

# Dachau Liberation

by Chuck Ferree

Pronounce it as though you were clearing something nasty from your throat...DACHAU. My first inkling that this pleasant Bavarian village would become a word to chill the blood, came from the terrible odor as my passenger and I disembarked from our little two-seater StinsonL-5.

We were at least a mile away maybe more, but we could still smell something very disagreeable. The SHAEF officer climbed into a Command car with another General, and off they went. I hopped into a jeep with a S/Sgt. who wore the shoulder patch of the 45th. Infantry Division...the Thunderbird Division, which had been in constant combat for almost three years.

We followed the command car. It was cold in the jeep, even though the sun shone brightly, and I wore my fleece-lined flight jacket. It had snowed the night before. The date was April 29th. 1945. The Sgt. began telling me what to expect when we reached our destination, which was Dachau, a Nazi concentration camp liberated only that morning. I asked about the bad odor, he said, "just wait, it gets a lot worse."

Dachau had its typical Bavarian attractive homes and neat gardens. This gave me no hint of what lay beyond the landscaped entrance to the death camp.

The first place the Sgt. drove me to was the awful proof of the rumors---boxcars and bodies. The stories we had heard gave no indication of the grotesque forms of the victims and their emaciated condition. These miserable creatures had kept an unusual rendezvous with death. The train loaded with prisoners had been shipped away as the American Liberators approached. The camp at their destination refused to accept them. Without food or water they had been shuttled around from camp to camp and ended up back at Dachau. Most had died on the return trip. The few who had managed to climb from the box cars were shot down by the SS. The bony frames stuck out like skeletons, no meat on those bones. Many of the cars were open gondolas. The dusting of snow gave the cadavers a ghostly aspect.

We passed along a row of imposing homes of camp directors and entered a gate decorated with a large German Imperial eagle. The barracks inside bore lighting-decorated SS insignia. We passed a large kennel, it's occupants lay victims of the wrath of the recently liberated prisoners. Large and once beautiful German Shepherds, throats slashed, heads crushed. We then saw a building appropriately marked "Braus Bad," to lure victims into the gas chamber. Warnings were painted on the building and the door; the international signal for danger...a skull with crossed bones.

Leaving the gas chamber we found further proof of the Nazi claim to everlasting infamy--human bodies heaped hodge-podge filling two rooms and sprawling out the doors. It was here that the cold weather worked to the advantage of the witnesses. The stench of the bodies and the accompanying filth would have been unbearable under other conditions. The order permeated right through my heavy leather jacket.

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Between these crowded morgues was the crematorium where four yawning doors stood open and eagerly consumed more victims. Outside there was much evidence of bones and ash where the furnaces had been emptied many times of their gruesome contents. Beyond this scene was a stall which had been used as an execution chamber where many had met death by the firing squad.

This death farm was separated from the main stockades by a high wire fence and a moat. Swarming along the fence were hundreds of the more fortunate prisoners who were now liberated and expressing their gratitude.

Beneath the murky waters of the moat were the features of several SS guards and on the opposite bank was a fitting monument to the depth of the Nazi culture. Frozen on the ground were the bodies of several SS troopers who had been slain by their liberated captives before they could surrender to the Americans. At the bottom of each of the many high watch towers, more bodies lay. SS guards who had tried to put up a fight and were killed by the Infantrymen of the 45th. Division. After seeing many more horrors of Dachau it was small wonder that the only superman who still held his head up high was the larger-than-life-sized statue of the SS trooper on the wall.

After 3-4 days touring Dachau, the SHAEF officer and the others in our group flew back to Frankfurt. My passenger commented to me as we settled into our seats: "Jesus Christ, I wonder how many more of these f\*#@ing places we're going to find."