

Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP 2/13/95 COL JAMES MONCRIEF JR  
Page 1

Colonel James Moncrief Jr. interview 2/13/95

SWB: Tell me how you first heard about ...

COL. MONCRIEF: Okay. Uh, in April of 1945, the war had reached the stage where soldiers, had reached the stage that soldiers called it a rat race. The Germany army was pretty much, uh, upset and it was a matter of the Americans just chasin' 'em. It became a real rat race. Uh, on the eleventh, part of our division overran a camp at Buchenwald concentration camp at Buchenwald. Uh I was a, I was a G-1, lieutenant colonel, as a G-1 of the division headquarters. G-1 is a staff officer on the general staff of the commanding general. His capa- his job has to do with many aspects of personnel. Part of which are prisoners. So when the message came into division headquarters, the general wasn't at the headquarters. At this stage of the game, I don't remember where the headquarters was located. It was north of Buchenwald. When the message came, it was, we became sort of frantic. It talked about thousands of people dying, and our troops had overrun 'em. So immediately I knew that something had to be done and I said before we can really recommend a course of action we've got to know more of the facts. So I told the chief of staff that I would just go to Buchenwald, and, for myself, find out about it. The message we had received was over radio through two

echelons of command before it reached the division. From the battalion first to a, b- t- to the b- patrol to the battalion to combat command A and then to division headquarters. So I got in the jeep mounted uh with a radio, and took off for Buchenwald, while driving. So I got to Buchenwald about uh, I'd say about two hours after this was just my-my estimate at this stage of the game. I got to

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Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP 2/13/95 COL JAMES MONCRIEF JR  
Page 2

Buchenwald about two hours after it had been discovered by our troops. Troops of the ninth armored infantry battalion, a patrol commanded by Captain Fred Keopfer, found the camp, and fortunately, he had a man who understood German and Russian to some extent, whose name was Gotschok. Now Sergeant Gotschok overheard a conversation taking place on the side of the road between what our troops consi- our patrol considered to be Germans. Some of them had German civilian, German military uh, some military uni- -tire, attire. While also had some civilian clothes. But they were being roughed up and by some people who Gotschok determined to be Russian because they were speaking Russian. So when they were finally separated to the point that uh

Gostchok could get them quieted down enough to understand what they were talking about, he found out that there was a concentration camp out the road, ten or twelve, six or eight miles out, I don't know how far they were from it. So [Ahem] Jefferson said okay, mount a couple of these guys up on our scout car and we'll just go out there and see this camp. So he radioed into his battalion commander, task force commander actually, it wasn't a battalion commander, who was Colonel, at that time, Captain Bennett. And Captain Bennett said well go on out there and see what is taking place, come back in and let me know. So with that, uh, Koepfer then had these Germans up on the front end of his m-uh, scout car, and went out to the north rim of the camp, where the Russians apparently had gotten out. Now these Russians turned out to be former inmates of the camp. When the German guard left the camp, they all took off in a cloud of dust when they heard all the commotion of the war coming on, artillery and sound of tanks and so on. There was no fight for Buchenwald. The German guard had just simply ran. And when they, Russians, after the German guard got out, the

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Russians had cut a hole in the fence, north edge of the perimeter, they cut a hole in the fence, barbed wire, and gotten out. And then they found these Germans guards up in the little village, and that's the reason that led to how are troops getting in there. So when our detail, our patrol got down there, they went to the same opening that these troops had gotten out-, Russians had gotten out. And found themselves in the camp, by the time they got there though, they were overpowered with able-bodied, as able-bodied as they were, not many of them were that strong, believe me. But some were able-bodied and were out in the compound area and were therefore \_\_\_\_\_ for the Americans when they came in. So they began to have a big celebration. Pitchin, they just want to touch the Americans, and they were touching by grabbing them and throwing up in the air and trying to catch them and so on. And Koepfer said that he was afraid he was gonna get killed, dropped out there and get hurt. So we finally got some order maintained, told them to quiet down. By this time, he was led to a man who appeared to be the leader of the group, and they were well organized, incidentally, the inmates were. And then between them the, I don't know, well Gotschok was there to-to interpret for 'em. Uh, Koepfer told em to stay in place, we gonna get help quick as we can. And he sent his radio message, through these various echelons, came to the division. And I got there about two hours later. Our troops, Koepfer and his patrol had already gone. There might have been, and I don't remember, there might have been some other American

troops there and I think there were, b- from our battalion headquarters, the ninth armored infantry battalion headquarters, who got the message and they came, some of them came up there. But other than a half a dozen other American soldiers, I don't remember seeing any other

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Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP 2/13/95 COL JAMES MONCRIEF JR  
Page 4

American sol- all of whom I thought were in our division. Looking back, that's the only thing I can remember about it. So when I got there [clears throat] in the meantime I had gone round and I went through the main gate as I recall it. I didn't go through the hole in the fence that the troops had found. So when I got through the- I went through the main gate and there were still a lot of milling around of inmates. Now let me tell you something about the condition of the inmates, the ones that were milling around. Obviously, uh, not as in good physical condition at all. But still able to maneuver and move. Most of them that I saw were men who were, skin was a- looked, \_\_\_\_\_ skin wise, and it looked, next layer under that was just bone. It was absolutely no flesh on the, on the few[?] people that I saw at all. Uh some of them were dressed in prison garb

and some had on what I would call a T-Shirt, uh, and uh, were just mixed type uni- clothes, none of had on uniform clothing. So then I said well I'd like to see some of the place, and uh there was a language barrier, obviously. I didn't have a German or a Russian interpreter. So in s- sign language and some way or other, I wanted to find out who was in charge or somebody I could talk to. And finally they brought a young man, a younger inmate, who a man who I considered to be thirty-ish. Uh, who had, they called him doc-tor. And it turned out, and when I started talking to him, that he had been a pre-med student and therefore earned the title doctor. So I told him what I who I was, I was from division headquarters and I wanted to get some of the, some specifics of the problems, and he apparently being a, the doctor, uh knew something of the details and he could me. And he told me that there were thousands and I tried to pin him down and he didn't really know whether there was 18 or 25 thousand, but he said it was somewhere in that

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Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP 2/13/95 COL JAMES MONCRIEF JR  
Page 5

neighborhood, thousands of people there. And he-he said some of them are actually dying, all of them are in need of

medical attention, food, uh, fresh water, all of the other requirements for life. So then I said, well I'd like to look in a barracks, and he was my guide through, I went through one barracks. And the condition, uh, the conditions I saw there would just turn your stomach. Uh there was some leaning on the wall, inmates, some lying on the floor, and those lying on the floor I couldn't tell whether they were dead or alive. Some were in their bunks, they were they were stacked bunks. And honestly I've forgotten I don't know whether there were three or four stacks. But there was a-not enough room fo- in the bed space, for a big man to turn over. If a man my size got in there, he'd have to get out if he wanted to turn over, he'd have to get out, get in the bed a different manner, where, in which he wanted to lie. They were that thin. And th- some of the people lying in those bunks were so uh near dead that they didn't have energy enough to turn their head. When I would walk by. Not that th- not that they would anyhow, but at least there was a stranger in the barracks, and I know that they-they they recognize if they was still hearing, because I was talking and obviously talking in English. And I was talking to this, my guide, all through this barracks tour, and none of them bothered to say anything, uh, they just let me walk by. Well, I went through the barracks, and I told them, uh, I said, is there a mess hall. So I went through what he...

SWB: We need to put up another roll

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#2]

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Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP 2/13/95 COL JAMES MONCRIEF JR  
Page 6

COL. MONCRIEF: Uh my guide led into what he called a mess hall, it really wasn't much mess hall, I saw some, a big stove, uh with some dirty looking pans and pots around but there was very little space for anybody to sit, in the mess hall. Uh so I presumed that people got, went by the chow line and got their little rations and then went out and ate it on the grounds somewhere, I don't really know. Well, there wasn't much there that I could, pay much attention, except that I did see that there was no, no supply of food. He showed me where they did have, what would be a pantry. But there was nothing there. So then he sh- took me, he said he wanted to show me the crematoria. Now the crematorium that I saw at least, when I knew, what I saw at Buchenwald, was not any huge thing, it only had two uh big ovens, but they were obviously had been used, they were big enough where you could uh poke a body through it to the end of the doorway, and uh, the thing that I remember more



distinctly than anything else about the crematorium was, apparently they had uh brought people in, brought them in to the room alive. And had yanked them up or tied them up by their feet. Because at, about my height of my eyesight, on the walls, were these places where somebody had, it obviously hadn't been done by any tool to make them even and smooth, it was clawed with fingernails, into the wall. And you could, you could this uh shook me up. Uh there were only two place, two ovens as I said there. Now, uh, there was a, although the uh ovens were warm on the outside, it wasn't hot, it just feel it warm, I could see no evidence in the side of the ovens, this b- my guide opened the door for me and there was nothing that I could detect in the way of bodies, or ash or bodies. Uh, just outside and around the corner was a whole stack of bodies, just stacked up like

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Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP 2/13/95 COL JAMES MONCRIEF JR  
Page 7

cord wood. Some clothed and some not. Uh whether they had been uh, whether they just died naturally and were moved out there to one central spot, or whether they had been murdered and brought there, I don't know. But they were just stacked up out there. Well, with that, I figured I had enough, I

tried to pin him down some more and I s- he showed me where the area of the camp was, I did not go through the whole area, mine was just a cursory inspection, I did not inspect in great detail. But he did show me the, where the, how far the camp extended, on each side of where we were. And based on that information, I made a horseback estimate, there must be 20,000 there if they were all billeted in the barracks about like similar to the one that I had seen. So then I got on my radio and at this stage of the game I don't remember now whether I talked in the clear or whether it was all in code. I think by this time in the war, everything we could talk in the clear. So I think I was able to relay it to division headquarters, uh, what I had seen. And my message was in effect, it's far worse than we had anticipated. Now, in the division headquarters, uh, that's- that's the purpose of the staff officer, take care of all these little details. And so, although this was a major detail, I g- I got the G-4 on the other end of the, a G-4 who was a very good friend of mine, just recently died, former senator from the state of Delaware as a matter of fact, name was Bowes, Kale Bowes. I said Kale things are a whole lot worse than we thought, and uh, so I know you want to get them to radio to the army if you haven't already been in touch with the army. And tell them what we need. And I can't begin to tell you what all we need. Uh, I'm not gonna try to identify every bottle of iodine or anything of that sort. We need all kind of medical supplies. We need enough food for 20,000 people. We probably need a whole medical

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Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP 2/13/95 COL JAMES MONCRIEF JR  
Page 8

battalion in here to take care of them. We need a quartermaster company, at least a company to come in here and set up some uh kitchen operation, with food. Uh we need some engineer people in here to purify the water. Uh, we need uh, other support troops to administer, military government. In the mean time, military government had already been alerted, we had, it- now, within our resources within the division we were somewhat limited in what we can do in, in terms of these lu- furnishing this type of logistical support. But they had already been alerted, within our division. So we did exhaust the capabilities that we had even before uh we turned it over to army. But remember now, our division's mission was to fight the war and we were pursuing the Germans, and they were running fast. So we couldn't tarry there very long. Uh, Koepfer and his patrol, being of leading elements of the, of that task force down south, they had already gone. So he had to dash to catch up, when he sidetracked to come over to Buchenwald. That's how rapidly we were moving. And he had, his mission was to uh fight the war. And likewise uh the echelon of division headquarters wasn't able to tarry there

very long. So we, we exhausted, from what we had in our rear echelon, what we called it, trains command, they have th- qu- support and logistical support people. Uh, they brought, they did leave some rations and some medical people, they have a medical battalion that supports the whole division. And so they had, I believe it was a medical company that was able to stop there and start some sort of medical treatment. But that was only just as a temporary expedient. Army headquarters had to furnish some, and they furnished the, what I call the s- the uh occupying forces to come there and occupy the place and administer and set up all these logistical things.

Working transcript: not spell checked or verified for accuracy.

Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP 2/13/95 COL JAMES MONCRIEF JR  
Page 9

SWB: Did you give anybody any food?

COL. MONCRIEF: No, I didn't have any food.

SWB: Did you give anybody anything, did any of the inmates ask you for anything?

COL. MONCRIEF: Oh yes, they were asking, they were, remember there was a language barrier here. And they were they yes, they were asking for food. Uh, but I had no food. I was in a jeep, uh just I didn't know w- I could have carried them probably some K rations if I'd have had time to think about it before I left, but I didn't think about all those kinds of things. Uh so no I didn't give them anything, and I don't remember anybody giving me anything except uh they were all, everybody that was able, wanted to touch me. Just touch me.

SWB: Did they say anything...

COL. MONCRIEF: No, except what was interpreted to me by the guide, and all that I remember him saying was that they were asking for food, and uh, one, and also they were asking uh, when are we gonna get some uh, when will the doctor be in, when will the doctor come? And when will we get some food? That was the primary things they were concerned about.

SWB: And you had no knowledge of the camp before...

COL. MONCRIEF: Not specifically. Now, while the higher headquarters might have known something more detailed than I knew at the division headquarters level, and I was not in

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Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP 2/13/95 COL JAMES MONCRIEF JR  
Page 10

there, I was not in the intelligence business, so therefore, it wasn't my prime mission to know about the camps. All of us in division headquarters, the staff officers, knew that there were in existence some German prisoners' camps. Uh we had no idea what, when they mentioned that, German camp, we had no idea that they were so horrible and were in such horror, state of horror as they were. We had already, by this time we'd been in combat a long time. And had encountered several prisoners of war camps. I remember one just, there too I think a day before this. It was either a day before or a day after and I'm not sure which. At Badsousa, Germany. In which there were, I'm gonna say hundreds, I don't really know how many hundreds, of most of them were British, and most of them were officers, and I was instrumental in getting them flown directly back to England after, getting airplanes and the support and so on. So, the point I want to make is, we were no strangers to liberating camps. We had seen several. And many displaced camp, displaced persons enclosures, that type of thing. But at no time had we encountered brutality, uh where people had been subjected to such uh inhumane treatment, where people were dying, where people indeed were being killed, as prisoners, as we did at Buchenwald and some of these other concentration camps. I personally am not familiar with

others other than Buchenwald. But there were others, so I'm now reading about of course and since then have found out, that were far worse than Buchenwald, insofar as the uh, terrible deaths were being uh inflicted upon the prisoners.

SWB:

COL. MONCRIEF: Yes well, you never forget it, I can't describe it to you. Words won't permit. It was terrible,

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Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP 2/13/95 COL JAMES MONCRIEF JR  
Page 11

the stench. And the sounds, sometimes you would think they were happy sounds. When here was an American soldier, and they were seeing at long last, seeing an American, the sounds were happy, believe it or not. Although some that were at the point of death, they were making some sounds that weren't necessarily happy. I think in the long run they were all happy to see an American. Now only a very small portion of them did I see, nor only a small portion saw me.

[END]

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