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Colonel James Moncrief Jr. interview 2/13/95

SWB: Tell me how you first heard about ...

COL. MONCRIEF: Okay. Uh, in April of 1945, the war had

reached the stage where soldiers, had reached the stage that

soldiers called it a rat race. The Germany army was pretty

much, uh, upset and it was a matter of the Americans just

chasin' 'em. It became a real rat race. Uh, on the

eleventh, part of our division overran a camp at Buch-

concentration camp at Buchenwald. Uh I was a, I was a G-1,

lieutenant colonel, as a G-1 of the division headquarters.

G-1 is a staff officer on the general staff of the

commanding general. His capa- his job has to do with many

aspects of personnel. Part of which are prisoners. So when

the message came into division headquarters, the general

wasn't at the headquarters. At this stage of the game, I

don't remember where the headquarters was located. It was

north of Buchenwald. When the message came, it was, we

became sort of frantic. It talked about thousands of people

dying, and our troops had overrun 'em. So immediately I

knew that something had to be done and I said before we can

really recommend a course of action we've got to know more

of the facts. So I told the chief of staff that I would

just go to Buchenwald, and, for myself, find out about it.

The message we had received was over radio through two

echelons of command before it reached the division. From

the battalion first to a, b- t- to the b- patrol to the

battalion to combat command A and then to division

headquarters. So I got in the jeep mounted uh with a radio,

and took off for Buchenwald, while driving. So I got to

Buchenwald about uh, I'd say about two hours after this was

just my-my estimate at this stage of the game. I got to

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Buchenwald about two hours after it had been discovered by

our troops. Troops of the ninth armored infantry battalion,

a patrol commanded by Captain Fred Keopfer, found the camp,

and fortunately, he had a man who understood German and

Russian to some extent, whose name was Gotschok. Now

Sergeant Gotschok overheard a conversation taking place on

the side of the road between what our troops consi- our

patrol considered to be Germans. Some of them had German

civilian, German military uh, some military uni- -tire,

attire. While also had some civilian clothes. But they

were being roughed up and by some people who Gotschok

determined to be Russian because they were speaking Russian.

So when they were finally separated to the point that uh

Gostchok could get them quieted down enough to understand

what they were talking about, he found out that there was a

concentration camp out the road, ten or twelve, six or eight

miles out, I don't know how far they were from it. So

[Ahem] Jefferson said okay, mount a couple of these guys up

on our scout car and we'll just go out there and see this

camp. So he radioed into his battalion commander, task

force commander actually, it wasn't a battalion commander,

who was Colonel, at that time, Captain Bennett. And Captain

Bennett said well go on out there and see what is taking

place, come back in and let me know. So with that, uh,

Koepfer then had these Germans up on the front end of his m-

uh, scout car, and went out to the north rim of the camp,

where the Russians apparently had gotten out. Now these

Russians turned out to be former inmates of the camp. When

the German guard left the camp, they all took off in a cloud

of dust when they heard all the commotion of the war coming

on, artillery and sound of tanks and so on. There was no

fight for Buchenwald. The German guard had just simply ran.

And when they, Russians, after the German guard got out, the

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Russians had cut a hole in the fence, north edge of the

perimeter, they cut a hole in the fence, barbed wire, and

gotten out. And then they found these Germans guards up in

the little village, and that's the reason that led to how

are troops getting in there. So when our detail, our patrol

got down there, they went to the same opening that these

troops had gotten ou-, Russians had gotten out. And found

themselves in the camp, by the time they got there though,

they were overpowered with able-bodied, as able-bodied as

they were, not many of them were that strong, believe me.

But some were able-bodied and were out in the compound area

and were therefore \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ for the Americans when they came

in. So they began to have a big celebration. Pitchin, they

just want to touch the Americans, and they were touching by

grabbing them and throwing up in the air and trying to catch

them and so on. And Koepfer said that he was afraid he was

gonna get killed, dropped out there and get hurt. So we

finally got some order maintained, told them to quiet down.

By this time, he was led to a man who appeared to be the

leader of the group, and they were well organized,

incidentally, the inmates were. And then between them the,

I don't know, well Gotschok was there to-to interpret for

'em. Uh, Koepfer told em to stay in place, we gonna get

help quick as we can. And he sent his radio message,

through these various echelons, came to the division. And I

got there about two hours later. Our troops, Koepfer and

his patrol had already gone. There might have been, and I

don't remember, there might have been some other American

troops there and I think there were, b- from our battalion

headquarters, the ninth armored infantry battalion

headquarters, who got the message and they came, some of

them came up there. But other than a half a dozen other

American soldiers, I don't remember seeing any other

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American sol- all of whom I thought were in our division.

Looking back, that's the only thing I can remember about it.

So when I got there [clears throat] in the meantime I had

gone round and I went through the main gate as I recall it.

I didn't go through the hole in the fence that the troops

had found. So when I got through the- I went through the

main gate and there were still a lot of milling around of

inmates. Now let me tell you something about the condition

of the inmates, the ones that were milling around.

Obviously, uh, not as in good physical condition at all.

But still able to maneuver and move. Most of them that I

saw were men who were, skin was a- looked, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ skin

wise, and it looked, next layer under that was just bone.

It was absolutely no flesh on the, on the few[?] people that

I saw at all. Uh some of them were dressed in prison garb

and some had on what I would call a T-Shirt, uh, and uh,

were just mixed type uni- clothes, none of had on uniform

clothing. So then I said well I'd like to see some of the

place, and uh there was a language barrier, obviously. I

didn't have a German or a Russian interpreter. So in s-

sign language and some way or other, I wanted to find out

who was in charge or somebody I could talk to. And finally

they brought a young man, a younger inmate, who a man who I

considered to be thirty-ish. Uh, who had, they called him

doc-tor. And it turned out, and when I started talking to

him, that he had been a pre-med student and therefore earned

the title doctor. So I told him what I who I was, I was

from division headquarters and I wanted to get some of the,

some specifics of the problems, and he apparently being a,

the doctor, uh knew something of the details and he could

me. And he told me that there were thousands and I tried to

pin him down and he didn't really know whether there was 18

or 25 thousand, but he said it was somewhere in that

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neighborhood, thousands of people there. And he-he said

some of them are actually dying, all of them are in need of

medical attention, food, uh, fresh water, all of the other

requirements for life. So then I said, well I'd like to

look in a barracks, and he was my guide through, I went

through one barracks. And the condition, uh, the conditions

I saw there would just turn your stomach. Uh there was some

leaning on the wall, inmates, some lying on the floor, and

those lying on the floor I couldn't tell whether they were

dead or alive. Some were in their bunks, they were they

were stacked bunks. And honestly I've forgotten I don't

know whether there were three or four stacks. But there was

a-not enough room fo- in the bed space, for a big man to

turn over. If a man my size got in there, he'd have to get

out if he wanted to turn over, he'd have to get out, get in

the bed a different manner, where, in which he wanted to

lie. They were that thin. And th- some of the people lying

in those bunks were so uh near dead that they didn't have

energy enough to turn their head. When I would walk by.

Not that th- not that they would anyhow, but at least there

was a stranger in the barracks, and I know that they-they

they recognize if they was still hearing, because I was

talking and obviously talking in English. And I was talking

to this, my guide, all through this barracks tour, and none

of them bothered to say anything, uh, they just let me walk

by. Well, I went through the barracks, and I told them, uh,

I said, is there a mess hall. So I went through what he...

SWB: We need to put up another roll

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#2]

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COL. MONCRIEF: Uh my guide led into what he called a mess

hall, it really wasn't much mess hall, I saw some, a big

stove, uh with some dirty looking pans and pots around but

there was very little space for anybody to sit, in the mess

hall. Uh so I presumed that people got, went by the chow

line and got their little rations and then went out and ate

it on the grounds somewhere, I don't really know. Well,

there wasn't much there that I could, pay much attention,

except that I did see that there was no, no supply of food.

He showed me where they did have, what would be a pantry.

But there was nothing there. So then he sh- took me, he

said he wanted to show me the crematoria. Now the crema

torium that I saw at least, when I knew, what I saw at

Buchenwald, was not any huge thing, it only had two uh big

ovens, but they were obviously had been used, they were big

enough where you could uh poke a body through it to the end

of the doorway, and uh, the thing that I remember more

distinctly than anything else about the crematorium was,

apparently they had uh brought people in, brought them in to

the room alive. And had yanked them up or tied them up by

their feet. Because at, about my height of my eyesight, on

the walls, were these places where somebody had, it

obviously hadn't been done by any tool to make them even and

smooth, it was clawed with fingernails, into the wall. And

you could, you could this uh shook me up. Uh there were

only two place, two ovens as I said there. Now, uh, there

was a, although the uh ovens were warm on the outside, it

wasn't hot, it just feel it warm, I could see no evidence in

the side of the ovens, this b- my guide opened the door for

me and there was nothing that I could detect in the way of

bodies, or ash or bodies. Uh, just outside and around the

corner was a whole stack of bodies, just stacked up like

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cord wood. Some clothed and some not. Uh whether they had

been uh, whether they just died naturally and were moved out

there to one central spot, or whether they had been murdered

and brought there, I don't know. But they were just stacked

up out there. Well, with that, I figured I had enough, I

tried to pin him down some more and I s- he showed me where

the area of the camp was, I did not go through the whole

area, mine was just a cursory inspection, I did not inspect

in great detail. But he did show me the, where the, how far

the camp extended, on each side of where we were. And based

on that information, I made a horseback estimate, there must

be 20,000 there if they were all billeted in the barracks

about like similar to the one that I had seen. So then I

got on my radio and at this stage of the game I don't

remember now whether I talked in the clear or whether it was

all in code. I think by this time in the war, everything we

could talk in the clear. So I think I was able to relay it

to division headquarters, uh, what I had seen. And my

message was in effect, it's far worse than we had

anticipated. Now, in the division headquarters, uh, that's-

that's the purpose of the staff officer, take care of all

these little details. And so, although this was a major

detail, I g- I got the G-4 on the other end of the, a G-4

who was a very good friend of mine, just recently died,

former senator from the state of Delaware as a matter of

fact, name was Bowes, Kale Bowes. I said Kale things are a

whole lot worse than we thought, and uh, so I know you want

to get them to radio to the army if you haven't already been

in touch with the army. And tell them what we need. And I

can't begin to tell you what all we need. Uh, I'm not gonna

try to identify every bottle of iodine or anything of that

sort. We need all kind of medical supplies. We need enough

food for 20,000 people. We probably need a whole medical

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battalion in here to take care of them. We need a

quartermaster company, at least a company to come in here

and set up some uh kitchen operation, with food. Uh we need

some engineer people in here to purify the water. Uh, we

need uh, other support troops to administer, military

government. In the mean time, military government had

already been alerted, we had, it- now, within our resources

within the division we were somewhat limited in what we can

do in, in terms of these lu- furnishing this type of

logistical support. But they had already been alerted,

within our division. So we did exhaust the capabilities

that we had even before uh we turned it over to army. But

remember now, our division's mission was to fight the war

and we were pursuing the Germans, and they were running

fast. So we couldn't tarry there very long. Uh, Koepfer

and his patrol, being of leading elements of the, of that

task force down south, they had already gone. So he had to

dash to catch up, when he sidetracked to come over to

Buchenwald. That's how rapidly we were moving. And he had,

his mission was to uh fight the war. And likewise uh the

echelon of division headquarters wasn't able to tarry there

very long. So we, we exhausted, from what we had in our

rear echelon, what we called it, trains command, they have

th- qu- support and logistical support people. Uh, they

brought, they did leave some rations and some medical

people, they have a medical battalion that supports the

whole division. And so they had, I believe it was a medical

company that was able to stop there and start some sort of

medical treatment. But that was only just as a temporary

expedient. Army headquarters had to furnish some, and they

furnished the, what I call the s- the uh occupying forces to

come there and occupy the place and administer and set up

all these logistical things.

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SWB: Did you give anybody any food?

COL. MONCRIEF: No, I didn't have any food.

SWB: Did you give anybody anything, did any of the inmates

ask you for anything?

COL. MONCRIEF: Oh yes, they were asking, they were,

remember there was a language barrier here. And they were

they yes, they were asking for food. Uh, but I had no food.

I was in a jeep, uh just I didn't know w- I could have

carried them probably some K rations if I'd have had time to

think about it before I left, but I didn't think about all

those kinds of things. Uh so no I didn't give them

anything, and I don't remember anybody giving me anything

except uh they were all, everybody that was able, wanted to

touch me. Just touch me.

SWB: Did they say anything...

COL. MONCRIEF: No, except what was interpreted to me by the

guide, and all that I remember him saying was that they were

asking for food, and uh, one, and also they were asking uh,

when are we gonna get some uh, when will the doctor be in,

when will the doctor come? And when will we get some food?

That was the primary things they were concerned about.

SWB: And you had no knowledge of the camp before...

COL. MONCRIEF: Not specifically. Now, while the higher

headquarters might have known something more detailed than I

knew at the division headquarters level, and I was not in

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there, I was not in the intelligence business, so therefore,

it wasn't my prime mission to know about the camps. All of

us in division headquarters, the staff officers, knew that

there were in existence some German prisoners' camps. Uh we

had no idea what, when they mentioned that, German camp, we

had no idea that they were so horrible and were in such

horror, state of horror as they were. We had already, by

this time we'd been in combat a long time. And had

encountered several prisoners of war camps. I remember one

just, there too I think a day before this. It was either a

day before or a day after and I'm not sure which. At

Badsousa, Germany. In which there were, I'm gonna say

hundreds, I don't really know how many hundreds, of most of

them were British, and most of them were officers, and I was

instrumental in getting them flown directly back to England

after, getting airplanes and the support and so on. So, th-

the point I want to make is, we were no strangers to

liberating camps. We had seen several. And many displaced

camp, displaced persons enclosures, that type of thing. But

at no time had we encountered brutality, uh where people had

been subjected to such uh inhumane treatment, where people

were dying, where people indeed were being killed, as

prisoners, as we did at Buchenwald and some of these other

concentration camps. I personally am not familiar with

others other than Buchenwald. But there were others, so I'm

now reading about of course and since then have found out,

that were far worse than Buchenwald, insofar as the uh,

terrible deaths were being uh inflicted upon the prisoners.

SWB:

COL. MONCRIEF: Yes well, you never forget it, I can't

describe it to you. Words won't permit. It was terrible,

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the stench. And the sounds, sometimes you would think they

were happy sounds. When here was an American soldier, and

they were seeing at long last, seeing an American, the

sounds were happy, believe it or not. Although some that

were at the point of death, they were making some sounds

that weren't necessarily happy. I think in the long run

they were all happy to see an American. Now only a very

small portion of them did I see, nor only a small portion

saw me.

[END]

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