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Summary

Wilfred Jerome Fisher, Melvin Darden, and Doris (Don) Duplechein were interviewed separately about their experiences liberating Dachau at the end of April 1945. In this interview they are interviewed together. They were part of an African-American army ambulance unit from 1943 to 1945 and remained good friends after the war. Duplechein knows French, which helped when they were shipped to France. They all lived in California after the war, and Melvin Darden and Wilfred Jerome Fisher are pastors.

The interview focused on their experiences at Dachau. They went as a unit to Dachau as young men in their twenties. As one of them put it, they grew up fast seeing what war was all about. The three did not know what Dachau was before they arrived and could hardly speak when they arrived from the shock they witnessed. They were sent there to feed and help the former prisoners as the only medics in the area. Otherwise, they had no idea why the army sent them. The three were angry afterward. They felt that the army was using them as “experiments” because there was so much disease there. No white hospital officers dared enter the camp. The three African-American witnesses had vivid memories of being lined up and sprayed with DDT.

They saw gas chambers and crematoria and knew that the gas chambers had been used to kill the prisoners because of the bodies piled up next to the chambers and the several dead bodies still in the gas chamber. The crematoria could not burn the bodies fast enough. One of the interviewees said he spoke with some of the former prisoners who were responsible for moving the bodies from the gas chambers to the crematoria. The soldiers shared with each other and other liberators what they saw.

To the question of how it has affected their attitudes and beliefs, one of the interviewees, Melvin Darden, said that he thinks his experience at Dachau explains his hyper personality and his sleepless nights. Another said that it is with him all the time and that he is especially upset when he hears radical groups spreading hatred.

At first, none of the three interviewees knew that the former prisoners were Jews, but that many were Jews soon became obvious. To the question about the relationship between African-Americans and Jewish Americans today (1993), two of the interviewees said they did not think about it. But Wilfred Jerome Fisher, who is a pastor, said he discusses this all the time in his sermons and works with rabbis on interfaith and racial matters.