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Summary

Ralph Fink was a 20-year-old Technical Sergeant, a Platoon Leader of four Machine Gun crews, members of the 157th Infantry Regiment, 45th Infantry Division, when his unit, while in Reserve, was ordered into the Dachau Concentration Camp. While Ralph had heard of Concentration Camps, when he arrived at a rail siding next to the Dachau camp, he was unprepared at what he saw. There were between 40 and 50 box cars at the siding, all filled with dead bodies, all in horrible conditions, starved down to 75 pounds in weight, in civilian clothing and mostly men. His troops were shocked and some almost went crazy, it was all so unbelievable. There still was some shooting in the distance and Ralph's platoon maintained a defensive posture throughout. Ralph heard that some of the guards had been shot, even as they tried to surrender. He could understand such action but still he would not tolerate it. The Dachau Concentration Camp was a huge complex with factories apart from the prisoner residential compound, all surrounded by a high-wire fence. Guard towers were placed only around the inner camp area. The unit followed the tracks into the main camp, where a crowd of prisoners was milling around the entrance gate; the timing was about 30-45 minutes after the Infantry had made their initial entry. There were men in striped uniforms, emaciated but still functional, hugging and kissing and joyously greeting their liberators. Several dozen bodies were piled up in the area. Moving cautiously beyond the gate into the residential complex, between sizable wooden huts, Ralph saw prisoners, starved, with deep-set eyes, looking out of open doors. Within the barracks, prisoners were lying in bunk beds crowded together; these prisoners were non-functional. One emaciated prisoner came stumbling towards them on the road, falling down several times, as he exerted himself to greet his liberators. Ralph set up his machine guns in a defensive position, just in case of a counter-attack. He now reconnoitered further into the camp within a small group. They came upon a Crematorium, which obviously had been used recently. Adjacent was a shed filled with clothing, presumably by prisoners prior to their extermination; trousers and jackets had been separated.

For the night, Ralph retired to a residential building just outside of the camp, which apparently had been used by officers or NCO's of the guard force. The next day it was on towards Munich. Ralph heard later of disputes about who liberated Dachau. The camp would become a tourist attraction and claims of who liberated it became important. He knew his 45th Infantry Division was involved; the 42nd Infantry Division might have moved into the camp from a different direction. Ralph talked about his experience in many venues. It was incomprehensible to him that some people in California claimed that this atrocity never happened.