

RECOLLECTIONS OF A LIBERATOR
OF
OHRDRUF & BUCHENWALD CONCENTRATION CAMPS
APRIL 4 and 11, 1945

Capt. Frederick B. Lea, Company Commander, Hqs. & Hqs. Company,
46th Armored Medical Battalion & Division Medical Supply Officer,
Fourth Armored Division, with General Patton's Third Army in Europe

At the suggestion of Dr. Paulette J. Idelson, an Oral Historian from Newton, Massachusetts, these recollections are being placed on record for the first time, to accompany photographs taken by the writer at Ohrdruf and Buchenwald on liberation day at each. A taped interview of miscellaneous war-time experiences has also been made with her assistance, for which I am most grateful.

April 30, 1992

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On April 4, 1945, the Fourth Armored Division liberated a concentration camp called Stalag III, located in Ohrdruf, on the autobahn between Gotha and Chemnitz. It was surrounded by a barbed-wire fence, high and forbidding, with search lights and machine guns mounted in watch towers trained on the camp. Just inside the main gate lay thirty or more bodies in striped prison garb. As we stared in disbelief at the sickening scene of cold-blooded murder of unarmed people, three figures came from the woods nearby. They had survived by escaping when the German SS guards had marched the remaining inmates eastward as the Americans had approached. The fallen ones had been too sick or weak to walk; so they had received a bullet in the throat or the back of the head. This was something new to us, different from the usual war scene; and we were shocked by the sight.

We had been in constant combat for nine months, from the beaches of Normandy through France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Germany, as the leading or 'spearhead' Division of the Third Army. Soldiers had grown accustomed to the sight of destruction of towns and cities and the bloated corpses of herds in the fields killed by artillery bursts or bombs. Familiar, too, was the sight of enemy dead by their shattered tanks or machine gun emplacements, often discolored by the summer's sun, awaiting burial. We had experienced the loss of comrades in the heat of summer, in the rain and mud of fall in Alsace Lorraine, and on icy mountain roads to Belgium to relieve the troops surrounded in Bastogne. Finally, we had entered Germany and crossed the Rhine, leaving behind fallen friends at river crossings and in city streets, often in company with civilian victims of the conflict. Death and destruction had been our companions, continually. We had become inured to death, if that is ever possible. But we had not seen anything as savage and heartless as this!

In a shed, stacked like cordwood, were dozens of skeleton-like bodies, naked and sprinkled with lime, skin stretched so tight that every bone could be counted. With empty stomachs and scarcely any flesh remaining on their frames, there was little to rot. However, despite the freezing cold, the stench of death was overwhelming.

Recollections of a liberator (cont'd.)

A short distance back in the woods was a disposal pit - a long trench about ten feet wide and eight feet deep. Cadavers were stacked on pine logs placed on a grate of steel railing; the fires had been tended by other inmates. Rains had extinguished the flames and the half-burned bodies presented a most grotesque scene. We were told that the crematory had been shut down for lack of fuel; but that some 4000 had been murdered and burned in pits since December. Ohrdruf was a work camp as well as an extermination camp. Inmates had built a huge underground communication center for the headquarters of the German High Command, in preparation for a retreat from Berlin. It was never used, as the Americans got there first.

News of the discovery of this first concentration camp by the American Army caused shock and revulsion at all levels of authority in the field and all the way back to Washington. Generals Patton, Bradley, and Eisenhower came to view it within twenty-four hours. Town officials of Ohrdruf were marched through the camp and all denied having any knowledge of what had gone on there; but the burgemeister and his wife hanged themselves. Soldiers not in combat at the time were taken to see how their enemy had treated innocent people. Even hardened veterans were appalled at this Nazi slaughter, a deliberate bestial murder. The camp, even though evacuated, provided sickening evidence of what had been perpetrated here. And worse was yet to come - and soon!

But, first, let me digress for a moment. Three months before, in early January, right after the Battle of the Bulge, our Division had reassembled in Luxembourg, where the people invited us to share their homes - a rare treat and particularly welcome in winter. A close friend, Capt. Kleinman, was a guest in the home of the acting Mayor, who had been taken prisoner in December, during the Ardennes Offensive, just as the elected Mayor had been during the 1940 invasion by the Germans. The city was Dudelange, I believe.

As Capt. Kleinman and I viewed Ohrdruf, he recalled carrying in his billfold the name and prisoner number of his best friend's husband and his promise to look for him. Could he be one of the bodies on the ground, in the shed, or in the pit? We could only hope that he had been transferred if, indeed, he had ever been here. Fortunately, our duties required us being in a position favorable to carrying out our resolve to search diligently for him.

As Division Supply Officers we usually travelled in the rear of the forward elements of the Combat Command. Battalion supply vehicles, in an armored column, travelled to depots in the rear daily and returned in blackout at night to the front, where the various division supply officers, familiar with the locations of the front line units, could direct the re-supply. Thus, when we heard that a tank commander had come upon another camp, exactly one week after Ohrdruf, we left the autobahn and were first to arrive at this new one.

Recollections of a liberator (cont'd.)

It was April 11, 1945; and the camp was called Buchenwald, northwest of Weimar, Capital of the German Republic and home of Goethe and Bach. Opened in 1933 to eliminate the political opposition to the Nazi regime, it was one of the more notorious of the concentration camps. It was estimated that some 50,000 out of a capacity of 85,000 were still there, many having been evacuated in recent days, particularly Jews.

Approaching the wrought iron gate and the stockade-like fence with superstructure and terrifying sentry towers, we expected to use our broken German and French; but we found that English was all we needed. On the barest of hope, we asked how we might find out if a certain person were in the camp. Volunteers took the number and had it called out over the public address system. Unbelievable as it sounds, the man appeared and was positively identified. We took him, immediately, to the nearest medical clearing station for treatment and care.

Our special prisoner became a symbol of our liberating mission. He travelled with us under constant medical attention until the doctors were assured that he had no communicable or infectious disease. Then, dressed in an American uniform, he was sent in an ambulance directly to his home in Luxembourg. A sincere but an improbable promise had been kept! His wife may never have read the biblical writer's exhortation: "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." (Hebrews XIII,2) She received the reward and 'good Samaritan' deserves.

That's the good news of Buchenwald. It is a story shared previously only with family and close friends. Our action, by Army standards, was highly irregular, but so too was much of what happened during wartime.

We returned immediately to inspect the camp fully, joined by Capt. Gromer, the Division Dental Surgeon and his driver. A few SS guards lay dead on the ground near the front gate, others had escaped into the woods. Prisoners were attempting to get through the wire to give chase. The infantry soldiers were trying to dissuade them; others were clearing remaining Germans out of the buildings and securing the area. The scene was one of utter chaos. Lined several deep against the fence, the prisoners looked for all the world like caged animals or inmates of a mental institution staring vacantly at visitors. There was waving and shouting; but it resembled nothing we had ever seen before.

We entered the camp and were led on a tour by a collection of gaunt, emaciated figures in ragged striped prison clothing bearing colored patches that identified their nationality - or Jew.

Recollections of a liberator (cont'd.)

It became more and more evident that the prisoners had been de-humanized. Their body language was like that of neglected children or abused animals. Many were completely withdrawn, distant, fearful, and remained apart; others were like pets wanting to be close, to rub against us, looking for attention. Most were not able to show normal emotions. There was not the ecstasy or joy we had observed with normal subjugated people experiencing the moment of liberation. Rather, there was disbelief, subdued thankfulness, awe, bordering on worship. We were made to feel like saviors, which, in fact, for many we were.

We soon learned that Buchenwald held a composite of all the people Hitler and the Nazis considered inferior and thus deserving only to be enslaved and eventually eliminated. There were political prisoners, prisoners of war, educators, professional people, intellectuals, from every European country, and, of course, Jews, men, women, and children. Recently, thousands of Jews had been marched eastward to prevent their liberation by the Americans. While most prisoners were used for slave labor on various projects, the Jews were brought here specifically for elimination. Poles and Russians were only slightly higher on the 'desirable list'. The death toll depended on the capacity of the crematory ovens which had been shut down for lack of coke.

As we approached the most prominent structure in the camp area, a giant smoke-stack towering over the crematory building, most of the followers fell back and waited at a distance until we had completed our inspection. A Yugoslavian prisoner, who had been assigned to the work detail there and claimed to have witnessed his own wife go to the ovens, explained its workings.

It was situated on sloping ground; and we approached it from the rear, entering an open yard protected on two sides by masonry walls. On the left were large wheeled carts with one side lowered to reveal a pile of corpses three or four deep. On the right was a mound of ashes from the ovens. Nearby, on a crude table, rested a heavy wooden mallet and a two-foot long cord looped at either end. The guide explained that they were for beatings and hanging. Facing us was the wall of the lower level of the building, with a door on the left leading into a huge window-less room with walls, ceiling and floor of concrete. A narrow-gauge railroad track ran around the room near to the wall and entered an elevator at the rear. On the walls, at about the seven foot level, were large meat-hooks about every eighteen inches. We were told that the cord we had seen outside was used to fashion a noose to hang those who were still alive when they reached this point. The bodies would be placed on steel litters mounted on trucks which rode on the rail tracks and transported by elevator to the upper level.

Recollections of a liberator (cont'd.)

Upstairs, the tracks led through a series of rooms or directly to a bank of six ovens, where the litters were transferred onto steel tracks that suspended them and the bodies over the fire pits of the crematory. Remnants of the half-consumed corpses remained over the dead coals. This entire chamber was glistening tile, spotlessly clean. The small rooms on either side were laboratory like in appearance; where medical experiments or autopsies might have been performed. It was apparent that teeth and gold fillings were extracted in one of them. Another contained urns filled with ashes. A card bearing a name and prisoner number of a former inmate was enclosed in each urn. The adjoining room was a shipping room where the urns were packaged for mailing to a relative, perhaps.

We took pictures in this area; for it was something we wanted a record of for proof. We didn't ever expect anyone to believe our description of what we had seen this day. We did not have the heart to snap pictures of the pathetic looking prisoners and make them objects of our curiosity. Their appearance was so sickeningly depressing that one refrained from recording it out of consideration for what little dignity they still possessed. The world media was not so moved, as everyone knows; Life magazine and others devoted entire issues to the depiction of the atrocities and stories of the inmates. But pictures cannot begin to tell the story; one had to smell, feel, hear, experience the unspeakable horror, the desolation, the evidence of torture, starvation, and death. No one word or sentence can describe it and a thousand would still be an understatement. Exaggeration of the inhumanity of actions that took place there is impossible. Dante's depiction of Hell comes closest to the sense of doom these poor souls lived with daily.

Others again joined us as we were led to a row of barracks where the sick and dying lay on bare warehouse-like shelving four tiers high on either side of a center aisle. Lying side by side were the living dead, virtual skeletons, scantily clothed, and with no blanket material. Many were unable to lift their heads and few could have managed to crawl off their death-beds. The only heat was what their withered bodies could generate and share with the ones next to them. It was bitterly cold; as one may judge from the pictures of us in our warmest winter clothing. My senses were numbed by the sight of the conditions, the emaciated bodies, the stench of human waste, and an awful feeling of hopelessness. Some mumbled what we took to be expressions of thanks; others made feeble attempts to reach out to touch us as though to be reassured that it was not a nightmare or a vision. Eyes were lost in sunken sockets and glazed over and expressionless.

We barely made the doorway at the far end of the barracks before we were all physically sick. The prisoners who had led us through this first one were bent on our following them to a second. It seemed important that we let as many as possible know that they were free.

Recollections of a liberator (cont'd.)

The sight of an American uniform was one way to convey the message. We steeled ourselves and continued through a dozen or more similar barracks, each holding four or five hundred ; though our insides were convulsed with dry heaving. Preceding us were a few inmates with the simple announcement that "the Americans are here; we're saved". We touched every outstretched hand we could reach; and those on the lower bunks strained to touch our uniforms. The silence was frightening. The sense of depression was like nothing we had ever experienced.

For four years I had hated the Nazis for disrupting my life and exposing me to fear of violent death. But now my hate grew a hundred-fold and I felt guilty for my self-pity. I realized that my sacrifice and suffering were as nothing compared with theirs. Suddenly, I had a sense of being one with them- a Jew, Pole, Czech, Russian, whatever. After all, wasn't this what my American comrades were ? Weren't most from European ancestry with relatives in all the countries including Germany ?

Our Division, the Fourth Armored, was formed in northern New York state and was composed primarily of men from N.Y., N.J., and the New England States, with a large percentage of Jewish soldiers. This was a particularly difficult time for them, as many had relatives throughout Europe . We had known of Hitler's persecution of the Jews and were well aware of the fear of being taken prisoner. However, the words 'genocide' and 'holocaust' were not in our vocabulary at the time. In fact, it was months before we knew that what we had seen was but the 'tip of the iceberg' - that there were hundreds of similar camps and some a thousand times more hideous and monstrous.

As we walked back toward the main gate, we passed the large assembly area with the gallows. They told us about the twice-daily roll calls and of standing by the hour until the weakest fell from exhaustion and were carried off, not to be seen again. Having one's number called out meant beating, torture, or worse. It was hard to comprehend that these wrongs were committed, not in a moment of passion, but methodically, cruelly, and viciously, by one man on another for no valid reason except hatred.

I have a vivid memory of the growing cluster of prisoners that gathered around Capt. Kleinman during our tour. Imagine the feelings of those condemned Jews knowing that they had been saved by an American Jew who spoke Yiddish. Unfortunately, many people think of Jews only as victims of the Holocaust during the time of World War II. They were soldiers, sailors, and officers in all the Allied Armies and Navies and the Air Corps. They were wounded, killed, heroes, and liberators, survivors and witnesses. Also, avengers and victors over oppression.

Recollections of a liberator (cont'd.)

Upon leaving the camp, I radioed my observations to the Division Surgeon emphasizing the desperate need for medical help. Within hours an Evacuation Hospital was set up inside the camp area and a second one a day later to minister to the thousands of desperately ill inmates. Many of them were saved from certain death by a few precious hours. The camp was closed immediately to all but medical personnel for fear of the spread of typhus. The exception was for members of Congress, the military authorities, members of the world-wide press.

A teen-age Hungarian Jew was lying on a bunk in one of those barracks we walked through that day. His name was Elie Wiesel; he had heard his father breathe his last breath in the lower bunk and was not able to help him. He recovered his strength and was named the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate. He is a world renowned writer and Professor of Philosophy at Boston University. He is but one of thousands of the survivors who have made tremendous contributions to society. While we celebrate this, we are also aware of the incalculable loss of talent -scientific, artistic, musical, and philosophical- that the world suffered.

I call myself a 'liberator' since that is the term used by Holocaust historians to differentiate between witnesses: victims or liberators. It had been our good fortune to be the first troops to enter literally hundreds of towns and cities and to experience the initial jubilation of people who had been suppressed and were now free. It was as exhilarating for us as for them; but we soon learned that 'liberation' and 'freedom' were multi-faceted terms.

If the town had not been defended and was largely unscathed by war, there was spontaneous demonstrations of joy and appreciation: hugs, kisses, bouquets of flowers, flag waving, offers of food, wine, etc. Liberation was jubilation, ecstasy! On the other hand, if the town or city held a strategic location, a road junction, a rail center, or an industrial complex, and had been defended, it would be virtually empty. As we left, we would meet the evacuated population returning homeward, pushing treasured possessions on makeshift wagons, baby carriages, carts, wheel-barrow and bicycles. They were much less enthusiastic with liberation, -subdued, in fact, obviously suspecting what we already knew: their homes had been destroyed in the action. They had freedom, but at what a price!

Then there was the liberation of prisoners in concentration camps, who had been enslaved and condemned to starvation and death. There was little jubilation or joy, even though we could sense a relief and hope reborn. But the conditions of existence, the humiliation and debasement, the lack of hope had destroyed the ability to express emotion. We had brought them hope and life itself. The jubilation and joy was in our hearts. The ecstasy was ours to know. This was truly a liberating experience for us.

Recollections of a liberator (cont'd.)

Liberation day meant something quite different and sad for those who had cooperated or collaborated with the occupying forces or the oppressor. They were identified immediately, accused, publicly humiliated, threatened with retribution, or worse : frequently condemned to death. The same procedure was carried out in concentration and other prison camps, resulting in summary judgment.

For many years, I could not bring myself to discuss the war in any detail. Finally, when I felt comfortable I discovered that most people were not interested in listening, - particularly to a description of the concentration camps, genocide, or the holocaust. They claimed that they wished to 'forget the past and go on with life'. In fact, they did not know the past; for they expressed doubt about the enormity of the atrocities committed by the NAZIS. I capitalised that word unintentionally; and I will leave it that way. It seems that people tend to disbelieve what is ugliest about human behavior unless it happens to them. There is a disinterest in documentary films - even those filmed of the camps by the Germans themselves. Yet they will watch movies in which imaginary scenes are shown and consider it entertainment.

My memories are as vivid today as though it all happened yesterday. Scarcely a day passes that I am not reminded of some phase of that experience. For instance, this year at Symphony two performances were particularly poignant and painful. First, we heard a symphonic work entitled 'Study for Strings' written by a Czech, Pavel Haas, composed while he was an inmate along with many other Jewish musicians and artists at Tereseinstadt concentration camp in Czechoslovakia. All were eventually sent to their deaths at Auschwitz. The camp was used for propaganda purposes by the Nazis, who pictured it as an ideal community where the finest artists and musicians of Europe were assembled for creative work. Recently, the Boston Symphony played 'Metamorphosen', a study for twenty-three solo strings, by Richard Strauss. Program notes stated that he had lived as a recluse during the war and, saddened by the bombing of Dresden and other cities, he wrote this as a 'memorial' to the cultural Germany that had been destroyed. The score was completed on April 11, 1945, the very day we were liberating Buchenwald. We, who bombed his cities, were just beginning to get an understanding of the tremendous loss of innocent lives caused by his countrymen. Indeed, all losses were tragic and unnecessary.

While I cannot say there was a 'defining moment' in my life during the war, the most memorable one was at Buchenwald, when we gave freedom to one special prisoner and brought hope and medical care to thousands of others. Second to this was the liberation of the last town, Strelske Hestice, Czechoslovakia, on May 8, 1945, V-E Day. On that day, we experienced complete release of all pent-up

Recollections of a liberator (cont'd.)

emotion and knew a sense of freedom and a realistic hope for a future life. We had survived the war and were going home ! It was especially gratifying to be on the scene for the liberation of Czechoslovakia, the first victim of Hitler and, ironically, the last to be freed. To me, the saddest outcome of the war has been the fate of that wonderful country and people: turned over to the Russians in accordance with the terms of the Yalta Agreement among the Allied powers. They did not know freedom again until their 'Velvet Revolution' in November 1989 brought liberation after fifty years of foreign domination. Until that happened, I had a great ache in my heart and felt that the war had not been won.

Almost fifty years later, as countries continue to make war on other countries and even on their own countrymen at a cost of tens of thousands of lives, it is obvious that some have not learned from the past. I am concerned that people will equate current conflicts with what Hitler and the Nazis engaged in against the Jews in the Holocaust. That was completely separate and apart from his war for power and possessions. The world must acknowledge that the deaths of six million Jews in a planned genocide was a distinct and unique event in history and that we cannot afford ever to forget , lest it happen again.

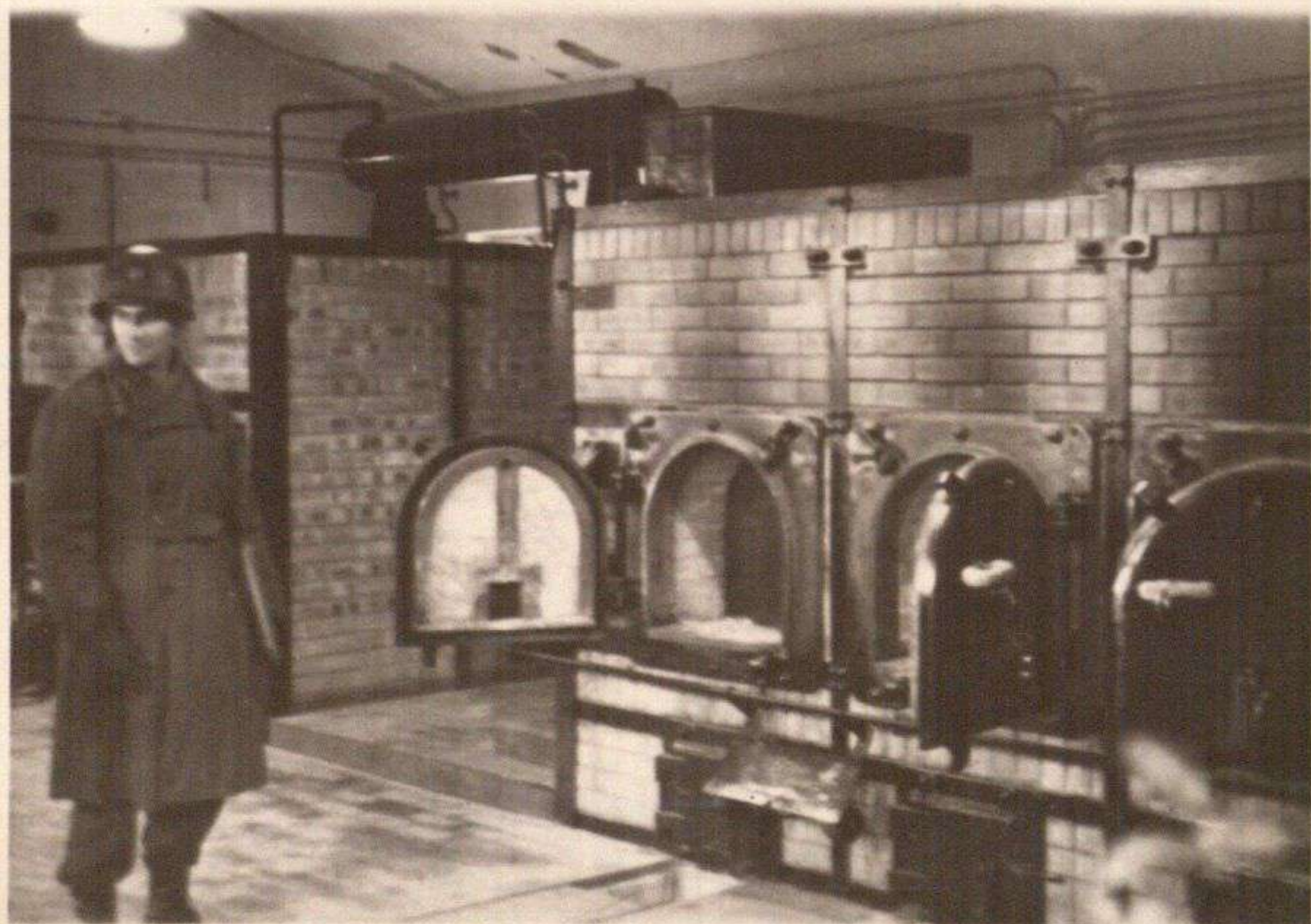
The most difficult challenge that I have faced has been the need to forgive. Someone said of Abraham Lincoln, "His heart was as great as the world; but there was no place in it to hold the memory of a wrong". I have tried to understand and to forgive, for my faith is founded on love and forgiveness. But I must bear witness to what I have seen of man's potential for evil. Still ringing in my ears is the plea we heard at Buchenwald, spoken in every European language, "Tell everyone what you have seen. Please don't ever forget".

When I have referred to war experiences as rewarding or satisfying, I meant it in a very limited sense. In total, they caused me to alter my priorities and gave me a new measure by which to evaluate life. In order to salve our consciences for the tremendous losses we have shared or caused others to suffer, survivors search for redeeming qualities or compensations. Among these are the joy that liberation brought to oppressed people and prisoners, heroic acts witnessed, dangers faced, military goals attained, and, yes, sacrificial service rendered to others. But all of that is pure rationalisation and wishful thinking. Violence is never ever the right answer. It is a denial of life's true meaning. War is the ultimate violence; and there are no winners - all are losers.

A survivor of Auschwitz best summed up the lesson the world should have learned: 'violence is in the end self-destructive, power futile, and the human spirit unconquerable'.















NORTH STALAG III Ohdruf - GERMANY, 4 April 1945



CONCENTRATION CAMP - PRISONERS TOO WEAK TO MARCH WERE MURDERED BY SS TROOPS - APR. 4, 1945
FREED BY 4th ARMED DIV. MY DRIVER - SGT PICARD IN NEAR PICTURE - OTHER 4th ARMED DIV. SOLDIERS IN FAR REAR.



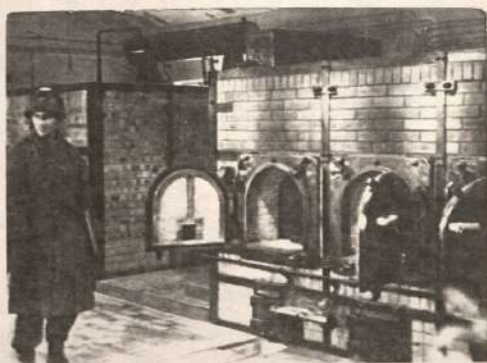
In Addition:

Disposal pits back in woods contained
thousands of burned bodies.

Bodies stacked in shed - lime-sprinkled.

MAYOR + WIFE TAKEN THRU CAMP - COMMITTED SUICIDE LATER.

Buchenwald Concentration Camp. NW of Weimar, Germany
Liberated by 4th Arm'd Div. April 11, 1945



CAPT. LEA - OVENS IN CREMATORIUM



CAPTS. GROMER + LEA + SGT. PICARD



TRUCKLOAD OF CORPSES BEHIND CREMATORIUM



MORE BODIES - CAPTS. LEA + KLEINMAN & YUGOSLAVIAN PRISONER
SGT. PICARD + CAPT. GROMER

BUCHENWALD CONCENTRATION CAMP



Instruments of torture - Capt. F.B. Lea



Capt. Kleinman - Mtn. BN-S-4



Pile of Ashes behind crematorium
Capt. Groomer + Sgt. Lucien Picard
46th Arm'd. Med. Bn. - 14th Arm'd. Division



Dead SS. Guard - Buchenwald