

Liberation of Dachau

I have obtained permission from Brigadier General Felix L. Sparks, AUS (Ret.) to add his article on Dachau to my website. I would like everyone to know who the true liberators of Camp Dachau really were. This is a factual account of what transpired before and after the liberation of Dachau.

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DACHAU AND ITS LIBERATION

Prologue

A day or so after the fall of Nurnberg, I was designated as a task force commander, with the mission of moving with all possible speed towards Munich, Germany. At that time, I was a lieutenant colonel commanding the Third Battalion, 157th Infantry Regiment, 45th Infantry Division, Seventh United States Army. Attached to my battalion for this mission were the entire 191st Tank Battalion,, Battery C of the 158th Field Artillery, and supporting engineers from the 120th Engineer Battalion, With the organic infantry battalion weapons, the artillery battery, and the over fifty tanks of the tank battalion, we had a formidable array of firepower. We were able to smash through the sporadic German resistance with ease, although the many blown bridges caused us some problems.

By the late evening of April 28,, 1945, we were less than thirty miles from Munich. Shortly after midnight, I received the regimental attack order for the next day. I was ordered to resume the attack at 0730 the next morning, with the mission of entering Munich. The order stated that, if my task force encountered any delay because of German opposition, the following first and second battalions of our regiment would continue the attack into Munich by bypassing the resistance area. I was also informed that the concentration camp near the city of Dachau would be in my attack area, but my orders did not include the taking of the camp. At that time, I knew virtually nothing about Dachau, except that it was a concentration camp near the city of Dachau. In order to set the scene for the events that followed, a description of what I learned subsequently about that infamous place seems appropriate.

In 1933, the first of the German concentration camps was established adjacent to the small city of Dachau, not far from the much larger city of Munich, Germany. Political

opponents, Jews, clergymen and so-called "undesirable elements" were to be isolated there as enemies of the Nazi regime. It was organized and operated by the SS and Gestapo, whose specialty was terror and brutality. ,

The camp was constructed originally to imprison about five thousand persons, but it soon outgrew that number. In 1937, the prisoners were forced to begin the construction of a much larger camp. It is not known how many prisoners passed through the gates of the camp between 1933 and 1945, but a reasonable estimate places the figure at around 300,000.

From the outside,, the camp appeared to be an ordinary military post, surrounded by a high brick wall. It was garrisoned by several hundred SS troops and Gestapo agents who lived in comfortable quarters. On the far side of the camp from the main gate was a large rectangular confinement area, surrounded by a water-filled moat, a high barbed wire fence and guard towers. within the confinement area were thirty-four wooden barracks, some of which were used for administrative purposes and the remainder to house the prisoners. Two connected larger buildings just inside the only entrance to the confinement area contained the kitchen, laundry, storage rooms and the "camp prison." In this dual facility, prisoners were tortured, flogged, hung at the stake, and executed. This infamous complex now houses the camp museum established by the present German government.

Each of the prison barracks was constructed to house 208 prisoners, At the time we arrived on April 29, 1945, each of the barracks contained the impossible number of about 1,600 inmates, many of whom were dead or dying when we arrived. The several barracks used as infirmaries were also filled with the dead and dying.

Also within the camp area was an "experimental station" operated by a Dr, Rascher, It was in this station that gruesome medical experiments were practiced on hapless prisoners. A Professor Schilling caused prisoners to be infected with various diseases, such as malaria, in order to observe their reactions and resistance. Various biochemical experiments were also carried out. Agonizing deaths were usually the common result.

Every morning and evening, the prisoners had to parade on "roll call square." At any time that a prisoner succeeded in escaping, all the remaining prisoners were compelled to attend a subsequent punishment roll call, lasting a full night and half a day. Prisoners who managed to escape were usually recaptured. They were then confined to the penal barracks for special treatment by the SS and Gestapo personnel--torture and often death.

Outside the confinement area,, but within the post area, was a rifle range. It is known that at least six thousand Russian prisoners of war were executed on this range. Only God knows how many others were executed there in similar fashion. While we were occupying the camp, one of the prisoners took me to a small area reserved for the execution of German officers suspected of plotting against Hitler. I was told that several German officers had been executed there in the few months before we arrived. They

were forced to kneel down with their hands tied behind their backs. They were then dispatched by a single pistol shot in the back of the head.

It is not known with any certainty how many prisoners died or were executed at Dachau. It is known with some certainty that over thirty thousand human souls perished there. The actual number may have been over fifty thousand.

THE LIBERATION

It was in this atmosphere of human depravity, degradation and death that the shocked soldiers of the 157th Infantry Regiment first set foot on the morning of April 29, 1945. The initial shock was experienced even before entering the camp. The first evidence of the horror to come was a string of about forty railway cars on a siding near the camp entrance. Each car was loaded with emaciated human corpses, both men and women. A hasty search by the stunned infantrymen revealed no signs of life among the hundreds of still bodies. Few words were spoken as the grim-faced soldiers deployed in battle formation towards the camp itself.

At 0730 on the morning of April 29, the task force had resumed the attack with companies L and K and the tank battalion as the assault force. The attack zone assigned to Company L was through the city of Dachau, but did not include the concentration camp, a short distance outside of the city. Company I was designated as the reserve unit, with the mission of mopping up any resistance bypassed by the assault forces. Shortly after the attack began, I received a radio message from the regimental commander ordering me to proceed immediately to take the Dachau concentration camp. The order also stated: "Upon capture, post an airtight guard and allow no one to enter or leave."

At the time I received the order, it was not feasible to extract the two assault companies from the attack. I therefore directed the commander of Company I, the reserve company, to attack the camp. Dachau was not included in the original operations order for the day, but from my map I determined that it was only a mile or so off to my left flank. I advised the company commander that I would accompany him and would attach a section of machine guns from Company M to his command. **A forward observer team from the 158th Field Artillery was already with the company.** A small motorized patrol from the regimental I&R Platoon was also dispatched to the Dachau area.

As the main gate to the camp was closed and locked, we scaled the brick wall surrounding the camp. As I climbed over the wall following the advancing soldiers, I heard rifle fire to my right front. The lead elements of the company had reached the confinement area and were disposing of the SS troops manning the guard towers, along with a number of vicious guard dogs. By the time I neared the confinement area, the brief battle was almost over.

After I entered the camp over the wall, I was not able to see the confinement area and had no idea where it was. My vision was obscured by the many buildings and barracks

which were outside the confinement area. The confinement area itself occupied only a small portion of the total camp area. As I went further into the camp, I saw some men from Company I collecting German prisoners. Next to the camp hospital, there was an L-shaped masonry wall, about eight feet high, which had been used as a coal bin. The ground was covered with coal dust, and a narrow gauge railroad track, laid on top of the ground, led into the area. The prisoners were being collected in this semi-enclosed area.

As I watched, about fifty German troops were brought in from various directions. A machine gun squad from Company I was guarding the prisoners. After watching for a few minutes, I started for the confinement area, after taking directions from one of my soldiers. After I had walked away for a short distance, I heard the machine gun guarding the prisoners open fire. I immediately ran back to the gun and kicked the gunner of the gun with my boot. I then grabbed him by the collar and said: "What the hell are you doing?" He was a young private about 19 years old and was crying hysterically. His reply to me was: "Colonel, they were trying to get away." I doubt that they were, but in any event he killed about twelve of the prisoners and wounded several more. I placed a noncom on the gun and headed towards the confinement area.

It was the foregoing incident which has given rise to wild claims in various publications that most or all of the German prisoners captured at Dachau were executed. Nothing could be further from the truth, The total number of German guards killed at Dachau during that day most certainly did not exceed fifty, with thirty probably being a more accurate figure. The regimental records for that date indicate that over a thousand German prisoners were brought to the regimental collecting point. Since my task force was leading the regimental attack, almost all of the prisoners were taken by the task force, including several hundred from Dachau.

The scene near the entrance to the confinement area numbed my senses. Dante's Inferno seemed pale compared to the real hell of Dachau. A row of small cement structures near the prison entrance contained a coal-fired crematorium, a gas chamber, and rooms piled high with naked and emaciated human corpses. As I turned to look over the prison yard with unbelieving eyes, I saw a large number of dead inmates lying where they had fallen in the last few hours or days before our arrival. Since all the many bodies were in various stages of decomposition, the stench of death was overpowering.

During the early period of our entry into the camp, a number of Company I men, all battle hardened veterans became extremely distraught. Some cried, while others raged. Some thirty minutes passed before I could restore order and discipline. During that time, the over thirty thousand camp prisoners still alive began to grasp the significance of the events taking place. They streamed from their crowded barracks by the hundreds and were soon pressing at the confining barbed wire fence. They began to shout in unison, which soon became a chilling roar. At the same time, several bodies were being tossed about and torn apart by hundreds of hands. I was told later that those being killed at that time were "informers." After about ten minutes of screaming and shouting, the prisoners quieted down. At that point, a man came forward at the gate and identified himself as an

American soldier. We immediately let him out. He turned out to be Major Rene Guiraud of our OSS, He informed me that he had been captured earlier while on an intelligence mission and sentenced to death, but the sentence was never carried out. I sent him back to regimental headquarters.

Within about an hour of our entry, events were under control. Guard posts were set up, and communications were established with the inmates. We informed them that we could not release them immediately but that food and medical assistance would arrive soon. The dead, numbering about nine thousand, were later buried with the forced assistance of the good citizens of the city of Dachau.

Fearful that the inmates would tear down the gate to their prison area,, I posted a number of soldiers at that point. While I was standing near the gate, three jeeps from the 42nd Infantry Division approached the gate area. Apparently someone, without my knowledge, had opened the main gate to the camp area. The first jeep contained Brigadier General Linden and a woman reporter, by the name of Margaret Higgins. The general informed me that the reporter wished to enter the compound to interview the inmates.

At that time, a sea of inmates was pressed against the gate, awaiting an opportunity to get out. I advised the general that my specific orders were to prevent anyone from entering or leaving the compound, until otherwise advised by my regimental commander. While I was explaining this to the general, the woman reporter ran forward to the gate and removed the restraining crossbar. The prisoners immediately surged forward, creating a brief period of pandemonium. I ordered my men to open fire over the heads of the prisoners and rush the gate, After a brief struggle, the men closed and secured the gate.

It had already been a most trying day. I therefore requested the general and his party to leave and directed one of my men to escort them from the camp. The good general was a dandy who carried a riding crop as his badge of authority. As my man approached the jeep, the general laid a blow on the man's helmet with his riding crop. I then made some intemperate remarks about the general's ancestry and threatened to remove him and his party from the camp by force. He then said I was relieved of my command and that he was taking charge. I then drew my pistol and repeated my request that he leave. He left, but only after advising me that I would face a general court-martial for my actions.

In the meantime, the men of Company I had rounded up a number of SS troops who were dispersed throughout the camp area. From these prisoners we learned that most of the Dachau garrison, including almost all of the officers, had fled the scene the day before our arrival. Only about two hundred were left to guard the camp. We captured most of those, but some were killed. The regimental history book contains a picture of these captives, accompanied by Lt. Walsh, the Company I commander, and Chaplain Loy. Fate was much kinder to these captured SS men than they were to the inmates of Dachau.

Later that day, Major General Frederick, the 45th Division commander, and Colonel O'Brien, the regimental commander, appeared on the scene , and I took them around the camp. I also told them of the incident with General Linden. General Frederick advised me that he would be able to take care of that matter.

In the original order which I received to secure the camp, I was informed that our first battalion would relieve me at the camp in order that my task force could continue the attack into Munich. Late that afternoon, Company C arrived by truck and established various security posts. I then started moving Company I out of the camp in order to resume the attack into Munich with a full task force. Before I could again assemble the task force, I received an order that the tank battalion,, less one company,, was to be relieved of attachment to my task force. The 180th Infantry was encountering strong resistance in its sector, and the tanks were needed there. Sometime later, I received another order informing me that our first battalion would lead the attack into Munich the next day and that I was to relieve Company C at the concentration camp. I then dispatched Company L to relieve Company C. This relief was completed by about 10:00 p.m. that night.

The foregoing narrative includes all of the rifle companies which were in the Dachau concentration camp on the day of liberation, those being companies C, I and L. **With these rifle companies were attachments from companies D and M. along with forward observer parties from the 158th Field Artillery.** Small elements of other units were also there, namely a small patrol from the regimental I&R Platoon which was with Company I. and some personnel from the first and third battalion headquarters, There were some troops from the 42nd Infantry Division somewhere in the vicinity. Earlier that morning, Company I had reported that they were being fired upon by troops of the 42nd Division. This information was relayed to regimental headquarters with a request that the 42nd Division be informed that we were both on the same side.

On the morning of April 30, our first battalion resumed the attack towards Munich. The second battalion was also launched in that direction. Shortly after the attack began, the first battalion came upon and occupied another concentration camp. It was a slave labor camp and contained about eight thousand prisoners. In order that the first battalion could continue its attack with a complete battalion, I was then ordered to relieve the first battalion company at this second camp. I assigned this mission to Company K, where they were to remain for the next several days.

During the morning of that day, I assembled Company I in the city of Dachau, leaving Company L at the Dachau concentration camp. At about 6:00 p.m. that evening, Company L was relieved at the camp by the 601st Artillery Battalion from the 15th Corps. My battalion then moved into Munich, minus Company K.

On May 1, the following morning, I received an order to relieve the 15th Corps troops at the Dachau concentration camp. I thereupon sent Company L back to the camp. During the afternoon of May 3, both companies L and K were relieved of their concentration

camp duties by the 179th Infantry Regiment of the 45th Infantry Division, never to return.

At this point, I should point out that Seventh Army Headquarters took over the actual camp administration on the day following the liberation. The camp occupation by combat troops after that time was solely for security purposes. On the morning of April 30, several trucks arrived from Seventh Army carrying food and medical supplies. The following day, the 116th and 127th Evacuation Hospitals arrived and took over the care and feeding of the prisoners.

EPILOGUE

A few days after the liberation, General Frederick came to my headquarters and informed me that General Linden was trying to stir up trouble through the Seventh Army Inspector General. He said he thought he could handle the matter, but he considered it advisable that I leave for the United States at once. He further informed me that the 45th Division had been selected to participate in the expected invasion of Japan and would soon be returning to the states in preparation for shipment to the Pacific Theater. He said that he would see that I was reassigned to the division when it returned to the states.

Placing a command car at my disposal, the general instructed me to report to the transportation office at LeHavre, France, where orders would be waiting for my transportation to the states. I left the following morning, accompanied by three of my most trusted soldiers, namely Albert Turk, my driver, Karl Mann, my German language interpreter; and Carlton Johnson, my runner and rifleman. It was a long trip to LeHavre, taking several days.

I eventually located the army transportation office on the docks at LeHavre and informed a sergeant there of my mission. He immediately went to a telephone in the back of his office and made a call. I sensed trouble and so informed my men. Within a few minutes, an MP lieutenant appeared and courteously informed me that I was under arrest. He stated that he was under orders to escort me back to Seventh Army Headquarters in Bavaria. I suddenly had the feeling that General Frederick had not been able to take care of the Dachau matter after all.

I politely informed the lieutenant that I would not submit to an arrest but that I would voluntarily return to Seventh Army Headquarters. Glancing around at my three men casually standing by with loaded rifles, he agreed to my proposal. He then gave me the name of the small town near Augsburg, Germany, where the army headquarters was located. We then began the long trip back, although we dallied for a few days in Paris.

Some days later, I reported to army headquarters in the small town near Augsburg. There I learned that the Seventh Army Headquarters was being deactivated that very day. I was informed that General Patton had been appointed military governor of Bavaria and had established a headquarters in Augsburg. The very unfriendly and

displeased G-1 of Seventh Army curtly told me that my pending court-martial was now in the hands of General Patton. I left immediately for Augsburg.

The following morning I reported to General Patton's Chief of Staff and arranged for an appointment with the general that afternoon. At the appointed time, I reported to the general. He then said to me:

"Colonel, I have some serious court-martial charges against you and some of your men here on my desk. " I replied that I had never been advised of any specific charges but that I would like to offer an explanation of the events that took place at Dachau.

The general paused for a moment and then said: "There is no point in an explanation. I have already had these charges investigated, and they are a bunch of crap. I'm going to tear up these goddamn papers on you and your men."

With a flourish, he tore up the papers lying in front of him and threw them in a wastebasket. He then said: "You have been a damn fine soldier. Now go home. " I saluted and left. The whole interview lasted perhaps three minutes. I then rejoined the regiment in Munich and heard nothing further about the matter.

POSTWAR TALES

For the past several years,, I have been puzzled about copies of newspaper articles which a number of our members have sent me in which the 42nd Infantry Division has been portrayed as being the liberator of Dachau. In addition to the newspaper articles, at least two national television programs have featured members of that division as being the liberators of Dachau. The 42nd Division was never there at all, except for the brief excursion of General Linden and party as previously described in this summary.

A few years ago, I learned of a publication entitled "The Liberators," published in 1981 by the Center for Holocaust Studies Documentation and Research, Brooklyn, New York. I obtained a copy of that publication, and I am now quite certain that it is the primary genesis of the rash of claims made by members of the 42nd Division. The publication features a story about Dachau by a Lt. Col, Walter J, Fellenz, 42nd Infantry Division. A reading of the story convinces me that the man is either a pathological or congenital liar, or both. After reciting that in his approach to Dachau he had the impression that he was "approaching a wealthy girls' finishing school in the suburbs of one of our great cities," his story reads in part,, as follows, along with my editorial comment.

"At the main gate I met Brigadier General Linden, Lt. Col. Bolduc, and several staff officers and bodyguards. General Linden was waiting for a report from his aide who had been dispatched inside the camp to see if the camp had been deserted by the guards. Shortly after my arrival the aide reported that the SS had apparently deserted the camp. In we went, fully prepared to fight, however."

COMMENT: The general's aide apparently had very poor eyesight. There were about two hundred SS guards and other German troops inside the camp, although at that time they were under custody. He also failed to note the presence of about two hundred men from my battalion, who had arrived about an hour earlier. The composition of the Linden party appears to be correct; except that, for some curious reason, Col. Fellenz does not mention the presence of a lady reporter by the name of Margaret Higgins, who was the solicitous focus of the group being there in the first place. Since I had reported our entry into the camp about an hour earlier, the Linden group already knew that we were there.

To continue with the good colonel's story, he then states:

"Several hundred yards inside the main gate we encountered the concentration enclosure itself. There before us, behind an electrically charged barbed wire fence, stood a mass of cheering, half mad men, women and children, waving and shouting with happiness--their liberators had come! The noise was beyond comprehension! Every individual (over 32,000) who could utter a sound was cheering. Our hearts wept as we saw the tears of happiness fall from their cheeks."

COMMENT: When my battalion arrived at the camp earlier,, the prisoners, except for the few who performed menial labor on the outside, were all huddled together in their various barracks. Subsequent interviews with some of the prisoners revealed that they were all expecting to be killed by the SS guards prior to the arrival of Allied troops. They therefore tried to remain out of sight of the guards. Actually, we had been inside the camp for about thirty minutes before the prisoners realized what was happening. The scene described by Col. Fellenz then did take place, although I did not see any children. Col. Fellenz was not present when this scene took place.

We now come to the heroic liberation part, as described by Col. Fellenz:

"Amid the deafening roar of cheers, several inmates warned us of danger by pointing to one of the eight towers which surrounded the electrically charged fence. The tower was still manned by SS guards! Half crazed at what we had just seen, we rushed the tower with rifles blazing. The SS tried to train their machine guns on us, but we quickly killed them each time a new man attempted to fire the guns. We killed all 17 SS, then in mad fury our soldiers dragged the dead bodies from the towers and emptied their rifles into the dead SS chests."

COMMENT: Generals, staff officers and field grade officers were not armed with rifles, much less "blazing rifles." Neither did they carry rifle ammunition belts, although perhaps the lady reporter acted as the ammunition bearer. The outside perimeter of the confinement area was over a mile in distance. The guard towers were about two hundred yards apart and were mutually supporting, They were massive steel and concrete structures and virtually impregnable to direct infantry assault. They were also surrounded by a water-filled moat. The outside perimeter of the moat was patrolled by some rather vicious guard dogs, mostly Dobermans.

The simple way to dispose of the SS troops in the guard towers was to pick them off with rifle fire from the cover of the many buildings surrounding much of the confinement area. This is what my men did. I must admit, however, that it would have been an inspiring sight to witness the charge of an aging general and a few valiant officers with blazing rifles against the massive concrete machine gun emplacements, cheered on by a lady reporter. I am very sorry that we missed it.

The total Fellenz story as contained in the publication is quite lengthy and grows more absurd with each paragraph. I will not therefore dwell upon it any further,, except to point out that Col. Fellenz was also the conqueror of Munich, as he himself recites as follows:

"The next morning, the rear echelon types and the military government types arrived and we turned over the Dachau Concentration Camp to their control. C Company and I rejoined the 'Fighting First' Battalion and moved into Munich where so-called German resistance elements attempted to surrender the city to me. I got in touch with Col. 'Daddy' Bolduc and he accepted the surrender, and that night I slept in the famous beer hall in Munich."

But wait! Comes now a Colonel Don Downard, a fellow battalion commander with Colonel Fellenz in the 222nd Infantry Regiment, 42nd Infantry Division, and brands his old buddy as a liar. Colonel Fellenz commanded the First Battalion of the 222nd, and Colonel Downard was the commander of the Second Battalion of the same regiment. In a recent letter to one of our members Dr, Howard Buechner, Colonel Downard writes in part as follows:

"As commanding officer of the 2nd Battalion, 222nd Infantry, 42nd Infantry Division, I was at Dachau from the time the gates were crashed until late that afternoon, at which time I was ordered to await arrival of our first battalion, turn the camp over to Fellenz and proceed immediately to Munich--all this a period of 5 or 6 hours. I personally pulled a live inmate from under dead ones on the box cars. Several of my soldiers were present when General Linden and his party were pinned down by SS fire right at the main gate."

The letter is quite lengthy and more or less concludes with the statement:

"I relate the above, not to be critical (could happen to anyone) but to emphasize that even the 'Thunderbirds' could be mistaken about events of that time..... I never saw a Thunderbird at Dachau."

Any reader must be puzzled about which story to believe. In the Fellenz account, General Linden sent an aide into the camp through the main gate, who determined that no SS guards were present. In the Downard story, General Linden and party were "pinned down by SS fire right at the main gate." Actually, Fellenz is entitled to a bit more credibility. He was with the Linden party when they entered the camp and I exchanged a few unpleasant words with him.

As of this date, at least a dozen other units have claimed that they were the liberators of Dachau. This number will undoubtedly continue to grow in the future as a result of the attention focused upon the many Holocaust memorial events held annually throughout the United States. Just this year, the 20th Armored Division was recognized by the Holocaust Memorial Council as being the liberator of Dachau, And so the list continues to grow.

One very likely explanation of some of the claims is that there were a number of concentration camps in the Munich area, although only one Dachau. The other camps around Munich were slave labor camps, and they most certainly were liberated by other units of the United States Army. One such camp was liberated by our first battalion and subsequently occupied by our Company K for several days" I do not know the exact number of these camps, but there were many of them. The inmates, predominantly of Russian and Polish origin, were used as slave labor in the many factories and other installations in the Munich area. The prisoners in these camps received somewhat better treatment and food fare than did the inmates of Dachau. The number of prisoners in each of these camps was generally less than ten thousand, as compared to the over thirty thousand in Dachau.

In conclusion, and not that it makes any great difference, I suppose the question can still be asked as to what unit liberated the concentration camp at Dachau. At least one official publication has the correct answer, In a publication entitled "The U, S. Army in the Occupation of Germany, 1944-1946," published by the Center of Military History,, United States Army, Washington, D. C., in 1975, on pages 252 and 253, credits the 45th Infantry Division with the liberation of Dachau, concluding the account with the words: "The 45th Infantry Division troops who liberated Dachau in the afternoon on 29 April were fighting in Munich the next morning and by nightfall had, along with XV Corps' other three divisions, captured the city that was the capital of Bavaria and the birthplace of nazism."

Dachau was but one of the many monuments left behind by depraved and tyrannical ruling individuals and groups of the past, As I recall, we were often told during the course of World War II that we were fighting a war to end all wars. As I view the world scene today, it seems that very little has changed since the end of the war. In the name of nationalism, religion, political affiliation, greed, racial superiority, economics, or various combinations thereof, innocent people around the world are still being killed, kidnapped or brutalized on a daily basis. And so it shall ever be.

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