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Summary

Charles Barnes was a 33-year-old Captain, an OSS Officer attached to the 3rd Army's 6th Armored Division, when his unit approached the area of the Buchenwald Concentration Camp. Twenty SS Guards were captured, who had defected from the camp and while they were being interrogated, they were attacked by a number of prisoners who had escaped the camp. After order was restored, prisoners volunteered to guide the unit to the camp. Charles proceeded to the main gate, opened it and walked in; there were no guards in sight. He had the mission to find an imprisoned French Resistance leader who he suspected was in the camp. He went to the Administration Building and started looking through the files but those seemed very disorganized and were not useful. In the meantime, a group of about 30 prisoners had assembled in the yard. While most looked starved, there were some who seemed in reasonable shape; they were either recent arrivals or food servers who had access to additional food. Most failed to have shoes and had their feet wrapped in rags which when wet, in the cold, would not offer much help. There were Russian, French and German speaking prisoners and he approached a French one and asked him to check with the French network in the camp to see if they could find this one Frenchman. About an hour later the named prisoner appeared.

Looking around the camp, Charles found a lot of dead bodies scattered on the ground throughout the area, most had been shot. There was a place in the open where there was a scaffold used to hang 'trouble-makers'. In questioning the prisoners, he found out that the Germans used a cart to gather up the dead every morning, using meat-hooks to move the bodies to bring them to the crematorium. Survivors would strip the clothes off the bodies before they were moved. There were about 21,000 prisoners in the camp. Some of them were very educated while others were not, but all seemed pretty much confused and questioned as to what was happening. He noticed that there was no obvious water supply throughout the camp, toilets were slit trenches which were placed everywhere. He was also surprised that there was no real bad odor off the dead; it was still cool in April, but that probably was not going to last long. He had never seen so many people in such bad shape; the callousness of their treatment shocked and angered him. The only action he could take was an immediate report to headquarters for military government and medical help. The German guards who had been captured had been in their 30's and had worn fairly well-kept uniforms; all had been solemn. The younger ones maintained that they were just following orders, while there was no way to communicate with the determined older Nazis. He only stayed in the camp for no more than three hours and, at the time, did not realize that he was among the first to enter the camp.

After the war, he had important assignments serving Generals Marshal, Eisenhower, Bradley, Collins and Ridgeway, as well as Admiral Strauss of the Atomic Energy Committee. He did not much engage in reminiscences about the war. Some years later he heard a broadcast in which veterans of the 6th Armored Division, which had been designated as the official liberators of the Buchenwald Concentration Camp, told stories how they were engaged in a fire fight to liberate the camp; this was obviously not true. He turned to other 6th Armored Division

veterans to help correct the misinformation which he deemed to be an insult to those who had died in real combat. He also offered his assistance to Jewish Concentration Camp Survivors. He opined to the interviewer that he could never forgive the Germans for their treatment of their prisoners.