

RG-50.759.0017

Summary

Robert Bowes was 24-year-old T-5 (equivalent to a Corporal) assigned as a teletype operator of the 59th Signal Battalion, XX Corps, 3rd Army working with the G-2 (Intelligence) section at Corps level. He had seen information about concentration camps from 1st Cavalry intelligence reports based on their encounters with survivors. The Corps' Divisions were involved in liberating camps as they moved further into Germany and Robert had the chance to see four such camps, soon after liberation, but only for less than an hour in each. At interview time, 50 years after this experience, it was hard for him to remember details and to differentiate what was seen, and in which camp. During the first 30 minutes of the tape, which was picked up after prior questioning, there was much discussion about his wartime service and personal matters; discussion about his concentration camp experience was repeated and elaborated during the second part of the interview.

The first camp he visited was Buchenwald. He entered through a 10' high gate and saw perhaps a hundred skinny inmates in striped shirts roving around in the yard. He came upon an open concrete block crematorium, with a nude, skinny man's body on a table in front, where gold was pulled from teeth before the body was shoved into the furnace. Ashes was strewn around and a half-burned body could be seen in the incinerator. Behind that building, he was advised was a building where people were gassed. Buchenwald was a very large camp. There were about 15 wooden barracks, he looked into one of them. There were very few inmates left within the barracks, no dead bodies, they had all been removed. Bunks were laid side by side on wooden boards and at one end were nails which served to hang their uniforms. There were no women or children in the camp. The men had all been workers, others had already been murdered and the remaining inmates were destined to be worked to death, without much food. Outside there was a line of naked dead bodies perhaps 3,000 – 4,000, laid out head to foot, with lime sprinkled over them, and with trailers waiting for burial at some unknown location. The camp's commander, a 50-year old fat man, dressed in a blue coat, with only his boots indicating that he was a Nazi officer, had been caught by the inmates and stabbed to death; there were about 50 bodies of inmates around him who he had shot, but they had finally managed to kill him. It was all too gruesome and Robert was anxious to get away.

In the fourth camp, he met up with a lot of high brass. There were American, British and French Generals, among them Eisenhower, Patton, Walker, Doolittle, Montgomery. Robert had just seen the camp's latrine which consisted of a long board fastened at both ends where prisoner sat on them; two had fallen in and were covered with feces. It made Robert ready to vomit, just when he met up with General Eisenhower who asked him if he needed help. Robert declined explaining that this was terrible, to which Eisenhower agreed and said that they had seen a lot. The camp was on a hillside and there was horror all around. He saw 4 stacks of bodies each 5 ½' high. There were also seven wagon loads of bodies with about 250 in each wagon. There was only one building in the camp and a double barbed-wire fence enclosed the camp. He did not stay long.

While talking about the other two camps, which all had similar buildings, the interview stopped abruptly without a proper ending.