

RG-50.759.0021

Summary

Eldred Burr was a 28-year-old Private First Class, assigned to Company A, of the 56th Armored Engineers, of the 11th Armored Division, when his unit was ordered to the Mauthausen Concentration Camp. Eldred had recently been exposed to the horrors of a forced labor camp and thereby expected to see a similar scene. He had also seen pictures of other concentration camps in the Stars and Stripes newspaper. However, Mauthausen was even worse. When he arrived, the prisoners in their striped uniforms, and looking like skeletons, had crowded around the entrance gate, the gate the unit had been requested to open. The German guards had locked the gate as they fled the camp, in view of the imminent arrival of US troops. It was difficult to get the prisoners to move back, due to the confused situation at hand and the various languages spoken by the prisoners. Eventually they moved back and the unit was able to blow the gate open. A Company of medical personnel had also been summoned, while Eldred's unit moved on without entering the camp. A couple of weeks later, after the war had ended, Eldred had to return to the camp and this time he managed to look around. The camp was a short distance from a nearby town, right in the open, surrounded by a stone wall with four gun-turrets exercising control. The prisoners came from many nations, Italy, France, Austria, all men, starved into terrible conditions. There was a prohibition about giving the inmates food, the wrong food could kill them. While he stayed only about a half an hour, he managed to look into one of the barracks and noted the shelving where the prisoners had slept. There was a crematorium and he could still see bones in the ovens. He heard that there was a gas chamber, but he did not get to see that. Bulldozers were ready to cover hundreds of bodies placed in a ditch, side by side, without shrouds. In a nearby building he saw women and kids clothing and toys placed in boxes; the prior owners had not lasted long. It was obvious that some of the remaining living inmates, were too far gone to stay alive. The troops who were there were angry and disgusted; some Austrian civilians had been brought in to help clean-up and they were afraid that the troops might take revenge.

After Eldred returned home, he had no problems picking up life where he had left off. He did talk about his experience and received mixed reactions; some were bigots who would not believe. But he understood his fellow veterans in the 11th Armored Reunions.