

**Imperial War Museum
Department of Sound Records**

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LIFE IN NAZI EUROPE 1933 - 1945

Frederick A Riches

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Access Code A

CXW Could you tell me how you came to be in the army in the first place Mr Riches, were you a conscript?

FR No, I joined because I was doing civil defence work in Stepney and I was that ashamed of what was happening down there that when the heavy bombing had finished I decided to join up to get some of my own back. I went to Tottenham for examinations and I was transferred to Aldershot.

CXW When was it that you actually joined the army?

FR About '41.

CXW Jumping ahead to 1945 I think you were in a unit that went into Belsen?

FR Yes.

CXW When did you first hear of Belsen?

FR We was about five mile from the camp. We didn't know nothing about Belsen at all. The next morning we was told to assemble ourselves on the road with all vehicles and everything else and we was moved down the road and we passed Belsen on the way to the next field where we was going to stop. Even then we didn't know that it was a concentration camp or anything like that. All we could smell was the atmosphere itself and it was really horrible.

CXW What did it smell like?

FR There was all sorts of things, like burning boots, flesh, everything else, like, but we couldn't see nothing from the road we was on.

CXW Had you ever smelt anything like that before?

FR No, never had done and we smelt that when we were near enough

mile away from it.

CXW What did you say to each other when you smelt that smell?

FR I drove a small ambulance and the orderly was sitting at the side of me. He said to me, "Coo, Fred, what a bloomin' smell." I said, "Yeah, can't see nothing alight around here anywhere." He said, "I don't know what it is."

CXW You didn't think it was just a countryside smell?

FR We knew that it wasn't a farmhouse or something like that going up because there's a different smell. This was any amount of different smells all mixed into one, it was really horrible and we put our handkerchiefs across our faces as we were going past it 'cos it was worse there and we were about two and a half, three miles down the road when we went into the field and we dispersed all the way round. Then the officer come out, he says, "What you passed just now is a concentration camp."

CXW Had you ever heard of concentration camps?

FR No, never had done then.

CXW Had you ever heard the word 'concentration camp'?

FR No, you see before we got there we was attached to the Guards Armoured Div and I was running up with the tanks most of the time and it was only when they was pulled out of action and we went back to our own unit, the Medical Corps, that we was given orders to move on and we moved on and when we come down to the Belsen camp.

CXW What happened next?

FR The next day, we parked up overnight, we were told by the officers and the ad boy that our job was to go in and evacuate anybody we could get out of Belsen. We said, "Belsen?" He said,

"Yes, the concentration camp down the road."

CXW When you say 'we', how many of you were there who were told to do this?

FR The entire lot of us, that was the Royal Army Service Corps and the Medical Corps, we was all together then, all the lot of us.

CXW Do you mean hundreds of you?

FR I suppose there'd be about 150-200 all together in our Service Corps division we had about 24 men, that was all mostly ambulance drivers, sergeant and a captain, there was just a captain in charge of us, like.

CXW Do you remember any of the names of any of your comrades?

FR Jack Lane, one of them, he came from Doncaster. There was Ronnie Crow, he got killed, Tommy Taylor, one of our chaps, he won the MM before we got to Belsen that was. Quite a few. I can't remember all the names at the moment. There was Teddy Low, he was the engineering corporal, used to look after our vehicles and that, Captain Pratt, our own officer and Chalky White the RAMC officer. They was all there with us but everybody all pulled their weight, everyone of them.

CXW Who was it who told you you were going to do this job?

FR Our own officers. They had a conference with the medical corps people, then they come out and told us all what was going to happen. They said, "All what you've got to do is to get them people out of there, fetch them back to here, they are setting up an old disused stables down there." And they putting tables in them so that they could wash 'em all down as they went in there, wash 'em all down, transfer 'em all over to the SS barracks. And we said, "when we go down?" "Not today" they said, "you go down tomorrow."

CXW So you were going to bring them out of the camp to these disused stables?

FR We used to bring 'em out of Belsen camp, take 'em about a mile and a half up the road to our camp, not our camp, the SS barracks, about two and a half, three mile down the road, take 'em in there, used to unload 'em, put 'em on the stretchers in the stable bay and the orderlies there used to wash 'em all down, scrub 'em everything else and then put 'em into the hospital down the road.

CXW What happened next?

FR Before we went down there we were strafed by this German aircraft as they come over. That was the day we were going down. We was all in our vehicles waiting to get the order to move out and these two aeroplanes come over and the sergeant major sez, "Don't worry, we're on neutral ground." I said, "We are?" He said, "Yes." Well, not me, quite a lot of them said, "Are we sergeant?" He said, "Yes." Any way they come round the camp, come in from the back end or the lefthand side of us and just strafed us, machineguns bursting all over the place. It's on one of the photos, you can see one of the ambulances what was hit. One of our chaps got caught on the ankle, took half of his heel off. Myself, we'd had our rifles and I just pulled it back and as I aimed it up the sergeant sez, "If you do that you're on a charge. That won't bring him down any way." I said, "One of the blokes is lying injured out there." "Nothing to do with us" he said "we'll go out and get him in a minute." He said, "If you do that they'll come round and strafe all the lot of us." I said to Snowy White, Palmer, me mate was next to me, I sez to him, "What a carry on ain't it?" He said, "I understand what you mean but he's right ain't he. They could come back again and get all the lot of us." We let that go. It was about an hour later before we started moving out.

CXW This was before you ever got to Belsen?

/Before

FR Before we got into Belsen itself. Then when we got into Belsen, the camp itself, we all had to go in, be disinfected right the way through, then we was told what huts we was to go to, what they was operating on, used to go to different huts, park yourself outside there, go in and help them out with whatever they were stretching out. They might be men, women, children anything like that. We were surprised when we first went in there, there was three ambulances on the first lot. I was the second one on that and when the three of us walked in with the orderlies all we could see was naked women. We looked at the officers. He said, "Don't worry about that, just get 'em out. Put 'em on your stretchers, get 'em out, get 'em down the road."

CXW Were they lying down or walking about?

FR A lot of 'em was walking about. They got 'em off the bunks, they pointed out which one they was going to take. The officer used to look at 'em, find out which was the worst of the lot, get them out first.

CXW Did the smell get worse as you approached the camp?

FR Funnily enough, after being there for a couple of days, we was used to that. It didn't affect us at all.

CXW When you first saw the people in the camp, what did they look like, what kind of impression did it make on you?

FR They looked like human skeletons, that was all. When we looked at them we thought, "how can these people treat 'em like that?" One woman come over and put her hands out and I turned to the doctors and I said, "Is she alright?" He said, "Yes, she's one of them. Put her out on the stretcher." So, laid her on the stretcher, handed them out and put 'em into the ambulances.

CXW What did she have her arms out for?

FR She wanted to get hold of somebody 'cos she knew we was

taking them away and they wanted to get out of there into the hospital where we were taking them.

CXW What colour were their skins?

FR They was all white but quite a lot of them was sort of yellowy colour and you could see their eyes were sunk right into their heads and their faces were all drawn in. We thought the Germans, what they was doing to them they might just as well have shot 'em in the first place when they first got 'em in there because they had no regular meals. All they used to do was fetch in a tip truck with turnips in it and upend it and let 'em fight amongst themselves for it.

CXW How did you know that?

FR We watch 'em doing it because when we first went in there we saw Kramer, the chief there, and Irma Griese was the second in command. Both of them was givin^g/the turnips away. As they was going to get 'em they was pushing some people away and letting somebody else get 'em.

CXW Were Kramer and Irma Griese still in charge?

FR Upto a point, they were in charge but then the other officer came in from somewhere else and he says, "Right, he's away," and took Kramer, put him in a vehicle, drove him off somewhere, I'm not sure of the place whether it was Nuremberg or one of the others there and he says, a chap in the Royal Engineers who put the water towers up, he said, "How about Irma Griese, she going as well?" "No," he said "keep her here for a couple of days then we'll send her away." In that short time, the infantry man who was there he used to mess around with them, put turnips up one end for them. Make them go up and get it. "Oh, we ain't going to eat that." They said, "You got to, you let these other people at it, now you eat it." "We're prisoners of war," they said "we want proper food." They said, "No, you get what we give you, same as you treated these other people."

CXW So the infantry were forcing them to eat the same things that they'd given the inmates?

FR That's right, yes, because they were in a sort of enclosed area and what the infantry used to do is to put the turnips up one end. When they went up to get them so they transferred them back again to the other end, kept 'em going like that all day long. The other inmates in there they were enjoying it as well. We was more or less. I thought to myself, "They are getting some of their own back now." But we was concerned mostly with getting the people away from there.

CXW Was it just Kramer and Irma Griese who were...

FR They was in sole charge.

CXW Were there any of the others who were having this turnip treatment given to them?

FR Yes, there was eight women there with Irma Griese and there was any amount of German soldiers there who were mostly all round Kramer most of the time until he was removed. Once he was removed they got all the prisoners including the women to move the bodies, put 'em on trucks. They had trucks running around, they were putting 'em on there. Taking 'em down to the pits we'd dug.

CXW So the German guards were having to do this?

FR They had to do that. Some of the pictures on the photos, they've got those showing that as well. The chap I felt sorry for mostly was a little chap in the engineers, he was driving the truck, the fork lift truck, the big conveyor. He used to dig the holes out. Bulldozer. He used to go down with the bulldozer right to the end and clear it all out and he was the only one allowed in there to smoke while he was working because the state she was creating more or less was terrible. His main job then was those what was at the side he used to push 'em in with the bulldozer. Push all the lot in there. Course we looked and said,

/Gor

"Gor, why do that, why not let 'em throw 'em in, get the Germans round here, throw 'em in instead of pushing 'em along with the bulldozer." So the officer said, "There's nothing to worry about that, they're all dead any way, nothing we can do about that and it's quicker, we want to clear the ground as fast as we can."

CXW Who dug the pits?

FR Just one chap on his own.

CXW British or German?

FR He was a British chap from the Royal Engineers driving a bulldozer.

CXW He dug the pits with a bulldozer?

FR He dug the pits with a bulldozer. As soon as he'd finished one, he was about 12-14 foot down and then when he cleared it out he went to another site, started digging away there again. Then they was - there was somebody helping the chaps who'd bin there, the German ones, the officer was getting them to throw the bodies in because none of them had any identification on them, no bracelets, no nothing, just throw 'em straight in. Then another officer come along and said, "look you're wasting your time doing that, we can get them on something else, get some more ambulances down. Put your bulldozer back on it." So he was put in and this chap didn't like it at first. Then he started pushing them in and that's how it went on from there.

CXW You talked about how the infantry more or less punished the German guards, did they punish them in any other way?

FR Only by making them load the trucks up. No way was they vicious with them, though a lot of them wanted to but the people that was adamant sort of thing, there was one chap was going to swing his butt at one bloke, his rifle butt and the officer said to him, "Don't do that, we got our way of dealing with them." He just looked at him and said, "You'd better go somewhere else."

Work somewhere else, don't get near these." He was transferred to another part of the camp and it more or less all settled down then. It was about four, five days before we was allowed through the camp. We saw the gas chambers and everything else.

CXW We'll come on to that in a minute, but how were the Germans behaving?

FR They was very arrogant and if you tell 'em to do anything. "Why should we do it?" Two or three times the sergeant has gone over and just wagged his finger to 'em and he said, "If I had my way you lot would be put down some of them holes there. Do as you're told, as far as I know you're being transferred tomorrow you are going to a prisoner of war camp." That's what they done during that time. But there was no - I won't be sure for myself because I was away from the camp two or three times when we were taking people out but there might have been one or two instances there with British soldiers and that.

CXW Did you see any?

FR I never seen them myself.

CXW Did you hear of any?

FR No, but if I'd have heard something I'd have been more or less delighted to see about it. After we got one of our chaps shot in the field, another one killed coming up with sniper fire, we was all wound up then.

CXW Did none of the Germans show remorse or that they were sorry?

FR No, not one, they just sneered.

CXW How do you mean 'sneered'?

FR When they started putting them into the trenches, what the

had dug, they^{'d} just stand aside there and sort of half smiling as though it was hitting the bottom, like. One of the officers come through, his photo's on one of the snaps as well, he come through and he says, "Get them soldiers out the way." One of the sergeants says, "Let 'em see what..." He says, " I don't want 'em to see, get 'em out the way because otherwise there's going to be a riot here, get 'em right out the way, take 'em over that field and put somebody in charge of them."

CXW That was because the British soldiers were disgusted you mean?

FR They was, yes. I mean, we saw that as we were going down to the huts and I looked at my orderly, I said, "look at that bloke laughing over there," - there's a German there with his hat on looking down the trench, "Ha, ha," he's going. My mate says to me, "Where's the British troops?" I said, "There they are, the other side." They'd separated them, the German troops were at one side, the British troops round this side. There's nothing could really happen like that because there's a big wide trench they'd dug. When we'd finished that and we was pulled out, I don't know whoever else went in but as far as we knew we'd cleared the camp and then we had orders - before we cleared the camp, the hospital where we was at the SS barracks, that was being filled up with the Belsen victims. The officer sez to us, "What we want you to do tomorrow, you won't go down to Belsen, they're going there sorting out all the others, we want you to transfer these wounded Germans further back to another hospital. He turned round he sez, "I want 'em out as quick as possible to get more victims in." So when we come out he told us all^{about} that^{at} the briefing , when we come out our sergeant sez to us, "What he was inferring, he wants 'em out as quick as possible to get them Belsen victims in, but I don't want you speeding along at 70-80 miles an hour. They are wounded men, do as you are told." We went alright and we were about two and a half mile along the road, we were just travelling and one of the bigger ambulances come past me. I looked up and said to my mate, "Old Jack Lane's moving isn't he?" He said,

/Yes

"Yes." When we got down there, cos he had a full stretcher one, mine was only a two one. When we got down to the hospital old Jack, I sez to him, you moved down there Jack, din't you?" "Yes I want to get back and get some more out," he says. I said, "But in a big ambulance like that it must be..." " Don't worry about them" he sez, "see what they've done down there, why be careful now?" I said, "That's not what the sergeant told us." "Take no notice of him," he says, "you're on your own here, you can do as you like with them." I said, "Oh" and looked at the others and they said, "As soon as we get our whatsisnames out, we'll get back as fast as we can, there's no restriction to us then." So we done that but old Jack he was haring away all the time.

CXW So he was taking a bit of revenge really?

FR He was, yes.

CXW But had these Germans had anything to do with Belsen?

FR We don't really know about that but they might have done. It was an SS barracks and had to keep changing the guard over every so often so they might have been part of it.

CXW What kind of wounds did the Germans have?

FR All sorts, shrapnel wounds, some with legs off, some with arms off, one or two of them were blind but they was all natural causes, wounds they got during the war.

CXW Did they seem to be distressed at the fact that the ambulance had gone at speed?

FR Nobody complained at all. We don't know because they were speaking in German. I think one of them in Jack's ambulance complained to one of his officers about it 'cos they never even give 'em water. We had water tanks in the ambulances and I said to Tommy, my orderly, "They want any water?" He pulled his curtain

/back

back.

He says, "Any of you want any water?" "Nein, nein." "Right". He shut it up again. He said, "They don't want it, carry on." So we just carried on. As far as we were concerned we'd got it for our mind, alright they was wounded soldiers, we could have been in the same position so we just took our time. We was told what to do. There was inference between the officer and the sergeant. One you could take, well, he was saying 'Get there and back as quick as you can.' The other one was saying "You can't do that, they are wounded. They are human beings the same as you and wounded."

CXW Which one said that?

FR That was the sergeant said that. It was the higher up bloke what sez 'Get there and back as quick as you can because we want the beds.'

CXW So your job with your comrades was just to drive the ambulance backwards and forwards was it?

FR That's right, yes. Our main job there, sole concern was to get as many people as we can back to the SS barracks to the tents and the stables and that. We was hell for leather up and down the road. We was fetching them back nice and steady back into the SS barracks and as soon as they was off we put extra blankets on, back we went again and we was racing each other down the road to get back as soon as we can. Directly we walked in we saw the officer in charge and said, "what hut now?" "So and so hut, you go down to that one." Somebody else went somewhere else then done the same thing over and over again.

CXW How many would you get in the ambulance in one go?

FR I had two stretchers in my one and the other ambulances had four stretchers so we could only take four and two at a time.

CXW So it was a slow business?

/Yes

FR Yes, very slow. We never worried about time, what day it was or anything. We just went down there in the morning. Maybe during the afternoon we'd pull into our camp, have something to eat and go back again. Then we'd carry on like that until it'd get a bit dark. Then we'd all have to pack up then.

CXW When you got to the hut what would be the first thing you'd do?

FR First thing we done down there, we were told which hut to go to. We went there. We walked in, saw the officer and he sez "Right, all that lot there, got 'em all over that side, you take 'em as you think, but you can only take as many as you got on your ambulances." We got nowhere for 'em to sit down. If we had somewhere for 'em to sit down we could have taken more than two but we had to take two at a time on the stretchers. They was in such a bad way that you couldn't let 'em sit up on the stretchers 'cos the stretcher's only that much from the roof.

CXW About two feet.

FR About two foot from the roof. You couldn't get 'em to sit upright. In the four (stretcher) ones we could sit 'em upright there and also...

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On the big ambulances they had seats in them as well which we could put some of the people on it and just to make sure that they couldn't fall we used to put a strap round 'em, one of the straps we had in the ambulances so that they didn't fall over. Then everything was going on from then onwards.

CXW When you got to the hut you had to choose yourself who to take did you?

FR No, we didn't choose. The people that the officers had figured out, they was one side of the hut, the others were being inspected over this side. The officers used to say, "Take anybody

you want from there. What ambulance you got? Got two stretchers, right, take two from there." So we took two. Well, then on one occasion one of them was fairly bad and this was coming out, my ambulance orderly turned round and sez, "Look, can we put one of these on the floor, in between the stretchers?" I said "It's nothing to do with that, we can't hold 'em in position unless you're going to stop in the back and hold 'em." He said, "No, we've been lucky so far, we haven't got nothing at all yet but if we get in with 'em we might catch it. So just leave it there." We asked an officer. "Right, lay one of these patients on a blanket on the floor in between the stretchers." "Yes" he says if you want to. So we started doing that and we were taking three at a time then our own self. Some of the bigger ones, the big Austins, they got the four stretchers in and they had enough room between the stretchers to get another two on it. Then we got told off at our own place when we got back. Instead of taking four in we were taking six in or instead of me taking two in I was taking three in. And they said, "No, you're upsetting everything that way. We're concerned how many vehicles are coming in, how many people we're going to get so they work according to that." So we had to stop that, just go back to normal and four.

CXW How did you choose the people to take?

FR We never, the officers done that.

CXW But didn't they say, "Take anybody from that side" ?

FR From that side, yes.

CXW And then did you choose?

FR No, we just went down, pointed out three people, out they come. There was no names, no nothing at all, just - we was sorry we couldn't get all of 'em out at once. We'd have done far better I reckon if we'd have had one of our big trucks down there where you could put more on 'em. Lay 'em all on the stretchers along

the floor of the trucks, you could get more out that way. But then again, when we started doubling up sort of thing, when we got back to the hospital itself, we was told, "Don't do that because you're over-running them."

CXW Were the inmates pleading with you to take them rather than somebody else?

FR Yes, they was all putting their hands up, "I'm next, I'm next." Some of them were even right at the back. They was shouting out, "Take me, take me." You went to the front and said, "Right, you come out, you come out and you come out." And that was it.

CXW What was the inside of these huts like?

FR They was all crammed up with double tier bunks and there was just enough room to get down between the bunks to get up into the bunk itself, there's just enough room. I should imagine there was about 28-30 bunks down one side, all on top of each other. And half way up the other wall there was more there as well. Everybody was fighting each other for clothes, any clothes that was lying around they grabbed for them. All that had to be stripped off.

CXW Did you dread going into the huts?

FR No, myself, I suppose everyone of us was the same, but myself I wasn't worried too much about that. We was scared - they'd got typhus and dysentery and everything else there. We was scared about that but at the same time we was disinfected fully.

CXW How did they disinfect you?

FR With this big spray they had, used to put it down your neck and spray you all over and down the back of your neck and everything, up your arms. You was more or less covered in powder. You could walk in and out there, all right. But I wasn't myself only,

I suppose the others were the same but I'd been through quite a lot down at the East End and myself then was to get 'em out as quick as possible 'cos I knew what it was like in there. The smell in there was terrible of all the different people. And you'd get 'em out quick and we was glad when we come out. Got in the ambulance and away again.

CXW Did you ever speak to any of the inmates?

FR They couldn't understand you. Could just ask one or two of them, you know, "When did you go in?" Just shook their heads. A lot of 'em pointed to their fingers and watches they had on, all kaput. Germans took 'em all off. I don't remember talking to anybody who understood our language or we understood them. All they was concerned about - "Let's get to the ambulances, get out."

CXW Did they know who you were?

FR We had our berets on. They knew we were British 'cos the berets we had on, my one was Service Corps and the other one was the RAMC. They knew the difference between the two of us, when the RAMC man went in there they all rushed to him. Soon as he put 'em to one side, takes 'em all and send 'em over there, when that Service Corps man went in they rush over to him, "I'm first, I'm first." They didn't say, "I'm first - me, me."

CXW What ^{were} the ages of the people there?

FR All sorts. There was elderly people there, youngsters.

CXW How old were the youngsters?

FR About four to five year old, that's all. There was any amount of them in the pit as well, threw 'em in the pits.

CXW Was there anything special that you could do for the children?

FR No, nothing. The only thing we could do, there was one or

two of them on the photo, on one of the photos with the chap who was in charge of us, of the whole camp itself, not our own officers, another chap who was appointed somewhere else. He standing at the side of a swing with a girl on it and I think he's holding her hand but they used to supply sweets for them, most of 'em and apart from that they was the only people who got any preferential treatment.

CXW Were the inmates in a dirty condition?

FR No, the funny thing is they were all clean, everyone of 'em. There was plenty of water there and they used to get under these big shower baths and wash their selves down. Nobody bothered about anything there, they was walking around naked most of the time. Then they dressed themselves back in the huts and when the Medical Corps went in there they said, "Take everything off." Well, everybody took everything off. Soon as they started undressing one, examine her or he whatever it was, everybody else done the same thing.

CXW Was their hair shaved off?

FR In about half a dozen cases, that was all we saw. But the rest of them they had quite good hair.

CXW The infantry you mentioned, do you know what unit they belonged to?

FR No, it's such a long time ago that I don't remember. There was one or two artillery men among them as well, you could tell by their badges. The engineers they called in after, was putting up the water towers and they brought the bulldozers in. I don't really know the name of the people or the battalions that was in, came in with us.

CXW Once you got them out of the camp, what happened when you unloaded them at the other end?

FR We unloaded them at our own place at the SS camp, then they was transferred into the hospital inside the camp itself. By that time we cleared all the German prisoners out, took 'em up further back down the road and that was filled up. They checked back onto it and they found that there's nothing more we could do there but we was pulled out for a couple of days rest. We were pulled out into our field and probably these other chaps went in, another unit went in. What I can gather from Mrs Ellett was that this Dr Wand was in the 216 Ambulance.

CXW What was the hospital like that you were taking them to?

FR A normal hospital - German hospital. Used to put their own SS men in there and it looked fully equipped, our chaps liked it very much when they saw it. What they was doing then, they got everybody on these different food they was giving them, not allowed to eat nothing solid, just on fluids all the time and they was there about two or three days and they started walking about. Then they put 'em on to solid food then. Then we don't know what happened from there, where they went from there 'cos we wasn't allowed in the camp at all, not in the big camp, better go back to our own field.

CXW Did they seem relieved to get to the hospital?

FR Yes. When they took 'em in, laid 'em on the stretchers and the first, you get a look on their face and they got these scrubbing brushes. The orderly sez, "Well, we're not going to have you, we just want to get everything off." Just started brushing down with the scrubbing brushes, cleaning them all up, then put extra water over them, disinfect 'em, wrap 'em up in blankets, put 'em on a stretcher and went across the road to the hospital.

CXW Did any of them die on the way in the ambulances?

FR No, not as far as I know. I don't think we lost any of them.

/Some

Some of them was pretty bad, I know, when they come out but as far as we were concerned we never lost any at all unless anybody died while they were back in the hospital, when they went back into there. A lot of them, they was in very bad condition, quite a lot of them.

CXW In what way?

FR They didn't care what happened, they just lay there like that, flopping all over the place and I sez to my ambulance orderly at one time, "It's a waste of time taking 'em back isn't it?" He said, "Well, we've got to take 'em back though, haven't we?" And back they went.

CXW You felt they were going to die any way?

FR Yes. I don't know myself how many might have died in that hospital. I don't really know. There should have been quite a few what we saw of them, what we took out. It was the dysentery mostly that killed 'em, not so much the typhus but it's the dysentery what killed 'em they had such - sometimes they never had any food at all.

CXW Did you see anything of the SS camp apart from the hospital?

FR The only time we saw it was when we went in there, the big barracks and that and then we was out for a week, to come out the camp itself, then we never went/^{back}in there no more. We were told to go down to the camp itself, the SS camp, and they had a cinema there, used to go down to there for the night. A couple of days after that we was told that - to get all our kit, all the lot, throw it in your ambulances and they was all taken off and burnt, all the lot of 'em, your kit, everything else, destroyed all the lot. But then they sez to us, well, one or two of them sez, "What chance of leave?" They said we got two choices, "You can go back to England but if you get back to England on leave you'll be six months in quarantine before you're allowed to go anywhere, on the other hand we can send you to Norway, you

stay there for six weeks, six months and then you can go home." So we sez "Well, might just as well go to Norway, if we go to England.." they was going to put us up near Shropshire. "If we're going up there, not allowed to go out anywhere, you might as well go to Norway." Norway they said we can do anything we like so we opted to go to Norway.

CXW Whereabouts in Norway did you go to? .

FR Near Oslo.

CXW Was it a special camp?

FR No, it was just commandeered places they took, took a couple of big halls, lot of them went into there. We had our own regular church parades and everything else.

CXW What condition was Norway in?

FR We didn't know what we was going to do 'cos when we landed they put us in an aircraft, flew us over there and as we got out the plane there was quite a crowd of Norwegians there and a lot of them was spitting at us.

CXW Why?

FR Don't know why. We looked at 'em but we were told after that it was the partisan(s). Some had been on the side of the Germans, some had been on the side of the Allies and the most people we saw up there was people on the German side when they started spitting at us. Then we was put down and we was also told when we went out of a night there'd got to be at least four of us together and "You take your rifles with you." "Anything that happens, let 'em have it." But we never got no more problems after that. We was there for about four or five weeks then everybody else round here started getting friendly towards us, inviting you in

to have a cup of tea. Course we was a bit dubious at first, we don't know who they are and then after a little while, "I've got a mate with me, I'll fetch him in and all." So we go in and everything was alright then.

CXW Did they tell you anything about what the German occupation had been like?

FR They reckon it was terrible there. There's quite a lot of them there, saw more girls there with their head shaved in Norway than what there was in Belsen itself. Everywhere you looked you could see the girls with their head shaved, they'd been taking part with the Germans. I think it was a Norwegian chap, they had to take him out the river, found him in the river and he had some stab wounds or something on him. I was on duty that morning and we had to go and fetch him out the river. The officer in charge he conducted a post mortem and he sez to me, "You want to look?" I said, "I've not seen one before." "Have a look he sez". Standing there for a while, then when he got a saw to saw across the top of his head I just went out like that. That's all right, get him out." I finished up outside.

CXW You fainted did you?

FR Yes. What turned me was the fact that with this saw he was cutting across the top of his head. Out I went. That was part of the post mortem, he went to have a look at the brain.

CXW Why had this chap been killed do you know?

FR Nobody knows. They made enquiries but nobody knew anything about it. We thought it was one of the British tommies at first when they said somebody been found in a hut, in the stream, so we went down there and looked over the top and he was on his face and one chap sez, "Looks like a British tommy doesn't it?" When they fished him out they sez, "No." His face was different, his face seemed similar to the other people we'd seen in Norway.

CXW Coming back to Belsen, did you see anything of the other parts of the camp apart from the huts?

FR Only the gas chambers. We went down had a look round there. All we could see there was charred bones right the way through there. On the outside when they was finished with them there was just big heaps of charred bones laying there.

CXW How big were the heaps?

FR About five to six foot high. After looking at a couple of them we didn't want to know no more. We all went out and didn't want to go through no more of it. They had another lot further down, those that was going to be burnt they was put in these compounds and they was being burnt the following day.

CXW What did the gas chambers themselves look like?

FR Not the gas chambers, they was incinerators. They was like a big oval thing with a big door in front and they used to open them out, throw 'em in and that was that. Just stay there - they had about twelve to fourteen of 'em, all lined up along there and they just used to put 'em in there and the ashes used to drop through the bottom, used to rake it out, used to get the prisoners to rake out the ashes. Guard standing there all the time watching them.

CXW Did you see any gas chambers?

FR I never seen none, not down there. They might have had some there I don't know. 'Cos as soon as we saw the incinerators it turned us all over, we didn't want to go no further.

CXW Did you see any possessions that had been taken from the inmates?

FR No, I did hear, I won't be sure, that in Kramer's place they

found a big chest full of rings, watches, teeth which they pulled out, gold teeth, they was all in there, all the lot and we was wondering what was going to happen to it because Kramer couldn't get it, he was away then and when they searched this place they found it, massive great chest full of them, false teeth, everything else.

CXW You saw Kramer, did you?

FR Saw Kramer, yes.

CXW What did he look like?

FR Horrible.

CXW In what way?

FR You could see on his face he was a sort of sadist. If ever you see them photos he's on one of them, and Irma Griese as well unless that's what, some of them have been torn, but they are on them photos as well. He wasn't worried, not even when he was caught. What the infantry done at first to keep him under lock and key they put him in a freezer what was there, put him inside the freezer and shut the door. We heard about that after but fortunate for him one of the officers walked in looking all round. Chap sez, "what you looking for?" He sez, "The commandant, he was here a little while ago, I want him now." He sez, "We got him in here." "You don't want him in there -fetch him out." He was just like that when he come out, almost frozen, then he was taken away somewhere else but he wasn't allowed out, the first day we was there when they caught him, it was actually first day out. Irma Griese was allowed out but he was allowed out in a little compound, round a little hut he had there, three guards all the way round him all the time. Then he was put back in there and he was moved from there upto somewhere else 'cos we were all glad to see him go then.

/What

CXW What did Irma Griese look like?

FR She looked fairly good but you could see also in her face, in her eyes, they was as hard as anything and when somebody - prisoners come down, they looked at her and spit at her, she went, "Grrrrr." As much as to say "I'd like to get over there and get hold of you." Of course the guards used to say, "Get back, get back." And push both of them away from the fences.

CXW What do you mean when you say she looked quite good?

FR She looked pretty enough but you could see on her eyes, they was wide eyes sort of thing and you could see the hatred running behind 'em as soon as you looked at 'em you could see that and there was eight of 'em with her but the one who was, it might have been a lieutenant or not I don't know, but she was always smiling to herself and when anybody had a go at Irma Griese she looked round at her like that and laughed as much as to say, "You've got what was coming now." Then just carried on walking but she'd never leave her side, they was always together, they used to march up and down all the time but that was the only one who was showing any sort of relief on her face.

CXW You talked about your disinfecting, of you and your comrades, but did any of you get any diseases?

FR No, none of us did, not one of us and we put it down to the fact that we were disinfected and we used to be inspected practically every week at camp even before we went into Belsen.

CXW Did you fear getting diseases?

FR Yes, naturally we feared it 'cos we were looking all round and they was telling us, "This is dysentery, that's typhus and that's typhoid and if you get anything like that straight away you let us know" and we was watching all the time. The big field we was in we had our own latrines at the back of the field a big trench cut right along, there's a board on it so if we wanted to

go to toilet you could sit on the board, no closed in thing or anything like that, just sit on the board and do whatever you do. Every so often the officer used to come along and check it all over and they fill that in and start off again.

CXW Did it make you unwilling to touch the inmates?

FR No. What we could gather, we used to have to pick 'em up and put 'em on stretchers, won't worry about that at all, pick 'em up and put 'em on there, put a blanket over 'em. It was nothing there at all to make us feel we were going to catch some of it from 'em. The only chance you got is if you - in that hut with them, you had about 50-60 people in that hut, that you gonna get something and they used to excrete and everything else all on the floor and that was all about. But if you was in there then you might get something but the way we was going in, everything was ready for us for 'em to come out. People used to go in in the morning and clear it all up before the officers went in, clear it up, got some of the inmates to clear it up as well and help sort out which ones they wanted and that was that.

CXW You were telling me earlier that you thought that the films that we've seen on television of Belsen don't really show what it was like.

FR No, some parts of it, what I saw of Belsen, but there's quite a lot of Belsen...

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Parts that they never saw, what wasn't showed was the actual putting the bodies into the pits with the bulldozer, loading them onto trucks, everything like that. None of that was shown in the film itself, the one that I saw of Belsen camp.

CXW Did your time in Belsen change your attitude towards the Germans?

/Yes

FR Yes, it would do.

CXW In what way?

FR At one time we, when we used to go through German villages they'd be talking to you, ask you if you wanted a cuppa tea or if you've got any chocolate for them or cigarettes. Nine times out of ten we'd stop, give 'em whatever we'd got. 'Cos there's quite a lot of them in the villages was quite friendly. Then, when we come to a big place we just sort of ignored 'em, didn't want to know. Used to say to 'em, "Ever been to Belsen?" They'd say, "What's Belsen?" "Concentration camp further down the road." "No, no, didn't know there was one there." The Germans themselves didn't want to know. That's how we sort of left it, we didn't entertain 'em no more like we been doing with the chocolates and cigarettes and everything else. Sometimes we used to give them some of our bully beef and old Jack Lane, one of the drivers there he said, "What are you giving them bully beef for?" "Give it to 'em, we've had enough of it, let them have some of it." "Here, they're Germans," he said. "Alright they're Germans." That's all we knew about it.

CXW Do you think they wouldn't have known about the concentration camps?

FR They wouldn't have because my son there, he got married over here. He was in the Royal Artillery then and I didn't know then, not until lately or about a year or so ago that when he was married he took his wife to Germany with him, 'cos he was with the Royal Artillery, and he was stationed at exactly the same barracks, the SS barracks in married quarters there where we was taking the patients from there and even them people round there, even after all that time, didn't know anything about Belsen. He said, "All the people knew" I can't think of the name of the town he was at, they went into this village, asked them about it. They said, "No, all we know was that trains used to

/pull

pull up here of a night, half past eleven, twelve o'clock at night. We could hear people getting on and off of them, but the next morning the trains had gone and nobody there. Probably they put 'em on trucks and took 'em down to Belsen. We didn't know nothing about that." So he said, "Did you get any smells from there?" " Yes, there were a lot of smells around all the time " but they thought it was some of the trees burning 'cos there's quite a few trees round there as well. When he said that to the camp - go down there, he's also been down himself with his wife to see the new memorial they've got there. He said they've got their names all the way round, quite a lot of them. I didn't know that, not until a couple of year ago that he was out there.

CXW How long were you doing that job on the ambulances at Belsen?

FR At Belsen I should say about a fortnight. After that time we moved out and somebody else took over. Somebody had to take over because there was too many there. We never had enough room to put 'em in the camp what we was at then. Whether they took 'em further back to an ADS or something like that or a general hospital further back, but we don't know. Our aim then was to clear out as many as we could in the time we had. 'Cos the officer said, "There's not a lot of time you can spend in there you'll have to come out. It's going to be on your mind for the rest of your life. The longer we keep you there the worse it's going to be. We'll leave you so long in there and then you come out, somebody else'll go in."

CXW The job wasn't finished when you...

FR It wasn't finished not when we come out, no.

CXW How many people do you think you moved a day?

FR I don't know off hand. I was doing about 18-20 trips a day, two at a time. Myself I cleared a good 40 a day. That was only

one ambulance. We had five double ambulances and eight Austin, four stretcher ambulances and they was on the go all the time. On top of that, Jack Lane the one I've been referring to, his ambulance packed up and there was nothing we could do about it so he found a German ambulance at the side of the road. He got over that and found it was alright and what we done, we hooked him onto one of the other ambulances, put a tow rope on him and we was taking him up and down the road so that he still got his stretchers going. Jack Lane he was a real card he was. He was a Yorkshireman and he didn't give a cuss for anybody. He'd say whatever he thinks no matter who it was. He got told off for towing this one and he said, "what you worried about, got people here." "Take it off." "No if I take it off we run short, driver short, we go up and down like that all day."

CXW Had the camp improved by the time you'd finished your two week stint?

FR The only improvement was that most of the bodies had been buried, that was all done - I think the engineers worked day and night on that to clear it all and they marked every one of them, put ribbons all the way round them, put the wood there with the name of people what was on it, the amount of people that was put in it. No names, no nothing we didn't have, just put the names, how many was in that pit and that was it, then he went on to the next one. But that was all, I think it was about three or four pits when we come away from there, still waiting to be filled up.