



OMER LEMIRE APR 1945

Military Service – European Theatre

After anchoring and tying up to a long dock in La Harve, France, we stowed all our gear onto truck, which took us to a camp 3 or 4 kilometers from the harbor. Camp "Lucky Strike" (all camps were named after cigarettes), was located on the side of a hill overlooking the harbor. After 2 or 3 days we were shipped by rail to Rimes, France to a replacement depot. There I replaced a sergeant who was a squad leader in company B 11th combat engineers. This outfit was a portable bridge outfit that carried bridge parts. We were able to build a bridge over streams 100 feet wide or more (at night). The bridge was sturdy enough for a Sherman tank to cross. It was hauled to the site on special trucks and put together like an Erector set. Each company had one tank fully loaded, ready to fire a 75-millimeter canon and machine guns in a turret on top of the tank.

We were assigned to Patton's 3rd army. He was going through Germany so fast that this unit would build a bridge over streams overnight. The unit I was with had been ordered to the war zone from the Panama Canal. They were an older bunch of peacetime soldiers with no war experience, however, they knew how to build bridges. Many had 15-30 years in peacetime service and were marking time for retirement. We went from Rimes, securing villages behind the infantry, to Augsburg, Germany, making our way to Munich. The last bridge we built, was across a tributary of the Danube River just about 10-11 miles SW of Dachau Concentration Camp and 12-15 west of Munich. Our camp was near a village that had a long name, I believe it was called Furstenfeldbruck.

The bridge, we built at night using flashlights, was used many times by our tanks over the period of about 1-½ weeks. We were to guard it and later dismantle the bridge. Some nights around 11:00, a German plane would fly overhead..."Bed Check Charlie" we called him. U.S. troops would fire at him and the debris from the shelling would fall back on us, raising havoc in the camp. We'd have to jump into our foxholes until the shelling stopped. The noise going on all around us was a constant reminder for us to be on our guard.

While in this camp, we received word (posted on the bulletin board) from Generals Patton and Eisenhower, encouraging us to visit newly liberated Dachau Camp in order to witness for our children and grandchildren the horrible destruction between human beings.... "man's inhumanity to man". I believed that we would be witnessing a historical event but had no idea what I was about to experience. This singular event changed me for the rest of my life. After witnessing what I saw, I wished I had never gone to Europe.

Dachau Concentration Camp

It was a dull, hazy day in early May, 1945. Those of us who were interested in visiting the Dachau camp were given permission to go. I have always been interested in history and I had a sense that this was something of historical importance. So I grabbed

my camera (one I had 'liberated' in a village we had previously secured), and climbed on board one of two army trucks, which were waiting to take us to Dachau. There were about 14-18 of us soldiers who made the trip.

As we got within 1 kilometer of the camp, a putrid odor overcame us. It was like nothing I had smelled before. We had to take handkerchiefs and cover our noses as no gas masks had been issued to us. We were not prepared for what lay ahead. The back of our truck was let down and the sergeant in charge ordered everybody assembled, to check their watches and to be back in one hour. Corp. Floyd Dulinski was the name of one of my buddies whom I recall going with me to visit Dachau.

Across a fence we could see piles of what looked like bodies in stacks, like cords of wood about 5 feet high and 15 feet long. As we got closer, the stench was so bad that some of us wet our handkerchiefs in the water at the cooler and tied it over our noses. This first sighting was so traumatic that some of us vomited. Some of us had seen dead people before, but not like this...mutilated, contorted, defiled. We were allowed to go through a narrow opening in the fence to get a closer look. My first emotion was anger. Who could have done something like this? Who could kill innocent people like this? I was so mad and angry that I wanted to kill every captured German soldier I saw in the camp. (They were carrying bodies of political prisoners on wheelbarrows to the trenches for burial.)

I was frustrated that we hadn't gotten there soon enough to save the victims of this atrocity. I felt guilty. I felt ashamed of being human. Why had God allowed this to happen? My religious training had taught me the 10 Commandments, one among them being, "Thou shalt not kill." Many of my buddies couldn't take it, they went back to the truck. I wanted this recorded for history and so I took 10-12 photos with my camera. (There were journalists there at the same time, also taking photographs).

One stack of bodies was by what looked to be a blast furnace. The German soldiers had left so quickly that they didn't have time to burn these bodies. Another stack of bodies had been stripped of clothes, mutilated, examined for valuables. Another stack still had all their clothes on. Yet another stack of bodies were thought to be political prisoners (according to what the German soldier there told us) ready for burial in a field outside of the compound. These political prisoners had no numbers tattooed on their arms. In this same compound there was a huge mound of clothes. The seams had been ripped out. Among the clothes were shoes, underclothing and personal belongings. A few of the victims of this atrocity were still alive, wearing vertical prison striped clothes and wooden shoes. They walked around in a daze. We weren't able to communicate.

After taking the photos, I couldn't stand it any longer. I became very emotional and distraught at such a sight. I could not get rid of the memory of this awful sight. I thought in time I would get rid of this experience, but from that day on, I have had reoccurring dreams of it. I have suffered from depression. I knew not to say anything about this to anyone for fear I would be labeled shell-shocked or not of good mind. I found out I was very emotional as time went by. No one spoke as we boarded the truck and headed back to camp. We were too numb to speak of the devastation at Dachau.



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MAY 1945
OTHER LEWIS

