 42nd Infantry Division. And that's the one that I went

overseas with, and I was able to retain it when I was discharged from the service. There is a patch on the left, and I'll bring that up now. Well, it's on my left shoulder. It's the 4th Infantry Division because, after the war ended in May 1945, for some reason, which I still don't know today, I was-- about 30 of us from our division was transferred into a group that was sent back to the United States for special training to join the 4th Infantry Division and to-- Pacific theater of operation.

As it turns out, I was on a ship when the two atomic bombs were dropped. And I got home, and my parents got to see their son right on V-J Day. And I never did go back overseas.

So you were in Europe. And--

I was in Europe.

With?

We landed in January, in January 1945. The division, the Infantry Division, infantry regiments landed a couple of weeks before the artillery. They were sent right into the Battle of the Bulge, at the tail end of the Bulge, where they suffered tremendous casualties.

Right.

We landed on January the 4th in Marseilles, France. And I was in the 542nd Field Artillery Battalion, Battery B. And I was the scout. Well, because I was a corporal, they gave me the ranking of scout corporal. And I would go with the forward observer, who was the executive officer with our battery, into positions so we could lead and direct fire from-- I was in-- the group was a 155 howitzer, which was a new weapon that came out. It was-- today I don't even think they use howitzers anymore because they have all these more technical, mechanized weapons that are really assigned to tanks.

But we were in the 155 Howitzer Group, and we did a lot of firing at the enemy when we pursued them.

So you saw death as you were going along.

We saw death. Right. I had been indoctrinated, and I had become very embittered. And it was either our life or their life, the German soldier's life. So we, as a division, had received a lot of commendations for our infantry participation and for our-- especially our artillery because of our direct-- and we were a very fine unit in firing at the enemy. We must have killed thousands of soldiers.

As you crossed Europe and got closer to where Dachau was, had you heard anything about concentration camps?

Not really. Not really. I heard words of death camp, but I don't believe I heard the word concentration camp until we landed at-- we arrived at Dachau.

Tell us how you came to that.

Well, we were pursuing the 4th-- the 42nd Infantry Division made a loop. We started at France, at the southern part of France, went across the Rhine, and headed directly East, right into Germany. And we were at-- [PAUSES] do you mind if I look at a map--

No. Sure.

--because there's a map here that would-- these names I haven't talked about in many years. We went to W<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>rzburg, which was-- at that time, I thought it was-- well, I can't even think of the city that-- Frankfurt. But it was W<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>rzburg which we-- the Air Force had destroyed that town. Only the steeples on the churches were still standing. And we went to Schweinfurt, which was west in Germany. And then we made the move South. Our goal was Munich.

And heading South, we hit the Autobahn. And at that time, the United States didn't have any superhighways, with the exception of probably the toll roads, the new tollways at that time. But Hitler had created tremendous highways there, which he was going to-- he promised the people that he would build cars so they could use these highways. But we were pulled by semi-- by halftracks, they called them, these big howitzers. And we just rolled so beautifully. And we were on a real roll, going down through-- from Schweinfurt to go into Munich.

Along the way, we were diverted into a side road. And we were following-- there are four batteries in a battalion. And we were in the second battery, so we were following the group in front of us. And of course, they were-- an hour or two or three hours before us were the infantry regiments. And they were, at that time, pulled-- they were on jeeps, they were on tanks, they were on everything, anything that could move because we were really gaining speed and finishing up the war.

Right.

Suddenly we came across this compound. And that was Dachau. At that time, we saw-- our group as we approached it, saw hundreds of soldiers-- and these were German soldiers-- laying all over the field in front of the entire-- of course, the entire complex was either with barbed wire or with building. And we saw all these German soldiers. They were already slaughtered by our infantry, who got there before us.

We pulled around to where the entrance was. And we kept on going because we saw the cattle cars. And there we saw a sight that, once you see that, you may forget other things, which I do at my age now, but I don't forget the sight. To see the 12 to 24 cattle cars stuffed with human bodies, it was a sight that, as hardened as I was as a soldier, we-- it was just hard to-- well, I'm not able to describe it.

But the stench, because we came right up to the cattle cars-- we got out of our vehicles. I was driving my jeep, and we had all the battalions, all the rest of the battery with their trucks and with the halftracks. We went up to those cattle cars and just stood and looked at that, and it didn't look real, to see these emaciated bodies stacked up high, some laying off the ground because the doors of the cattle cars were all open. And to see those bodies just laying on the ground or laying in there in all directions-- I know we've already recorded in history some of those pictures, and I think the previous person--

Had pictures.

--had pictures. Well, we stayed-- we stopped-- we stopped. We were there probably for 20 minutes. And then the battery commander said, let's go. We're going to go inside. And we went to the main entrance, which had already been opened by the infantry personnel, infantry soldiers. And we walked inside. You see the bodies of a lot of the victims just sprawled all over. They were evidently shot by the Germans because they knew the Americans were coming.

There were a few Germans still inside. I understand that some of the Holocaust victims got weapons and grabbed a few from the Germans and turned around and shot them.

But you didn't see. That already happened prior to when you came?

That was prior, about three hours prior to our arriving. That's how we-- I must have-- we must have gotten there about 1 o'clock in the afternoon. And I would imagine about 9, 10 o'clock that the building, the-- Dachau was actually liberated by one-- I think it was a 222nd Infantry Division.

Did you see any live people? I mean, any live inmates?

Well, I can answer that this way. We decided-- we went inside the building. And the first building we came to, where the fire-- where the-- the building where they were destroyed the-- they--

Crematorium.

--cremated the bodies. At that time, somebody said everybody from Battery B, all the battalions, 542 Field Artillery Battalion, we have to leave. We have to leave. The American military government, the group-- the group is here. They're going to take over. So we had to leave. And as we left the inside of the compound to the outside, we were put on guard duty for the rest of that day, till about late at night. And then we started up again toward-- because we were still in combat. We were heading toward Munich.

But during that period from about, I would say, from about 2 o'clock till about dark, we were at the-- assigned to one area around the compound, which had the wire. Well, the whole compound was with wire. What type of wire would you call that that had the--

You're talking about the fencing. I know.

The fencing that you don't escape from.

Right. Right. The electric fence or--

No, they weren't electric. They were--

Barbed wire, probably.

Barbed wire, that's the word. Thank you. That's why I retired. [LAUGHS]. Yeah, whatever. So we were assigned to one section of the barbed wire. And there were hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of victims that were just milling around. And a group came up because we were able to go right up to the barbed wire, and a whole group, 50, 75, couldn't get any closer. They were all reaching out. They wanted the touch you. And that's where it really got to me.

You've freed us. We're here. We're saved. And I could speak a little Yiddish because my parents spoke Yiddish. And I could understand a little German. And there were some Jews in there. There were some of non-Jews. And there was one-- but they spoke Polish. They spoke different languages. But they all seem to understand German.

So one man said to me, he said, he had one arm. He says, my turn tomorrow to go to the-- to go to the cremator, to be cremated. Another one said, I'm scheduled to go in a few days. They still had the car, the loads of cattle cars with bodies that they had priority. At least they had these people. But they-- the-- you felt like a hero. You felt like you had did something, but it was a group-- it was a group participation of the 42nd Infantry Division that liberated that. I was only one person.

It was a great thing to remember. But eventually they were all pulled back by the new soldiers that came in and told them to get back because they didn't want us to come in contact with them because we could get all the diseases that could be passing. And we were still fighting. So we bed down for the night. The next morning we went on to Munich. And Munich-- until we wound up in the war, in Salzburg, Austria.

We wanted to talk about the flag that you liberated, the Nazi flag.

Well, when I got to Munich, we went-- there we spent about four days because we were on guard duty. And we were assigned guard duty at different busy intersections. And during our visit there, I got into one military-- it was a military building. And I got there at the right time at the right place. I found this flag there.

And this flag is one of the worst memories that I ever had-- that I'll ever have as I look at that because it turns out that it's got primarily red. And I see red every time I look at that because of that swastika right in the middle, for what it stood for. And I pray to God that it'll never happen anyplace else in this world.

You have your--

This helmet is what they permitted me to take home. It's a helmet liner. The helmet actually goes over that. But they let

me take my uniform when I left the service, and they let me take this liner. Then I have this memento. This is a--  
[PAUSES]

Bayonet. Bayonet.

Yes. This is a bayonet that I took off a dead soldier laying on the field right outside the building in Dachau. I took it. He had it out, and it was loose, and I picked it up. This actually fits on his rifle. But I don't know how many people, how many Americans that might have killed before that.

This whole experience, as a young soldier and seeing it and living through it, has it influenced your-- I know that for a long time you didn't think about it too much. But now that you think about it, what are your feelings in regard to that period?

Well, my feelings are basically-- is that, after reading what the-- Hitler's style and how he took the youth of that country, and he, over a period of years, he took their minds and he created a monster, I feel that this could happen again. And I have the concernment. I know that there's the neo-Nazis, and I know there are. But as long as they're in a tremendous minority, and as long as the people of this country can appreciate the American flag like I appreciate the American flag-- I used to get a chill every time I was in a parade and then an American flag would go by. It's something that we have, and we should cherish. And I would hope that we could get back in line with our country to get that feeling again.

And by telling these stories and recalling what you saw as a liberator--

Well, again, I was one part of a group of a million men, who really gave of themselves, and many of them gave their lives in combat. I feel very fortunate that somebody up there looked down at me, just alone, took me from the infantry into the artillery, that I'm here today. But I would just pray that it would just not happen again in this world. And as long as we keep militarily strong, I think we're OK.

Well, thank you very much for your testimony and as an American soldier. The people of this country appreciate what you did during that period.

Thank you.