

RG-50.759.0038

Summary

Alex Dryden was assigned to the Cavalry Reconnaissance Troop of the 45th Infantry Division and as a 21-year-old Private First Class, was involved in the liberation of the Dachau Concentration Camp, near the end of World War II. There had been heavy fighting at Aschaffenburg and Schweinfurt when the Troop then proceeded towards Dachau. Alex had never heard of a concentration camp. The first contact was a railroad siding with 40 or more boxcars loaded with dead men in striped uniforms. The bodies had deteriorated and were bloated, assuming unnatural positions. The troop then came under fire from watch towers and about six German guards were quickly eliminated, since the wooden towers provided no shielding from rifle bullets. The Troop then broke into the camp where about 500 prisoners had gathered in the yard, some yelling and some too sick to move. There was a scene of happiness and some inmates tried to kiss the hands of the liberators. One group of Polish prisoners lowered their trousers to show that they had been castrated. Some prisoners seemed not to know what was going on. Soldiers gave the inmates cigarettes and chocolate bars but soon learned that food, at this stage of starvation, can kill. The prisoners ranged in age from the teens to the 70's or 80's but most looked older than their true age. All had been starved. Their heads were shaved to fight off the lice and most had some foot-covering of wrappings in lieu of shoes. There was some disorder, as prisoners wanted guns to shoot the guards, which finally was stopped by the Captain in charge of the Troop. In the barracks were wooden pallets for sleeping, with sick and dying prisoners lying about without any bedding. Interpreters came and questioning of the prisoners revealed what had happened to them. There were some dead in front of the barracks, which was the practice to move those who died during the night to the outside for pick-up and removal into the boxcars. Apparently, the incinerators had never been brought into action and Alex was advised that prisoners had been gassed and then also been thrown into the boxcars. The routine was a wake-up call at 5 AM, no breakfast, the first meal at noon and another at 5 PM, perhaps bread re-enforced with sawdust and thin soup. Thousands were dying. There was no cohesion among the prisoners, they pried off each other for any advantage and had to watch their belongings to assure they would not disappear during a shower bath. There were prisoner police among the Jewish prisoners called Kapos who were deemed traitors, since they traded their evil actions for a lengthier period of life; at the end they too were to be executed. There were about 25 different religious orders represented at Dachau. Alex, as a Catholic, had years later taken up the order of the Balladites (?) which had Irish and German participation, and was allegedly the majority representation at the camp. When the gates were opened, some of the prisoners walked out, intending to take the road towards their place of origin.

At interview time in 1994, Alex was now almost 70 years old and feared that his compatriots were dying off. He presented his experiences graphically to groups, such as a Jewish Community Center, where he was advised that his talk was not bloody enough. He did not think that his experience had changed him and that his move into the Catholic order, which terminated his engagement for marriage, had occurred twenty year after the war, so that he negated any nexus.