

This is Susan Singer at the International Liberator's Conference in Washington D.C. I'm here to talk with Mr. Hallowell about his experiences in the liberation of Dachau concentration camp. Hello, Mr. Hallowell.

Hello, Susan.

Before we really begin, I need some information for the record. Could I have your full name and where you live?

John R. Hallowell. I live in Lakewood, Colorado.

And what was your date of birth?

Oh, September 27, 1920.

So how old were you when you liberated the camp?

24.

And what was your military unit?

I was with the 157th Infantry of the 45th Infantry Division.

What was your profession during the war, after the war? What do you do now?

After the war, I was-- I had a degree in journalism from the University of Montana, so I went into that. I went into the newspaper business right away as a reporter in Great Falls, Montana after the war.

What was your rank during the war?

When we liberated the camp?

Uh-huh.

I was a staff sergeant at that time.

I see. OK, how did you first hear about the camps?

Well, we heard rumors about the camps from the time we got into Alsace-Lorraine. And of course, we had heard something about that kind of thing for months and months, although we had never seen anything like that. Some of the other units in the U.S. Army had liberated camps ahead of this one. So we did know something about camps, but I think this one took all of us completely by surprise.

Did you learn mostly by rumor? Or were you told by your officers what either to expect or what had gone on?

Mostly rumor, although the day that we attacked the camp, we were told by the officers we would see something that we-- would be unbelievable.

Did you have any expectations really of what you were actually going to see? Or just-- you just didn't know?

No, really, we didn't have any idea what we would see. It was a total surprise to all of us. And I think the emotional impact of the thing brought about some rather drastic results.

Do you remember what day this was?

Well, I do now because I looked it up. It was April 29th, 1945.

OK. Could you tell me about your actual approach to the camp? Who you were with? Vehicles? And what you saw. Just pretend you see it in front of you. What happened? What was before you?

All right. I think it was the train-- the train was what set everyone off. There were 40 boxcars full of bodies. They had brought these people in from, I think-- we think-- Poland. It was to be taken into the camp, and the railroad tracks ran into the camp.

Well, as we attacked, then we went by this train. And the bodies were lying-- well, they were hanging out the open doors. Some people had been able to get out and then had fallen in the field and died.

They had been starved. They were just little skeletons within their prison clothing. I was thinking, in connection with this, that we've had something recently in the way of starvation brought to our attention by way of the IRA people who have starved themselves to death. And it seems as though it has taken them about 58 days, I guess, to do that. They were purposely trying to starve themselves to death.

These people had been starved. They hadn't intended to do this. And they had been starved over a period of many months. So it's a terribly drastic kind of thing.

What resulted from that was that it was the first attack in which I was ever involved, and I wasn't one of the front assault troops. There was no fear. We had no fear whatsoever. And our I Company went over the wall and shot virtually everything that moved.

The towers-- the people in the towers-- had machine guns up there, the Germans. And they provided some resistance, but they were sitting ducks really. And our riflemen could get behind the buildings and pick them off. I think it was probably a period of about 45 minutes and we had everybody either dead or captured.

Were you in a vehicle at the time or on foot?

I was in-- yes, I was in the vehicle. I came in in a jeep behind the I Company assault troops. I was directly behind them. And I was there for the clearing of the camp and the securing of the camp. Actually, the camp was so big that one company couldn't secure the whole thing. But it was pretty well secured by-- well, within an hour.

OK. Could you give us a description of what you saw, as you came in physically, of the plant of Dachau?

As I recall, it seems as though the hospital was on the left side as we went through the gate. The assault troops didn't open the gate. They just went over the wall. It must have been quite a jolt to see them come over the wall like that, and firing at everything.

But then they opened the gate, and we went through in the jeep. And as I recall, going down this main street, the enclosure was on our right. And we saw all of the prisoners, the survivors who were in there. And the word was being passed to them that the American troops were in, and these were American troops and they were friendly, and that they were liberated.

There was no particular reaction on their part, as I recall. I mean, there was no great elation. It was just--

Well, there had just been a lot of machine gun fire too within the camp.

That's right. And they were very startled.

Did they approach you once this was over and try to talk to you?

They came to the fence, looked out of the fence, and shouted occasionally. Our orders though, as I understand it, I was

not-- as a staff sergeant, I'm not supposed to know all those orders. But the orders that we had were to keep them in the enclosure because if they were let out, then they would scatter all over the place. So the effort was made to keep them in there at least till the next day.

Were there men, women, and children? Just men? Who did you see?

I don't remember any women and children. All I saw was men.

You just saw men. Did you have specific orders on how to deal with them, other than trying to keep them contained?

I don't think that we did. I'm not aware that we did. I think just to keep them in there. And then we were later relieved by our first battalion, which I think provided some medical aid and that sort of thing.

But we were assault troops. And we had another objective after that-- to go on into Munich. So within a day or so, then we-- well, within that same day actually, we attacked toward Munich. So many of the experiences that these people are relating at this conference are by people who were in the camps a much longer time than we who were in the assault area.

Right. It's just a different phase of documentation. Very often we hear from that end. We're just as willing to hear this side. Could you estimate how many people were in the camp when you came in, of the ex-inmates, as you named them?

Yes. I don't have to estimate it because I know the figure. It was 31,000.

Were in the camps?

Yes. In the enclosure at that time.

What kind of physical condition were they in?

Well, they were very much worn down. They were very thin, but appeared to be fairly healthy.

I did have the experience of taking a Life photographer and a woman reporter from another magazine-- a U.S. magazine-- into the enclosure the day following our taking of the camp. And we just went through the gate at that time, and equilibrium had been established pretty well so that there wasn't a big move to try to rush out of the camp or anything like that.

And so I took them in and the prisoners couldn't care less about the Life photographer. They just liked the uniform. And they surrounded me and touched the uniform. And many could speak English. And they asked me for my name and my hometown, and gave me little slips of paper to sign. And so I signed quite a few of those.

That must have felt pretty good.

Well, it did. It did feel really good. And then they would-- and then they pointed out, I think, one barracks-- it seemed to me one barracks-- that had typhus in there. And they said, stay away from that one.

And they pointed out the gas chambers and the furnaces-- the furnace area. And then later, I was able to move around the camp to see all those things.

Did you get a tour of some sort or did you-- from the prisoners, or from the army?

I think it was just a fact-- well, they took us around. They took a group of us around. And we went into the-- where the gas chambers were where they had told these folks that they were going to have a shower and then they turned the gas on them. I guess they were all stripped.

And so, I remember the scene that's been photographed worldwide, and you see it every time they mention the camps-- these bodies piled up on this floor near the furnaces. And it's a very famous scene. When they had the TV series Holocaust, I saw that two or three times.

OK. You were there a short time, but other than the original coming in with the tanks, with the officers, were they just cleared out immediately? Did you have any other orders? And were you assured that they were all out-- guards, whatever?

We were sure. That's right. I mean, we had everybody.

How long did that actually take?

It only took about 45 minutes to pick them all off out of those towers, capture them. We went into the hospital--

Once they were captured, where did you go?

Well, there was quite a little struggle with that. Some of those prisoners wanted at them. And there were some prisoners outside of the enclosure who had the duties of-- oh, just clean up kind of duties. And they had been entrusted with that.

And there was some trouble with some of those folks wanting to get at those SS troops. And there were some SS troops. And there were some kids that they had put in there just recently. They were just young-- very young soldiers, but they were just kids.

Were you part of-- were you then put in the position of protecting the guards against the ex-inmates?

Yeah, there were, yeah. Our GIs were. That's right. They were in that position. And it was an odd position to be in.

It must have been very difficult.

Yeah.

Did you see any of the violence between them? Or was there any? Or was it prevented?

There was some violence. I didn't see it. There was some violence. And in fact, I heard a story or two that they had overpowered some of our GIs, and man-handled some of those guards themselves and killed them. I don't know if that's true or not.

There were pictures of some of these guards having been thrown in a little creek that ran through there. Matter of fact, in our regimental history, there's a picture of that. Some of these guards-- it was alleged, at least, that they had been killed by these inmates with their hands.

So one thing, you removed them. You just took them outside the enclosure and did what?

Well, we just moved them into the general procedures, back to a staging area. And it was the same as if we'd captured somebody in any normal kind of action.

How long was it before your follow-up came through?

The First Battalion relieved our I Company that afternoon. And then the next day, our whole Division headed out for Munich. And other units then came in, and I don't know which ones they were.

So you didn't spend a good deal of time in the area talking to people, you know, in the town?

No, we didn't have a lot of chance to do that. We did talk in Munich. I remember we were all so incensed that-- when

we had a chance to visit anyone in Munich because at that time General Eisenhower had a "no fraternization" rule in force-- and we were not supposed to visit with the Germans. Usually we did that under the cover of darkness, we'd visit with the Germans.

And we would-- I think all of us always ask them if they didn't know what was going on in Dachau. And there were some instances where we had a chance to visit with people from Dachau-- the little village of Dachau. They all contended-- and I think they contend to this day-- that they didn't know what was going on there.

Do you think that's possible?

It's a little hard to believe that that's possible. I've read some books-- recently I read Adolf Hitler by John Toland. I think I'd read it before, but I guess I'd forgotten it so I read it again. And even the leadership under Hitler-- Hitler for a long time wouldn't of course acknowledge that this was going on. But even the leadership-- the people in high commands-- refused to believe it, or at least wouldn't let themselves believe that this sort of thing was occurring. And Himmler, I guess, was the one who really knew what was occurring, and was in charge of the camps.

At about the time that we took Dachau, I think the word was down that they were to eliminate the camps-- or that is, destroy them so there would be no evidence of the atrocities. But it was too late because the Russians were moving in very rapidly on the one side, and the Americans and allied forces were moving in rapidly on the other side.

Well, you were thrown into a harrowing experience very quickly and taken out just as fast.

Yes, well, that was the way the situation was. And I think maybe we were the lucky ones. Listening to people at this conference, certainly we were the lucky ones.

Possibly, but how did you cope with that-- just being thrown into that and out again? Do you just write home? Do you talk to your friends? You know, how do you live with just seeing that moving out immediately, or-- not that staying would help.

Well, we had been in the thing for two years. We had seen quite a little death, not to that extent. We didn't see mass death like that. And you steel yourself. I think people steel themselves to that sort of thing when it's a daily occurrence, or maybe every other day occurrence. It's sort of an impersonal kind of thing-- I think death is-- unless you know someone individually.

I don't know that we dwelt on it as much as-- of course, these people have dwelt on it over the years. So at least, initially, I think we took it pretty much in stride, but we--

What about later? Was there a kind of delayed reaction once you realized-- once you had time after the actual assault?

I don't know. I've been trying to think that since I came to this conference. I've been trying to think what I did. I've read some people who said that well, they tried to forget it. I don't recall that I ever tried to forget it, but maybe subconsciously I did.

Well, you had enough interest to show up at the conference.

Oh, I'm terribly interested, terribly interested. I really am.

Have you discussed it over the years to your family?

Oh, yes. Yes.

So they know exactly.

Yes. We have--

You said you watched Holocaust on TV.

Oh, yeah.

What did you think of it?

Oh, I thought it was tremendously well done. It revealed a lot of things to me-- the movie-- I mean, the films themselves. The way the number of the Jews went in there, apparently even willingly. At least they went in without-- what am I trying to say-- fighting back or something or other. Some of that must have occurred. They must have just done that. They must have just decided to accept that, or something.

They had a conference this morning. One of the panels was talking about uprisings. They had just taken so much that they did rise up and fight back. And then for the most part, they were of course all eliminated when they did that. But there were some survivors here.

This is a tremendous conference here. There are more stories-- more stories of survival. It's a tragic thing, isn't it?

Yeah. Do you think there's anything we can learn from this story?

Oh, I'm sure there is much to be learned from this-- that it can happen again. They are making the point here so many times that we must be sure not to let this happen again. The fact that there have been some 90 books apparently published now saying it didn't even occur. And the big point being in this conference apparently that we need to tell this story, and tell it as eyewitnesses to these occurrences.

They make one point I'm not too crazy about and [LAUGHS]. They're saying we're not going to be around too much longer to tell that. Now I feel as though I'd just like to stay around a little longer than that.

I think I mean generationally.

That's right. I know.

It's part of the problem. But it is because there are several generations, and it is getting removed. But as you say, it's difficult to say it didn't happen when people like you went in in the first attack and are willing to say that.

Well, it definitely had happened, and these people have so many stories to tell. It's just terribly fascinating. And you feel as though-- I'm proud of the fact that I was in with the assault troops. But you feel as though perhaps you were just on the sidelines and you had a helping hand in this thing. And that there were heroes or heroines-- they were those people who survived this thing and underwent all those terrible ordeals, just absolutely terrible.

Do you think-- or do you know of any way to keep this alive other than this kind of conference? Do you think there's a way to teach it in school, and from what point of view? What would you like to see your kids learn about in school, if you have any?

Well, my kids have known about that. I told my kids about that all the time. As they were growing up, they were very much aware of that. I think that there is a move on at the moment to build a memorial here-- I think in Washington, D.C.-- and exhibits. They even have the building picked out, and they're discussing that.

I believe it's going to be a library.

A library? That certainly will keep it alive. It needs to be kept alive. One of the speakers today made the point that the Holocaust is continuing, even in Vietnam. When the Americans finally pulled out of Vietnam, then the Holocaust continued again. So it isn't as though man's inhumanity to man has ended at all. It continues. And we're seeing it all the time.

Do you think your experiences have colored your political views in what you see now in Vietnam, in the Middle East, and whatever? Do you think that's affected it more than if you hadn't been there?

Oh, definitely. It's definitely affected it. And I think I'm not quite so blase about things as I might have been had I not seen those kind of things. I know that they occur. I know that these atrocities occur and that people can really be terrible toward other people, and that these things do happen.

Would you consider the Holocaust more of a human problem in the kind of way you've been talking now about things happening around the world, or a Jewish persecution? Which way-- or is it one or the other?

Well, my tendency is to see it as a human problem. Of course it was a Jewish persecution, this particular one that we saw. Hitler, after he had decided he was not going to win the war, then made the elimination of the Jews his big objective. And all the time, I think during the war, it was continuing. But that became the thing he most wanted to do at the end, at least according to my reading.

And so it was a persecution of the Jews, but they weren't all Jews in those camps. Dachau, for instance, I read those figures. There were 9,000 Poles in there, and 2,300-some Jews when we took that. Again though, they may be Polish Jews, so you don't know how to break that down.

Oh, there are lots of other nationalities.

Yes. Many.

Did you hear a lot of languages being spoken while there? Do you speak other languages other than English?

No, unfortunately, I don't.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

And you can tell the Jews. They had the Star of David on their uniforms. You could tell that. And I noticed that lots of those people can speak English. They're much better than we are about learning other people's languages.

True about Americans. We expect other people to speak English to us.

Yeah, that's right.

Do you consider yourself a religious person? Or were you then?

Oh, I was really quite religious then. I may have slipped a little.

Well--

But I did lots of praying in those days.

Did you have any thoughts about religion when you entered the camp in the days after-- or a religion? Has that affected your religion at all?

I don't think so. I was scared most of the time when I was in there-- not in this camp necessarily, but during the war. I did lots of praying. I don't think-- I think somebody said there were no atheists in foxholes. And I believe that's true.

And I did-- I was quite religious. I think I still am religious, but I have slipped some, all right. I have a daughter who bawls me out. She married a minister and she bawls me out all the time for not being a little more religious than I am.

Yeah.

A person thinks he is religious in his own way. I guess I feel that way, but I don't demonstrate it--

I was just wondering because it's often wondered how one keeps faith during either being a soldier or an inmate of some kind. And I was just wondering--

Oh, I think you keep faith. I think anyone-- whether you're a soldier, or just get into a difficult circumstance, someone you care about on the verge of dying or something-- you're looking for some outside assistance. Then I'm quick to go there-- conscience stricken-- but I'm quick to go looking for outside assistance.

Yeah. Well, is there anything else that you'd like to discuss before we close?

No, I don't think so. Thank you for giving me an opportunity just to talk.

I thank you for sharing it with us. It's been very nice.