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John Holmes interview 2/9/95

SWB: Can you tell me how it is that you came on your first concentration camp. And just tell it to me the way that you experienced it.

JOHN HOLMES: Well like I had said before, this was not uh, deemed a concentration camp, It was a labor camp. We were fighting in the Hartz mountain sector. Um. On our way into fighting in Austria. Anyway, when we, when we, when we crossed this river and we came into this area the Germans were in there. But they were more, they didn't, they didn't put up any resistance and they had an airport nearby. And as a matter of fact this was the place I saw my first German jets. And I never knew what they were, but I knew they were just damn fast, because I tried to open up fire on them, a couple of them. And by the time you could get your guns trained, that thing was phew, gone like that. But anyway, um, we s- we s-, um, we passed this house and off in the distance you could see huge warehouses and then long rows of um, something like a, I don't know what, it's not a quonset hut, but uh, just a square, long buildings, and it had a gate in it. And I don't recall what the writing was up over the gate, but what it, what we did encounter, inside of there, I got out the turret of my tank, and walked in to see what was inside. And that was when I, d- d-, well you could

smell death for maybe 20 miles before you ever got to it, because it's very dif-, humans and animals, entirely different. You can stand a cow or a horse or something that's been shot up, but a human being, is death, the stench of death from it is, it's, it's awful. So, I saw this high ceiling and this little narrow pathway down the center, and they had maybe twelve or fourteen tiers. And you- and

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you've just enough room, maybe oh I'd say, for an individual to slip through, between each tier of bunks. And can you imagine them being twi-, now me at six foot it is twice as high as I am tall, in other words you got twelve or fourteen feet. Now these bunks, they got little ladders going up there and these people, now you might find underneath here would be dead person, and in, living in that, living person was just too damn weak to even move. And all they, all they do is just hold out their hand, and you were afraid to touch them. Uh, some of them had scabs and sores and everything on them, they had just been there for- and- and what I understand that these people were fed a ounce of meat I think it was once a week. They were also given potato soup

or cabbage soup once a day in a um, a small cube of bread, it might have been about like so. And I don't know how thick it was but it couldn't have been very thick. And they were nothing, they had an American Colonel in there, I don't know how many months he had been a prisoner, but he originally weighed about two, his height must have been, I'd say a good six four. He originally weighed about 230, maybe a little bit more. And I don't think that he weighed any more than eighty pounds when we saw him. So you can imagine the, the horror that those people suffered under Ger- German occupation. Um, as prisoners of war, they didn't even feed some of them. They- It was just- I- I- I- I- the only that I can say to you would have to have seen it. The pictures that you saw depicting the death in the concentration camps, this was identically the same.

SWB: When you first drove the tank in, did you drive right in.

JOHN HOLMES: No, no, I don't drive, I was a tank commander,

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my driver did.

SWB: Tell me, were there any people outside?

JOHN HOLMES: None at all.

SWB: And did you exchange fire with anyone, or everyone was gone.

JOHN HOLMES: The Germans took off and left everything just as it was. Even their warehouses of guns. This- this was the the- the um, I think this was the um, the Walter .32, they made a .32 pistol. And these, uh, these uh prisoners that were capable of work, any work at all, were the laborers that did the assembling of these pistols and all in that big huge factory to the rear. Uh there was no other gun there but that and they had them in there by the hundreds, just cases of them, you kind of like wonder where, you know, went all that trouble to make those guns that could have been feeding some of those people.

SWB: So when you went in the barracks and you found all this did you, could you talk to anyone. Tell me what else happened...

JOHN HOLMES: It was, it was virtually, can you- can- can you imagine trying to talk some- to someone that do, they don't even have the strength to op- for their vocal cords to even operate. We were warned not to give them anything,

like our C rations and our K rations, don't give them that. See these people had to be fed a broth, or something that was soupy that they could swallow that would not choke them to death because it, if you- if you fed them they couldn't

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swallow it. If you gave them solid food, cause a lot of people made that mistake. A lot of our soldiers made that mistake when they ran across where they had you know liberated somebody that had been under starvation conditions. And they gave them their food. The food has a tendency to choke you then. And you just choke to death. Whereas if they would just let them alone and let the people gradually eat soup until they get their strength back to where your stomach becomes acclimated to it.

SWB: Were you surprised?

JOHN HOLMES: Yes I was. I truly was, because I just couldn't believe that an individual that is supposed to be fighting for the preservation of his cus- culture and his country could be doing this to people who had not defense.

I couldn't believe this. Because you-you-you-you're flabbergasted. You-you're so shocked by what you're looking at. Well, I give you a good example. Uh-I-I, I-I-I wasn't really surprised yet I was. I can say this, um, the fourteenth reconnaissance platoon was out scouting and they ran into a bunch of Nazi SS and they were captured. And we had a hell of a fire fight. And I-I definitely was responsible for killing one, two three, four, I'd say approximately six German soldiers myself. Directing fire in on them. They, these, they- they captured about a dozen of these uh, it-it was the fourteenth conance- reconnaissance unit. And they tied their hands behind their back and they tied their feet together, and I'm not telling you what somebody told me, I'm telling you what exactly I saw. And in this little town there must have been at least, no-oh- I don't even think this town had a- a- six houses in it. But it had a little road that went down like a, and did you know

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those Nazi SS s.o.b.'s took those, those- those young boys, we were all about the same age, and they, when they put, when they tied their hands and feet together, and hands

behind their back, and they laid them out along the row, in a row, and they put a bullet right between their eyes. And I can recall, from this fire fight, headquarters company I think came in from the, southeast, and they had 105 guns, 105 millimeter guns. Ours were s- were these 75's and 76 millimeters. We killed just, I think we killed all of them. I don't recall us taking any prisoners. Cause you had to kill them. Because they were not going to surrender. The Nazi SS was not going to surrender. They would shoot and shoot until they were killed. It was stupid because they were raised all the way from the Hitler youth. And that's what they believed in. And when you caught them, they all had that insignia on their collar. So that's how you knew what you were fighting. But, to show you the difference between um, fighting, at the concentration camp....

SWB: We have to put another roll of film...

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#2]

SWB: When you were first coming in was there an exchange of fire and you shot down a plane?

JOHN HOLMES: No, there was no exchange of fire period. The only thing that, uh, we- cause we were really amazed to see these um, this- this junkers, I think, what was it, one, it wasn't a junker, it was a German transport. We- the one

that I opened fire up on was um, a transport, I think it had

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high ranking German officers in it. And of course we never saw it crash, cause, when we shot into it, you know, by the time when it's approaching you, and you open fire with a fifty caliber machine gun, um, you don't know how many slugs um, you put in them, but um, or, who survived, what with the plane, you- you're two or three thousand feet off the ground, and it just- it's going on in and-and-and the engines are smoking, you know it's gonna crash but it crashed way back to the back of us, so we never got a chance to see what, you know, damage you'd done.

SWB: And were there guards in the guard houses when you came to the camp.

JOHN HOLMES: None at all. Absolutely. I told you, everybody had, the-they just, as they say, they shagged tail on out of there. Uh, whatever guns and everything they had, they just dropped them and ran. Now they didn't want the co-, number one, th-the German soldier, uh, was a told all

the way back from Ger- uh- World War I, when they had black Americans fighting over there in Europe, uh that, don't be captured by black troops. Cause they would cut your throat. Course which was a lie, but during World War I, a lot of our guys did do that. They would infiltrate into the German lines at night in World War I and they had razors. And th- don't nobody know when somebody, you know, was clapped their hand across your mouth and then cut your throat, and you lay there and bleed to death and the rest of the guys around you that survived it didn't even know that you were dead, particularly the sentries on the outer line, parts, they were always caught off-guard and killed like that. But uh this went all the way back, this, [laughs] they said [laughs] as a matter of fact, the German soldiers were, we

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we shot up, I don't know whether you saw um, Liberators fighting on two fronts, this one particular guy was in my outfit, um, um, there was a bunch of Germans, must have been two or three thousand that came out of the woods and, German soldiers and they came out, and they took a look and they looked and saw the black soldiers, and they said, what, oh

no, not you guys, and they turned around and started back through the woods, and we put some high explosives over their head and they come on back out just as nice with their hands on back up, and they would rather take a chance rather than be blown to bits, come on out and now let's talk turkey.

SWB: When you went into this camp that you came upon, about how long did you stay?

JOHN HOLMES: I would imagine we must have been there at least, um, inside the camp itself maybe about an hour, hour and, hour and a half, and when it came orders to move out, um, I had already talked to this lady, Mrs. Schimmel, because she came to the door, and um, she flagged me down and she said um, soldier, she said um, and her English was very good, Mrs. Schimmels, you would have thought that she was from the states. But she was raised, she was an Austrian person of German descent. And so she asked me where I was from, I said I'm- I said I'm from Chicago. She said Seargent, she said, you're from Chicago, I said yeah, she said you know where Skokie is? I said sure I know where Skokie is. I says right across the canal from where my mother lives. She said I have a sister there, and I wonder if you would give her a letter for me. And I said, well, sure, so I gave her, she wrote the letter and I, when I was discharged I took it by the house and gave it to her. And,

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we- of course we didn't stay in the communications with one another after that because her husband was rather nasty and I didn- I didn't want to be bothered with it, going back, but um. She was pretty- but the woman herself was very nice. Met the sister and she thanked me for delivering that and all. And I think the sister in Skokie wound up sending for her, and she mi- if she's still living she's in the states now.

SWB: Do you know what happened to the people in the camp after you left.

JOHN HOLMES: No.

SWB: Had you been told what to expect.

JOHN HOLMES: No.

SWB: But you had been told not to feed...

JOHN HOLMES: Aft- only after we had secured the camp.

SWB: And who told, tell me more about that, how did you get the word.

JOHN HOLMES: We got it from our battalion commander, or one of our officers, cause I can't recall whether it was a major or a captain that said, do not give them anything to e- the word was passed all the way down the line, do not feed these prisoners, under any circumstances. Because, they wanted as many of them alive as possible. Cause see they all had a story to tell, also. Where they were captured, how long, what concentration camp they came from, because a lot of the

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instances, see, like Bergen Belsen all of those places like that, when they, if, they needed workers, and didn't have enough in one sector, they would send them from, on a train, boxcars full of them, all the way down to another sector to fill out as a work force. Those that they could trust.

SWB: What did the people when you went in the barracks with these tall benches, what did the people do...

JOHN HOLMES: The-th-th-they-they couldn't, those that were living, all they could, they-they looked death eating a soda cracker. That's what we used to call it. They-they-it-they were like s- they were skinny, skin and bones. You-you can you imagine a skeleton trying to talk to you? And holding out his hand? Can you imagine that? Can you get any kind of inkling what it's like. And this is all you saw. These people could not get up. These people were literally abandoned. And I imagine that um, when the Germans took off, running, I imagine that those that were capable of going, they herded them in front of them, because see, ah-uh-uh-uh-uh-upon our approach, the Germans were not gonna stick around. They were not gonna stick around to, for us to see them nor how many prisoners they took with them. And whether they killed them or not, I do not know, but you know the orders were from Adolf Hitler, was to, that any prisoners that, when the Americans approach, kill all the prisoners. That was...

SWB: What about any revenge against the Germans because of this. Do you think any of that, did it instill anger...

JOHN HOLMES: No. It didn't distill, it didn't in instill anger, because you know s- number one, I think the shock of

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something like that, could I explain something? If you're fighting a German soldier and you kill him, that happens. You look down at him, and that's and you keep right on moving. That's an individual that's trying to kill you and it doesn't make any- But when you see something where here is a, s- here are individuals by the dozens that have done nothing to no one. Bu- fu- their-their-their-their captors said do this or do that, and you did it. This is, you were so shocked by this, looking at it, that I don't, I think, the-the-the-the shock of something like that does not wear off right away. So therefore, you can't uh, you can't, y you just can't, I just don't know how to p-, I wished I could phrase it. Cause I can still see it. I-I'm, as I'm talking to you now, I can see the whole horrible picture, and it's not nice.

SWB: So, do you know if there was any message to bring help to those people?

JOHN HOLMES: Oh yes. Our commanding officer, see we had radios, in the tanks, and um, we had our hat tracks that had communication to divisions. And the divisions in turn would get the medics up there. And they, the medics would come in and they would load these prisoners onto, two and a half ton trucks, by the dozens. And they'd, they would take them

back to the rear hospitals, and they work with them until, oh, three or four months, six months, they would get their strength back to where they could walk around, but when you could just look at them, some of them had sores the size of your hands on them. Where they had been laying there for weeks. In their own excrement. Stench.

SWB: We need to get room tone...

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[ROOM TONE]

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#3]

SWB: I want you to tell me what kind of impact this had on you.

JOHN HOLMES: The impact that it had on me was the fact that uh, I-I, I-I never quite understood it. It is hard to, w

war is uh, I-I think one of the, one of the worst things that has ever happened to this country is that it never got a chance to fight on its own soil against a formidable enemy. It's always gone out, done the fighting on that enemy's soil. If the people in this country could actually see what total war is all about in reality, they would have a different perspective on everything that's around them. I think they would have a little more compassion toward one another, because when you have a race of people who think that they are superior to everybody else, and everybody else is dirt underneath their feet, um, you're gonna have, same thing, cause one of the things that history says it's always, if you don't remember the mistakes in the past you're going to repeat it all over again. Um. This is something, this episode over in Germany and France and Belgium and Holland and Luxembourg, where I fought in, I just couldn't believe that the enemy could be as cruel and brutal as he was. And the thing about it, the Germans, many of the Germans right today, don't, do not believe that this actually happened, that these, they don't believe that the Holocaust, and the young, I-I spoke at the University of

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Portland and the University of Seattle and they, so many of the childr- the students out there did not believe that the Holocaust really happened. They thought it was just a figment of imag- of their, you know, my imagination when I-, and I said look, I said, this is a black man talking to you, I said, this, y-y-you're not talking to a white man, I said, I'm telling what I fought in and what I saw. I said, I'm not, you, I don't have to ask nobody. What I went through and what I saw.

SWB: Tell me more about the condition of those people that you saw. Were they still people? I mean, what was it that brings you, what is it that is so devastating about that scene other than seeing the enemy who was trying to kill you who you had killed.

JOHN HOLMES: What about it? Those people, that like I said before, those people could not help themselves. They had no help from no one. Th-th-they were between a rock and a hard place. You got to do what you're told. The best thing that ever happened t-, what some of them did for us, uh, which I thought was th-, was amazing, is that they sabotaged a lot of the German shells and what have you. Cause one of the, one of the, on our way through the Hartz mountain, I can remember that when the Germans dropped uh some mortars in on us, not a single one explode. They didn- they didn't explode at all. Only did we find out later only that there was no fuse to set them off. They just left the fuses out

of them, the shells.

SWB: And you make a connection between those people that you found in that...

JOHN HOLMES: Yes. They say-, in other words, they actually

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saved a lot of American lives absolutely, by defusing a lot of the German artillery shells and mortar shells. Because, at the darndest thing that this, when we crossed the, is it the Rhine, I think it's the Rhine or the Danube, I'm not which one that it was in the south down there, we crossed this big river on the pontoons, and that was, was a horrible thing. I think I would have died a deat- a thousand deaths, you're going to cross this river, and it's like this, and you've got about three or four hundred feet going across the river, and the thing is like this, and you've got a 36 ton tank that bobbing up and down, it's kind of worse, but when you got to the other side, and we're in the middle of this town, and we had just got out of that, I had just got out of the turret of my tank, and we were kind of, the guys, y-y you need to stretch your legs a little bit and as, there's

no artillery fire around you, the Germans are way up in the high ground away from you, now what the, so they decide, the Germans decide to drop a few mortars in on us. And the, and the darndest thing I ever saw in my life, three of them fell right in the midst of us. Not a single one exploded.

SWB: Go back and tell me again about the people that you found there.

JOHN HOLMES: Just death, really. They were walking dead, as far as I could see. Living dead. I don't know how many of those people in those barracks were dead, but I do know this. That there were many of them. Because you could see them. When you see, wh-when you don't see any ribs going up and down as you're breathing, and you look down and you, and-and you can smell that too, you know they're dead. And those that-that are laying there and they're trying to stretch their hand out to you and they can't talk, because

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they don't have the strength, and now, I-I don't, I do not remember anyone but that American colonel, being helped up.

And he had to be helped up and helped to move one leg in front of the other. This is how, this is how bad it was. In other words, he was, they-they had to, two-two soldiers, one with his arm around holding him up, and the other one on the other side holding him up. And-and-and his feet were actually dragging basically. All the, other than that all the rest of them were still back in those, in-in those bunks. This was. This is a site I'd I-I'd never forgotten that. And what had bothered, w-w-w-w-w-w-one of the amazing things to me was Mrs. Schimmel, Mrs. Schimmel did not know all of this was going on, cause this was just about, I'd say three quarters of a mile back of her. But I imagine though by her being Jewish, she was actually hidden. She assumed the identity of the people that protected her. There's a lot of good German people now. I think some of the German people knew what was happening. But she didn't see it. Cause she didn't know what that, that all of this death and destruction was going on back of her. She could smell it but she didn't know what it was. Far as she was concerned, it was some of the bloated animals out there, and not being a-acclimated to the smell of humans and animals too, I imagine she just assumed that it was all just one thing. So this, th-that's all I can attribute it to with her. She was just an innocent bystander, and I was often, I was, I kept thinking, I said now, how, first of all she said to me, I ask her, I said Mrs. Schimmel, I said how is it that you survived this. And she explained to me, she said well they protected me. And she, I think she had assumed their name,

and that's probably what saved her. I don't know whether she blended in with the family or, or what. But this house was slightly isolated from the rest of the town, so that

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perhaps is what saved her.

SWB: Does that experience of opening that camp have more of an impact on you than just the whole general combat experience?

JOHN HOLMES: Oh yes, it, see because number one, when you're fighting and you're killing, you can do that with impunity. You don't forget this thing. Number one, you have an enemy to kill. Or else, you're gonna die. You have one or two choices. But when you see this, and you, and they can't do nothing about what's happening to them, sure you're not going to forget it. You never will. It's impossible to forget something like that. Um, I forget the name of the camp down around Munch... Ah-ah- is that, no, it's not Auschwitz.

?: Dachau

JOHN HOLMES: Dachau, that's the one. Um, we had a lieutenant, uh, in the outfit, that was at that camp, but he just happened, him, he was a, a, his tanks, his column of tanks were, were moving through and he asked um, the soldiers what was going on inside of there, and that was f-, that was the only time I ever heard of a concentration camp was when he said th-that that was at Dachau. But like I said I never knew what a concentration camp was. I didn't even know what a labor camp was. Cause what I was, the only thing that we didn't, see we'd never had, we'd never had the opportunity, because see we were constantly on the move and, you, and-and-and-and you're shooting and fighting at the same time and it's constant- we had 183 days of combat. And it was just constantly go-go-go, and to-to run into a

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situation like this was just, it was ph-ph-phenomenal to me, I just didn't have, believe anything like that existed.

SWB: Thank you very much....

END

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