

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
Interview With William A. Scott, III
October 1981

Served With the Third Army, Liberators of Buchenwald

Mr. William Scott was a student at Morehouse College when he was drafted. His father started a small newspaper in 1928, in Atlanta. William still works for the paper. William joined the 183rd Engineering Combat Battalion in December 1943, and went over seas in the Summer of 1944. He served as a reconnaissance sergeant.

During the progression from France to Germany, his unit was told about the atrocities the Nazis were committing, and they were also shown films. But it was vague. They were told the names of camps but it didn't mean anything. They didn't believe it; didn't believe it could be that bad.

William served in a motorized unit. During the dash across Germany, they were given immediate orders to go directly to Buchenwald, just to see it. William was the battalion historian and photographer. They were not given good directions and first could not find Buchenwald. William thought, this place doesn't exist. When they did find it, William thought it was not as bad as they said, because it looked like a regular prison at first. Then they drove around some buildings and saw these people milling around and they were in terrible shape. He then realized it was as bad, in fact worse, than they said. There was no way to describe it. William began taking photographs. They were told by some of the survivors that over 30,000 people had been killed in a two week period, and that the Germans were trying to kill all of them before the Americans got there.

One SS trooper was still there and some of the survivors beat him to death. It appeared to William that he wanted to die because he remained there up until the end. Several of William's unit went into the barrack to watch the survivors kill him. William did not.

He walked into the furnaces and took photographs. William saw many children. He saw the skulls and bones that were still in the incinerators. After he began taking pictures, he went into the barracks and the survivors pointed out what had been done. They weren't speaking, they were just pointing and gesturing. Some of the things they pointed out "you just couldn't believe." He saw a cross-section of a head with a slice down the middle with no ragged skin. He couldn't understand what kind of a sharp instrument could cut a head down the middle like that. It was placed against a jar so you could see the cross-section. He saw the lamp shades made from skins.

After a while, William became almost like one of the survivors;

walking around in a trance. He stopped taking pictures after a while. The situation was so unbelievable that he could understand how people today could say that it did not happen. It was worse than a dream.

The prisoners wanted the liberators to see what had happened. William had learned a few months earlier how to play chess. He remembers seeing some survivors, with their clothes torn and bodies exposed, kneeling on the ground playing chess out of make shift sets, almost oblivious to what was going on around them.

William's unit was the second wave of liberators of Buchenwald. They were busy helping the people out. Some of the buildings at Buchenwald had been knocked out by air strikes. Some people may have been saved. But the crematoria were still there. Buchenwald was supposed to have been a national prison. There was a group of prisoners, about 1,000, that were in better shape than the others. The unit was told they were Russians and that the Germans didn't bother the Russians as much as the others.

When William went into the service, he never knew that other people had been subjected to the types of abuses that black people had. There were some Jewish officers in his unit and they had problems with other officers. His unit was all black except for the officers, and there were three black warrant officers. There were three Jewish officers; one who accepted the abuse and went along, another who stood straight up, and the third was a doctor so he didn't get any flak. William began to realize there were problems for people other than blacks.

William's unit did not remain together much longer after Buchenwald. After they left, they went to Nuremberg and then up to the Dusseldorf area. It appeared they were going to be an occupying army. After a couple of weeks, his battalion commander told them to pack up; William thought they were given orders to go to Marseilles. But when they got there, one of the drivers told them they had gone without orders. The Army disbanded the unit and William was sent to the Pacific.

William feels Buchenwald may have given him a broader perspective. There are analogies with regard to what Jews and blacks have experienced. But what happened in Europe was of a different magnitude. It was beyond sadism. One example of that is that the Nazis had castrated some men and put their privates in a jar with their names on it, and for several weeks let them walk by. And then they killed them. This was beyond sadism because sadism is supposedly torture of a loved one. This may be one difference between the Nazis and the situation in America during the slavery period. There was interplay between blacks and whites, even though it was as master and slave. In Europe, there was not this communication. The problem is not just racism, but factionalism.
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