

RG-50.759.0034

Summary

Joe Costo was a 24-year-old Sergeant, a member of the Anti-Tank Company, 37th Infantry, 94th Division and attached to the 90th Division, when his unit was ordered to the Flossenbürg Concentration Camp near the Czechoslovakian border. Joe had seen a lot of combat and knew what he was facing as he approached the camp, about twelve hours after its liberation by the 90th Division. The German guards had taken off but a few were captured and others were later traced and taken prisoner. The inmates had been removed and some German prisoners were seen in the yard, as he entered the camp. A tall mountain was in front of him with very wide steps leading to the top and barracks on each side looking like two separate camps. There was a crematorium and a gas chamber. To the right of the crematorium, which had about 10 ovens, was a huge pile of ashes and bones. Some of the ovens also contains ashes; there were metal bars in the ovens which separated the bodies. Next to the crematorium was an immense pile of shoes which stretched into a two-block square and which was 10-12 stories high. In a room to the left of the gas chamber, there were jugs containing ashes which bore names. A ladder led to the top of the gas chamber where he found a cap which had been worn out with usage. A wall next to some barracks bore evidence of thousands who had been shot there and blood was still evident. There were big mounds adjacent to the barracks where the bodies had already been buried. The barracks were dilapidated and filthy with straw strewn around. The officers' quarter was located next to the gate with barbed wire around it marking the limit for its security. The camp was known as the worst concentration camp within Germany.

Joe did not talk about this experience when he returned to the States. He had nightmares and sleep problems which also affected his marriage and his physical condition. Some things like the sight of all those shoes could not leave his mind. Talking to other veterans, in support groups, offered some relief.