

This is January the 31st, 1995. And we are at Rice State University in Dayton, Ohio. This is the 50th year of commemoration of the liberation of the concentration camps in Europe during the Second World War. And we have with us one of the liberators of those camps, Major Gabe Vacca, who will tell us a little bit about what he saw and where he was during that period. But first he'll tell us where he was born and where he went into the service and at what age.

I was born in Youngstown, Ohio, Northeast Ohio here. And my mother had to sign for me to get in in 1941, before the war started. And I was an aircraft mechanic down in Texas. And then I went into flight training and became a pilot, graduating in 1943.

I went into combat in Europe in early 1944, before D-day. And then I was-- my 406th fighter group was one of many fighters in England. And then when D-day occurred, we moved over onto the continent and supported Patton's Third Army. We were his air support. And during that progress, as we moved across France and Belgium and into Germany, one of our assignments was right close to Buchenwald, the concentration camp, which we didn't know anything about.

I was just going to ask you, did you have any prior knowledge of what was taking place there--

None whatsoever.

--or that it was there at all? You didn't know it was there at all?

No, ma'am. Didn't have any idea. In fact, there were so many other things going on, the battle and the fighting, and the Germans were in close proximity. So that didn't even enter our mind. And it was only during a lull that-- I don't know how we managed to get sent to Weimar, where Buchenwald was. We were only about 12 or 14 miles from there.

We had an encampment, a fighter control center. And I remember being sent up there in a reconnaissance car with a friend of mine, who was also a fighter pilot. We were assigned to fighter control center, to maintain contact with our fighter group. And they wanted a pilot on the ground to talk to a pilot in the air so that we were on the same frequencies.

And it was almost a happenstance that we were said-- we were told to go up there. We didn't know what we were going to see. And when we got to the camp, it had already-- they had already rebelled. The inmates had already taken over the camp. They had already captured some of the Germans, killed some of them. And when we went into the gates, the gates-- they locked the gates and didn't let anybody out.

The inside, they locked the gates from the inside?

Yeah. Well, the army troops that took over locked it to keep the prisoners from leaving because they were almost dead. They were just skin and bones, most of them. And they didn't want them out. They had medics coming in. They were bringing food and blankets and medical equipment.

So some troops had already entered?

When I got there, yeah. They had been there, oh, maybe a day. We were talking about when this happened. And you said that they took the camp, I think, on the 11th. I flew a mission that day. So I must-- it must have been either-- well, it must have been when-- the day after because when I was flying, I wasn't right there at Weimar.

Right.

So I must have been there the 12th.

And your car came to those gates. And then tell us what happened after that.

Well, the first one I saw was a youngster. I'd say he was about 9 or 10 years old, with the striped suit and who looked

fairly decent compared to the others who were in the barracks. And I found out later that he was from Andorra, and he was 14 years old. And I think I have seen his pictures on posters or in documentaries.

Really?

And so then I met-- the next person I ran into was a very healthy-looking individual in a striped suit. And he said that he wanted me to let him out the gate, get him out the gate. He said he was--

He spoke what language?

He spoke-- he spoke--

He spoke English.

--fluent English. He said he was an American from Pittsburgh. He was-- but he was a German Jew, and that's why he was in there. Well, we had a lot of Germans who were trying to disguise themselves as Americans or get in civilian clothes so that they wouldn't be-- the SS. And I thought that he might have been one of those because he looked too healthy--

To have been in the camp.

--to have been in there. And then we started-- this was also the day that the commander of our GIs got all the people from that he could from Weimar and marched them out there and showed them what was there.

You were there when that took place?

Yeah.

What was that like?

Well, he had them going through there about six abreast. And he double-timed them, men and women. And there might have been children in there. I don't remember. But ran him through the compound, where the bodies were stacked up, the crematorium, the clinic where they had, I particularly remember, a head that was in a jar that was cut down in the middle, and it was, like-- you could see the brain and everything from that perspective. And then they had other parts of bodies in different containers.

I didn't know that that was an experimental camp also, for medical studies.

Were you horrified? What did you-- do you remember how you felt?

I was thinking that I wasn't in shock. But I think it was unreal. I really didn't realize what I had seen until after I'd left there because everything-- the bodies looked like mannequins. One of the most impressive sight I think I saw, other than the crematoriums with the bodies in them-- they were still in there. The fires were out, but the ovens were still hot-- was in the barracks, where the inmates were so emaciated, so they could hardly lift their head. And their eyes were just in a daze. I don't think they knew what was going on.

You had pictures that you have of that day--

Yeah. Oh, yes we have--

--of that very day.

Yeah, there some pictures of the bodies that were in-- there were bodies all over, particularly in the courtyard. But the ones that I have were taken by a friend of mine, who was also a fighter pilot on the same assignment-- we were

lieutenants then-- Lieutenant Jay McCall. He's now down in Phoenix. And I went down and got these pictures last week so that I could show them here.

And the bodies-- one part-- one stack of bodies that were right near the crematorium. The others, I don't know which photo that was. There's a picture of the courtyard. The gates were locked, and the people were milling around. There were inmates and GIs wandering around. Most people were sort of like in a daze. We didn't really know that we were going to find something like that.

There were hundreds or many, many-- oh, hundreds of inmates? Oh, yeah. Thousands.

Were they men, women, and children?

All the ones I saw were men and some children, children that were like the one I had seen. And I don't recall them as well as I do the first one I saw.

Did they come towards you? Did they make contact with you?

Oh, yes. Yes. A lot of them did. They wanted chocolate and candy, which we had with us.

You hadn't been told at this point that they could become ill if they would eat anything that-- other than--

No. In fact, while we were giving some chocolate and so forth, we were told stop it because they would become very ill. They hadn't eaten hardly anything. And the ones in the barracks were just skin and bones. They were the living dead, I have to say.

Did anyone-- no one actually could talk to you and tell you what had proceeded that day. They weren't able to do that.

We never even suspected that anything else had gone on. We thought this was just a prison camp, until we saw the crematoriums.

And then you realized.

Yeah, when we saw the bodies in there. And the others, we just assumed had died of starvation and so forth. But they had-- that was a planned exterminating process that they had going. I've studied it since then. And I have a book here that it's Hitler's death camps. And it covers Buchenwald in there as well as Dachau and Treblinka. And it's a real education.

Is it hard to imagine that people could do that to each other?

Oh, yes. Yes. Now that I read about it and I know what went on, and I was seeing the results of when-- everything that had happened before must have been a terrible situation for the inmates. They were tortured, poisoned, used for experimental purposes. And so I saw them when they were all through it, that they were dead or near death.

There were piles of bodies, even--

There were piles of bodies in the courtyard that was-- [SIGHS] I kind of felt like they made a path by the piles of the body on either side. And that's what I have in my mind. Now, that's almost unbelievable. And I'm wondering whether I really saw that many bodies stacked that high because it's unbelievable that they had them lying there for-- until they could get them into the ovens. But--

It's hard.

I feel-- I remember that. And I think it wasn't an illusion because I know some of these pictures brought it out, that it wasn't. And talking to my friend last week to confirm some of the things before I came out here, to see was it really true

what we saw there. And he confirmed a lot of it and gave me more information that he had seen.

It was, if not shocking, terrifying for a young person, like yourself, a young American soldier, to come into a place like this.

Yeah. Well, we had already seen a lot of death. There were-- we had fought already up to this point. We had been in combat for almost a year. So that wasn't-- seeing dead bodies was not unusual for us.

But in that quantity? In that quantity--

In that manner, because we had-- you know, usually the bodies were either our own military or the German soldiers, many-- mostly German soldiers in uniform. But this was-- there was a smell of formaldehyde in the air. There was a stench there that I think was very impressive, something we can almost smell now.

Did it cause you to have nightmares, or did it-- just was it something you could--

No. No, it didn't because we were still at war. This was only a short stop en route to-- well, Weimar was in the East Zone, in the East German Zone. So we were pretty close to the Russians. And the Germans in between were trying to surrender. And so there was a lot of other activity going on.

And during the period we were there, we saw it, we didn't believe it, and then went on. But it was only later that, when we started thinking about it, that what we really saw and what-- then we started hearing what it was all about.

Right.

Then we found out that was only one camp. There were hundreds of others.

Did you realize at the time that many of the people were Jewish that were in that camp that--

Yeah.

Yes.

And in fact, this was the first information we got, that they were all Jews. But then later, we found out that they had tried to move all the Jews out of the camp down south. They were going to leave the others. And they left half of the Jews in the camp because I think they were going to die or they were not-- they were of no use to them anymore. But the ones that were, they were marching them south. And I don't know how many went south.

But it was only for a matter-- a very short matter because we were taken over the whole-- that was the end of Germany because this is April. The war ended in May.

Right. Was it something that you talked about to your fellow soldiers, or did you not?

When I got back to my organization, they didn't know about this. But the person that I was with, Lieutenant McCall and I, talked about it a lot. We wondered about what went on there. And did we know about it and could we think of anything that led us to believe that something like that existed? And no, it didn't. We didn't

Didn't the people look on you, once they realized you were Americans, like saviors? I mean, liberators you were.

Oh, yes. Well, they treated us as liberators when we went in, those that were able to. The ones in the barracks just simply-- I don't know how they-- I don't think they ever got out of those barracks. They were just lying in shelves, like in a warehouse.

Like cordwood.

Yeah. And there were many of them in-- you know, all together. And they could just barely pick up their head and look at us. And we tried to tell them they were free. You know, nobody understood what we were saying.

Has this experience, Major, ever made you feel differently? Or is there something that you--

Oh, yes.

--can share from that?

Yes. I have great empathy and sympathy for the Jews. I've gone to Israel now about six times. And I have many Jewish friends, Israeli, and many Jewish friends here now. And I feel an obligation that somebody who is not a Jew has got to let people know the skinhead-- the skinheads are not for real, that it did occur. We're here to confirm that. And those of us that have seen it and know what it's about have an obligation to talk about it so that it never happens again.

Thank you very much. We as Americans, we are proud of the American soldiers in the liberation of the camps that occurred by people like yourself. And we also hope that, through the use of these stories, these firsthand stories, that perhaps it will not happen again.

Yes. And as long as I'm alive, I'll be one of them to make sure it doesn't.

Thank you.