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Summary

Bruce Kendall was 28-year-old US soldier who was attached to the British 8th Army working with the 15th and 21st Army Group, in D Platoon of the 567th Company, CM-92, Supplemental Training Unit; he was named an Army Field Volunteer and held the rank of Honorary Chief Warrant Officer. His Company had over 100 ambulances and had worked in Africa against Rommel and later in Italy until near the end of the war. Then, the unit was moved from Italy thru Marseille and hence thru Belgium into Germany, where they were ordered into the Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp, arriving on April 29, 1945, four days after it was liberated by British forces. While Bruce had heard of concentration camps, arrival at this camp was a startling surprise. There were actually 3 separate camps, all surrounded by barbed wire. Upon arrival, he saw but a few liberated prisoners in the yard but the one-story, wooden barracks designed for 100 people, sometime had up to 1,500 prisoners stacked into them. The stench and filth were overbearing. Latrines were only on the outside and often not used. Prisoners ranged from newly arrivals in relative fair shape, to those many who had been starved for lengthy periods and looked like human skeletons. There were men and women and a few children. Dead bodies were everywhere and bulldozers had to be used to haul them into 1000-person ditches; roughly 30,000 had to be buried, joining the corpses buried hurriedly by the departing Germans, who did a poor job trying to hide their crimes. The committed crimes were highlighted by the gas chambers and crematoriums on site, as well as boxed items of clothing, hair, tooth brushes, combs, shoes, watches, coins, paper money and even false teeth, all stacked in a high-rise building and bearing witness to the people killed in the camp.

A mobile hospital unit was set up and the job was to systematically clear every barracks, bring the inmates to a "human laundry" station at a cleared area of the camp; each inmate had to be cleaned, de-loused and bathed and then moved into a hospital ward with a clean blanket. At the end of the shift, the staff had to go through a similar sequence. Some prisoners stood out and became memorable for Bruce who was repelled by the smell, but felt very sorry for the inmates and could not understand how Germans could act so hateful; he was more sad than angry. Bergen-Belsen was a death camp where people had been starved and eventually tortured to death. On the other hand, there were big buildings which housed the German officers who lived well, with basements loaded up with wine and large auditoriums for their gatherings.

German medical personnel were shuttled in from Luebeck and laborers from the local area, to help with cleaning up the camp and tending to the former prisoners; all those were POWs and were treated harshly; they ended up doing all the dirty work of transporting the dead, placing them into the mass graves and cleaning up the site and the people in it.

Bruce was at the site for 6 weeks and worked continually. Accommodations were primitive, he often froze and was hungry, apart from the ham and corned beef British diet, but he felt that he did his job and accomplished his mission. The camp was the worst part of his 18 months of service, where he had previously seen the death and wounded of many of our soldiers. As he

thought back during his interview, he acknowledged that he would do it all again for the experience he had gained.