

Liberating Dachau

On April 29, 1945, two American divisions freed more than 30,000 inmates at the notorious Dachau concentration camp. They also touched off one of the most controversial episodes of World War II.

By Flint Whitlock

The existence of German concentration camps was common knowledge among Allied political and military leaders for years, and the camp at Dachau, the Nazi regime's earliest such camp, was particularly notorious. About 10 miles northwest of Munich, Dachau had been an ordinary, peaceful suburb until March 1933, when the Nazis converted a gunpowder factory there into a prison camp to house their political opponents. At first, it was nothing more than a normal detention facility. But once the Nazi regime became more ruthless, the *Konzentrationslager*, or KL, acquired a much more sinister persona. Hundreds of camps and subcamps based on the Dachau model were built, followed by the construction of the horrendous extermination camps.

At Dachau, in addition to the internment camp, there was also a huge SS training complex, where guards were schooled in their brutal craft; the finance offices for the entire SS; living quarters for the guards and officers; a military hospital; a camp headquarters building; a variety of factories that relied on the camp's slave labor; and storerooms bulging with clothing, shoes and eyeglasses confiscated from the inmates. An electrified fence separated the prisoners' compound from the SS camp, as did a deep dry moat with steep concrete sides, and a swiftly flowing canal—the Würm River.

Seven watchtowers manned by armed guards were strategically placed around the enclosure, and armed guards with dogs patrolled the fence line. A 10-foot-high masonry wall enclosed the entire complex, shielding the nefarious activities within from prying eyes. A sign on the *Jourhaus*—the camp's guardhouse, which enclosed the only entrance into the prisoners' compound—ingeniously proclaimed, "*Arbeit macht frei*" ("Work makes one free"). Behind the high walls, unspeakable cruelties were carried out by the SS guards on the helpless inmate population.

While Dachau was never one of the Nazis' "death factories," more than 30,000 of the 200,000-plus prisoners incarcerated there died during its 12 years of existence. Many of the inmates died from being overworked and underfed. Many more died at the hands of guards while being tortured, while others died from disease, in front of firing squads, or after they were used as human guinea pigs for

the pseudoscientific experiments carried out by the camp's medical personnel.

In March 1945, as the Allied armies were squeezing Germany from the east and west, the Germans were either trying frantically to evacuate the concentration and death camps and hide the evidence or making last-ditch efforts to exterminate as many Jews and other political prisoners as possible before the Reich was defeated.

Because of reports from escapees, Lt. Gen. Wade H. Haislip's advancing XV Corps (consisting of the 3rd, 42nd, 45th and 86th Infantry divisions, the 20th Armored Division and the 106th Cavalry Group, all heading for Munich) was prepared to deal with horrific conditions when it reached Dachau at the end of April.

Much had already been learned about what had gone on at concentration camps after Buchenwald—some 220 miles north of Dachau—had been discovered by the U.S. 6th Armored Division on April 11. The unanswered questions were: How many—if any—of the camp's inmates would still be alive and which unit would liberate the camp? It was the latter question that would fuel the flames of an interdivisional dispute between veterans of the 45th and 42nd Infantry divisions that continues to this day.

Poring over maps, officers at XV Corps headquarters saw that the 45th was in the best position to reach Dachau first. On April 28, a call was made to Maj. Gen. Robert T. Frederick, former commander of the elite 1st Special Service Force and now commanding general of the war-weary 45th "Thunderbird" Division, setting the wheels in motion for the 45th to liberate Dachau.

The 45th had already seen more than 500 days of combat—including four amphibious assaults, months of brutal warfare in the snowy mountains of Italy, the saving of both the Salerno and Anzio beachheads, and the punishing drive through German-occupied France and the Siegfried Line. When Lt. Col. Felix Sparks, commanding the 3rd Battalion, 157th Infantry Regiment, 45th Infantry Division, received orders diverting him from the drive on Munich to the liberation of KL Dachau, he was not happy. He felt the change of orders would slow his battalion down. "I didn't consider the concentration camp a military objective," he said.



The message to Sparks read, "Dachau may be very important, both militarily and politically. Be especially careful of operations in this sector." At 0922 hours on the 29th, Sparks received another message: "Upon capture of Dachau by any battalion, post air-tight guard and allow no one to enter or leave."

Sparks was also told that, once the camp was secured, nothing was to be disturbed. The evidence of atrocities was to be left for an international prisoners committee to investigate. Most of the men of the 157th knew little or nothing about concentration camps and had no idea what these orders meant or what lay ahead. They received a grim education on the unseasonably cold day of Sunday, April 29, as they cautiously advanced through the town, looking for snipers. All was unnervingly silent. In the center of the city, Sparks' men came to an intact railroad bridge and crossed the river, then followed a set of tracks that led toward the southwestern corner of the SS complex about one kilometer away. The time was approximately 1215.

"We went along the south side of the camp and I saw the main entrance and decided to avoid it; if the Germans were going to defend it, I figured that's where they'd do it," Colonel Sparks later said. "So we found a railroad track that went into the camp on the southwest side." Sparks' decision to avoid approaching the main gate would result in much confusion and controversy for decades to come. Inside that main gate, the Germans had been waiting, ready to surrender.

Sparks conferred briefly with 1st Lt. William P. Walsh, commanding officer of I Company, the battalion's lead element. Sparks told Walsh his orders were to seize the camp, seal it and let no one in or out.

The men of I Company moved out, unprepared for what they were about to encounter. Between the town and the camp, the Thunderbirds saw a string of 39 boxcars and open gondola cars

standing on the track. If ever the American soldier needed confirmation as to why he was at war, why he was required to put his life on the line day after day, it was contained in those 39 railroad cars.

As the GIs cautiously approached the boxcars, the sickening stench of death grew ever stronger. In each railroad car were piles of rotting human corpses—a total of 2,310 men, women and children—either totally naked or partially clad in blue-and-white-striped concentration camp uniforms. Most of them had starved to death while being evacuated from Buchenwald 22 days earlier in an effort to keep them from falling into the hands of the approaching Allies. A few with enough strength to attempt escape had been shot down by the SS guards or brutally beaten with rifle butts.

Private First Class John Lee was one of the first men on the scene. "Most of the GIs just stood there in silence and disbelief," he later remembered. "We had seen men in battle blown apart, burnt to death, and die many different ways, but we were never prepared for this. Several of the dead lay there with their eyes open. It seemed they were looking at us and saying, 'What took you so long?'"

To a man, I Company was seething with anger at what they had discovered on the railroad tracks. "Tears were in everyone's eyes from the sight and smell," Lee recalled. "Suddenly, GIs started swearing and crying with such rage and remarked, 'Let's kill every one of those bastards,' and 'Don't take any SS alive!' Never had I seen men so fighting mad willing to throw caution to the wind."

ordinary *Wehrmacht* troops. The SS men were then herded into a large, enclosed area and lined up against a high stucco wall that formed part of a coal yard for the camp's nearby power plant.

Several of the SS prisoners in the coal yard refused to keep their hands up, and others began muttering to each other in German. At that point, the handful of GIs guarding them were getting nervous. Lee recalled that the GIs "shouted for the SS to keep their Goddamned hands up and stay back."

Lieutenant Walsh ordered the others to set up a machine gun facing the prisoners and to fire if they didn't stay back. The gunner, Private William C. Curtin, loaded the belt in the machine gun and pulled back on the cocking lever so the gun would be ready to fire if necessary. The SS men, seeing the machine gun being cocked, apparently thought they were about to be shot. They panicked and started toward the Americans. Someone yelled "Fire!" and the machine gun opened up with a short burst of fire. Three or four riflemen also fired.

Shortly before the firing began, Sparks, who had been observing the roundup of Germans in the coal yard, had been distracted by a soldier approaching him. Sparks recalled: "He said, 'Colonel, you should see what we found,' so I started to go off with him. I hadn't gotten more than 10 yards away when all of a sudden the machine gun opened up. I wheeled around. The gunner had fired one burst—maybe 10

or 12 shots—at the guards." The SS guards dived for the ground, but in the hail of gunfire, 17 of them were killed. Sparks said: "I ran back and kicked the gunner in the back and knocked him forward onto the gun, then grabbed him by the collar and yelled, 'What the hell are you doing?' He said they were trying to get away, and then he started crying. I pulled out my .45 and fired several shots into the air and said there would be no more firing unless I gave the order. I told them I was taking over command of the company."

Sparks said: "I never like to see people killed unnecessarily, no matter what they have done. We did kill some people there that I consider [were killed] unnecessarily. However, given the circumstances, well, I'm sorry about it. It was just one of those things that no one could control. We tried to take prisoners and treat them honorably. But that was one situation that I was just unable to control for a short time."

Inwardly boiling at what had just taken place but understanding the motivation behind the troops' actions, Sparks directed that the wounded men should be taken to the infirmary, then remembered the enlisted man who had wanted to show him what new horrors I Company had uncovered. Sparks soon arrived at the crematorium, where he saw piles of emaciated corpses, stacked nearly to the ceiling. A count later revealed approximately 200 bodies.

The corpses found there and throughout the camp, including the bodies of the SS men in the coal yard, were left undisturbed for several days while investigators did their work and photographers recorded the scene. A stunned Corporal James Bird later came upon the horrors in the crematorium. After that experience, he

I Company continued grimly on, many of the men stunned and sickened at what they had encountered, others bent on avenging the mass killing. Suddenly, four SS men, their hands held high, emerged from a hiding place and tried to surrender to Walsh's party. But Walsh was not having it. He had heard stories of the notorious SS atrocities, and he had just seen firsthand the awful fruits of their labor. Filled with rage, Walsh herded the four men into one of the railroad cars and emptied his pistol into them. They were lying there moaning when Private Albert Pruitt came up and finished them off with his rifle.

The killing of unarmed German POWs did not trouble many of the men in I Company that day. Lieutenant Harold Moyer, a platoon commander in I Company, later testified: "I heard every man, or a lot of men, who said we should take no prisoners. I felt the same way myself. I believe every man in the outfit who saw those boxcars prior to the entrance to Dachau felt he was justified in meting out death as a punishment to the Germans who were responsible."

As I Company neared the SS infirmary, Private Lee recalled: "My buddy and I heard a loud scream and commotion around the side of one of the buildings. We went to investigate and there were two inmates beating a [German] medic in a white coat with shovels. By the time we got there, he was a bloody mess. We ordered them to halt. They said they were Poles, and one of them dropped his pants to show he had been castrated in the hospital and this German was somehow involved in the operation."

Near the camp's infirmary, Walsh's men were rounding up a number of German soldiers and separating the SS men from the

found that his mind was forever etched with nightmarish images. "I recall seeing the ovens used to burn bodies and recollect there were still some partly consumed bodies in some of them," Bird said. "One of my buddies photographed many scenes there, and later provided us with copies. I do not have them now because I think my mother destroyed them, since they were beyond her belief."

By now, I Company was only a few yards from the northwest corner of the prison compound. At least 31,000 inmates were huddled in the barracks there, not knowing if the next few minutes would bring liberation or death. Many feared that as the Americans neared, the SS men would carry out *Reichsführer* Heinrich Himmler's orders to dispose of them all.

Unknown to Sparks, a small advance party from the U.S. Army's 42nd "Rainbow" Infantry Division was rapidly closing in on the camp from the south at that point. As with all of the other American units dashing through Bavaria, the prize those GIs had in view was Munich. At 0220 hours on the 29th, the 42nd's commander, Maj. Gen. Harry J. Collins, sent a message to his 222nd Infantry Regiment: "Combat battalion to be moved as soon as possible, regiment to follow thereafter as desired. Case of champagne to first battalion to enter Munich." Collins made no mention of Dachau because he knew his division had not been authorized by the Seventh Army to attempt entering KL Dachau—that was the 45th's assignment. But a contingent of American and foreign war correspondents had heard the 42nd was close to the camp and were evidently pressing the division to move toward it—and take them along. There were also the humanitarian concerns. How could he say no? He ordered Brig. Gen. Henning Linden, the assistant division commander, to take a small patrol into the camp.

According to Linden's later testimony to the inspector general, at approximately 1530 the 42nd's advance party, following on the heels of the 45th, came upon the ghastly scene at the railroad siding. Technician Fifth Grade John R. Veitch, who was driving a jeep, recalled: "I had no idea where we were going or what we were going to see. Then we encountered the train with all the bodies. It was terrible."

Linden's party entered the camp at the railroad gate, then turned east toward the main gate. Leading the group were two generals—Linden and Brig. Gen. Charles Y. Banfill, deputy commander for operations, U.S. Eighth Air Force, who was accompanying the 42nd to observe the effects of supporting aerial operations. Others in the entourage included three junior officers and a number of enlisted drivers and bodyguards. Two jeeps carrying members of the press also tagged along, with a Belgian reporter and a photographer in one and Sergeant Peter Furst, a writer with *Stars and Stripes*, and war correspondent Marguerite Higgins in the other.

Higgins was a 25-year-old fledgling war reporter from the *New York Herald Tribune*

who had been in Europe only since March but was determined to make a name for herself. Two weeks earlier, at Buchenwald, she had received a quick introduction to the horrors of the SS camps. But Buchenwald was yesterday's news. Higgins wanted to be in on the liberation of a camp. While at Buchenwald, she teamed up with Furst, who had a jeep, and the two of them pressed forward toward Dachau along the same general route used by the 45th and 42nd divisions. Furst and Higgins arrived at the main gate about the same time as Linden's party.

John Veitch recalled, "We got to the outskirts of the camp and heard a lot of small-arms fire." Not knowing if enemy fire was being

directed at them, Linden's party, along with Furst and Higgins, scrambled out of the jeeps and took cover in a drainage ditch near the camp's main gate. "The small-arms fire let up. The firing was coming from the 45th, already inside the camp, and then, out of the gate area, came this SS officer. I think there was another man with him. I ended up going up to this SS officer and stuck my .45 in his ribs and told him to put his hands on his head. I'm hitting him in the ribs, trying to get his hands up, but he saw I was just a GI and he was an officer. I brought him back to the general and Linden said to me, 'Tell him to put his hands up.' I said, 'Sir, he won't do it.' Well, General Linden always carried a little stick, kind of a hickory stick with a knob on the end, and he hauled off and hit this guy up the side of the head and said, 'Put your hands up' and he immediately did. He saw that Linden was a general officer."

A brief surrender ceremony took place near the main gate, with the German detachment under the protection of a white flag on a broomstick held by Victor Maurer, a Swiss Red Cross representative. Unaware that the 45th had arrived at Dachau first and was, at that very moment, clearing out the SS camp's buildings, SS

Untersturmführer Heinrich Wicker officially surrendered the camp to the 42nd, thereby fueling a debate between the two divisions that lasts to this day regarding which was the true liberator of Dachau.

In his testimony to the Seventh Army assistant inspector general, Linden recounted his version of the events: "The interpreter stated that he and the SS troopers and one or two others had been sent into the camp the night before to take over and surrender the camp to the American forces, and asked me if I was an American officer. I replied, 'I am assistant division commander of the 42nd Division.' Linden then dispatched one of his jeeps to the town of Dachau with a message to Colonel Lucien E. Bolduc, the acting commanding officer of the 222nd Infantry Regiment, asking him to bring up some men to secure the camp.

Linden told the assistant inspector general, "At this time, small-arms fire broke out to the west of us in the camp area"—evidently shots fired by the 45th. He sent his aide, Lieutenant William Cowling, into the camp to find out what was going on.

In the meantime, Lieutenant William Walsh of the 157th had evidently reached the prisoner enclosure. In a video documentary,

The Liberation of KZ Dachau, Walsh said of the incident: "We finally get up to the main gate. This is the gate that says 'Work makes you free.' And when I get to the gate, I ask if anybody spoke English, and there was an Englishman there [Albert Guerisse, in reality a Belgian, also known as Patrick O'Leary]. I think he was a naval officer...and I say to him, 'Are there any Americans in there?' And he says, 'I don't know...I think so, but there may be only one or two.' And then I said, '...I can't open the gates, but I want you to know there's all kinds of medical supplies and doctors and food and stuff like this coming behind us, and they're going to take care of you.' And then he said, 'I want you to come in here first...I want you to see what was going on.' And then he finally prevailed on me. I said, 'okay, I'll go in.' And I went in with [Lieutenant Jack] Busheyhead and a sergeant. Of course, we had to squeeze through the gate because they're all inside, screaming and hollering."

Following Guerisse toward some buildings, Walsh was astounded by the hellish scenes that unfolded before him. "There's two or three guys in uniform that are being hammered to death with shovels...by the inmates. They're the kapos or the...trustees, or whatever. They have them in every camp, and there they are, they're being beaten to death. And he takes us up into an area where they had been experimenting on high-altitude stuff...there were a lot of bodies on this boardwalk outside this building...where they used to take these high-altitude tests...used to put these guys in this thing and drain the air out...I get to another barracks and the bunks are roughly four feet high, and they're all full of straw. There's no mattresses or anything....There's an old guy in the second bunk and he's reached out and he's got a cigarette in hand. A German cigarette, I think and it's water stained, a little yellow color on it, and he's offering it to me. The Englishman's right behind me and, of course, everybody is staring out of their bunks at us...and I say, 'Oh, no, you keep it.'"

Guerisse understood the significance of that gesture—by offering to give away his only worldly possession, the prisoner was showing his deep gratitude for the arrival of the Americans. Guerisse whispered in Walsh's ear: "Take it. That's the only thing that guy owns in this whole world. That's his everything...a cigarette. Take it."

Meanwhile, at the main gate, Linden and the small knot of Rainbowmen were champing at the bit. They had heard sporadic gunshots and were anxiously waiting to enter the camp. At last a jeep with Lt. Col. Lucien Buldoc in it roared into view. It was decided to send Lieutenant Cowling on another scouting mission inside the camp. Cowling, possibly accompanied by an enlisted man, moved in cautiously. He went about two blocks north, then turned east and discovered the *Jourhaus* gate 150 yards ahead of him. Seeing a crowd of inmates beginning to form at the *Jourhaus*, Cowling tried to tell them help was on the way. He then returned to Linden's group at the main gate and told them to come see what he had found.

The advance party from the 42nd Division arrived at the *Jourhaus*, where a group of SS guards emerged and surrendered to Linden's men without incident. In his testimony to the assistant inspector general, Linden said: "I moved in with my guards into [the military part of the camp], and I found the inmates—having seen the American uniform of my guards there, and those of the 45th Division—approaching the main stockade [i.e., the *Jourhaus* and the western side of the prisoner enclosure] from the east, had stormed to the fence in riotous joy. This seething mass increased in intensity until the surge against the steel barbed-wire fence was such that it broke in several places, and inmates poured out into the roadway between the fence and the moat [canal]. In this process, several were electrocuted on the charged fence."

In his testimony, Lt. Col. Walter Fellenz, commanding officer of the 222nd's 1st Battalion, said: "We were warned by the inmates

small bridge that spanned the canal near Tower B, Fellenz said, firing broke out. "Several more shots were fired inside the tower," he added, "and when these shots were fired, the men guarding the prisoners outside the tower shot through the windows of the tower and apparently the German soldiers outside the tower attempted to free themselves from the custody of our troops and were shot in the struggle."

The shooting began some minutes after Tech. 3rd Grade Henry J. Wells, the interpreter accompanying the 42nd's party, proceeded to the tower and fired a burst at the door with his .45-caliber M-3 "grease gun." Once all the guards had been flushed from the tower, Wells formed the group, numbering 16 men, into two ranks with their backs to the canal. A group of 42nd and 45th Division men held the captives under armed guard, and one of the Americans began disarming the Germans. It is not known whether one of the SS men made a move for a weapon, but suddenly the Americans began firing into the group.

When the firing stopped, seven SS guards lay dead on the bank of the Würm River canal. If the count of 16 Germans roused from the tower is correct, the bodies of nine other guards fell into the canal and were washed downstream, for only seven bodies were accounted for in the inspector general's report. Linden's men then apparently withdrew from Tower B and the *Jourhaus* and returned to the main gate.

Shortly after the shooting, Sparks, along with a number of I Company men, arrived at Tower B from the crematorium. Seeing only his Thunderbirds in the area, with no 42nd Division personnel around, Sparks assumed the I Company men had killed the Germans who were lying in a neat row at the base of Tower B. Continuing on to the *Jourhaus*, Sparks still saw no one from the Rainbow Division and did not even realize the men of the 42nd were inside the camp. Decades after the incident Sparks surmised, "Linden's group panicked after the shooting, took the German guards they had taken prisoner at the *Jourhaus*, and returned with them to the main gate."

On his way to the *Jourhaus*, Sparks saw prisoners streaming from their barracks by the thousands and rushing toward the wire that enclosed them. "Walking along the canal almost to the *Jourhaus*, I saw a large number of naked bodies stretched out along

that there were other German troops manning one of the towers to the left of us [Tower B]. This tower was approximately 200 yards away from us at this time. On the ground in front of the door to the tower, I saw a man who appeared to be in German uniform. With my field glasses, I identified him as a German soldier and I also saw several other German soldiers in the tower itself. By this time, bodyguards of the above-mentioned officers also saw the German soldiers. Part of the soldiers immediately rushed toward the tower going by the trail near the barbed-wire fence. Others of the bodyguards moved by the road opposite the fence." After he crossed a

the ends of the barracks," Sparks recalled. "I estimated there were about 200 bodies there. I also spotted quite a few of my men at the *Jourhaus*. About this time, the camp erupted. The prisoners came out of the barracks shouting and screaming."

Thousands of inmates dashed to the wire enclosure, emitting an unearthly howl—a howl of rage at what had befallen them, and a howl of joy at their redemption. Sparks said: "I told Karl Mann, my interpreter, to yell at them and tell them that we couldn't let them out, but that food and medicine would be arriving soon.

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Then I saw bodies flying through the air, with the prisoners tearing at them with their hands. I had Karl ask what was going on. The prisoners told him that they were killing the informers among them. They actually tore them to pieces with their bare hands. This went on for about five minutes until they wore themselves out. I had Karl tell them to send their leaders to the fence, where I told them to keep calm, that medicine and food would be coming soon. This seemed to settle them down."

Sparks recalled what he saw when he reached the *Jourhaus*: "A beautiful iron gate to the concentration camp itself...that had a sign on it that said in German, 'Work makes you free.' Of course, they worked those prisoners to death. I was standing there at the gate, talking to one of my officers about security when, all of a sudden, I saw three jeeps coming up and they stopped at the end of the little bridge that spanned the canal [at the *Jourhaus*]." In the jeeps were Generals Linden and Banfill, Colonels Bolduc and Fellenz, along with several others, including journalist Higgins and photographer Furst.

never been conclusively determined. Sparks said it was because he refused to abdicate his responsibility to secure the camp and turn it over to an American general from a division that was not supposed to be there. It also may have concerned an I Company soldier whom General Linden had hit or "tapped" on the head with his stick. Sparks' recollection is that he ordered one of his men to escort the general and his party from the area, and that Linden struck the soldier on the helmet with his stick when he approached the jeep. The catalyst may have been Marguerite Higgins, who tried to intervene in the tense situation. Certainly Sparks' war weariness, brought on by nearly two years of almost continuous combat, could have played a significant role in the incident. Or the outburst could have been attributable to the incredible events of the day—the discovery of the death train and the corpses at the crematorium, Walsh's rampage, the killing by I Company men of the SS guards at the coal yard, and the line of German corpses at Tower B. Whatever the catalyst, Sparks admitted that he briefly lost his composure and threatened the general with his .45-caliber pistol.

Corporal Henry "Hank" Mills, of 3rd Battalion's Intelligence and Reconnaissance

vision commander of the 42nd being there and the argument with one of our lieutenant colonels. At that moment, it didn't seem very important. General Frederick wasn't very concerned one way or the other—he thought the 42nd general was kind of out of line." Evidently, however, word reached Frederick that Linden had struck one of the 45th's enlisted men, and he phoned General Collins on the evening of April 29 to inform him that he intended to prefer court-martial charges against Linden. After hearing versions of the incident from Linden and Cowling, and learning that Brigadier General Banfill was an eyewitness and would corroborate the other two officers' stories—and perhaps realizing there was some dispute as to whether Linden had struck the soldier or merely tapped him with his walking stick—Frederick let the matter drop.

By now, Sparks and I Company were totally confused as to what the 42nd was doing there and who was supposed to be in charge. Wanting some clarification as to exactly in whose zone of responsibility the camp lay, the 45th Division operations officer queried XV Corps headquarters. The response was: "With reference to your TWX stating that Fury [code-name for the 42nd

'Prisoners swarmed over the wire and grabbed the American soldiers and lifted them to their shoulders amid many cries.'

The jeeps stopped at the western end of the bridge that spanned the canal, and Sparks talked briefly with Linden. Sparks said Linden told him that Higgins wanted to enter the camp to interview the inmates. Sparks replied that his orders prohibited anyone but his men from entering the camp. Higgins then spoke up, demanding to be allowed inside the enclosure. She said, "Colonel, there are some famous people in there," and rattled off a list of names, including the deposed Austrian Chancellor Kurt von Schuschnigg with his wife and daughter, Pastor Martin Niemöller, an anti-Nazi theologian, Hitler's former chief of staff Franz Halder—and many others.

Sparks reiterated his orders. Undeterred, Higgins ran to the gate and began to open it. She was nearly trampled by prisoners trying to get out. Sparks recalled that his men were forced to fire warning shots over the heads of the prisoners to achieve order before they could reclose the gate. "When the firing started," Sparks said, "it scared this woman and she ran back to her jeep."

At this point, a violent argument broke out between Sparks and Linden—an argument remembered clearly more than 50 years later by men from both divisions. Exactly what touched off the argument has

sance Platoon, said, "I remember distinctly that Sparks put a gun to that guy's head and said, 'If you don't get the f— out of here, I'm going to blow your brains out.'"

John Lee related, "The general, who was not in charge there, was upset and told the colonel he would be court-martialed. The general was so upset, he struck Sergeant Brumlow on the helmet."

Sparks confirmed that he advised the general and his party to leave. The general shook his fist at Sparks and told him that he was relieved of his command. "That's when Colonel Fellenz came running up," said Sparks. The two lieutenant colonels exchanged threats.

According to Sparks, Fellenz said, "I'll see you after the war." Sparks responded, "You son-of-a-bitch—what's the matter with right now?" Fuming, Fellenz returned to his jeep and the group departed.

Once Linden and his group departed, Sparks saw no one from that group again. "After they left, I placed security around the camp," Sparks said. "Walsh and some of his men went into camp kitchens to see if there was any food, but there wasn't much."

The 45th's chief of staff, Colonel Kenneth Wickham, commented: "I heard of the various discussions of the assistant di-

vision commander of the 42nd being there and the argument with one of our lieutenant colonels. At that moment, it didn't seem very important. General Frederick wasn't very concerned one way or the other—he thought the 42nd general was kind of out of line." Evidently, however, word reached Frederick that Linden had struck one of the 45th's enlisted men, and he phoned General Collins on the evening of April 29 to inform him that he intended to prefer court-martial charges against Linden. After hearing versions of the incident from Linden and Cowling, and learning that Brigadier General Banfill was an eyewitness and would corroborate the other two officers' stories—and perhaps realizing there was some dispute as to whether Linden had struck the soldier or merely tapped him with his walking stick—Frederick let the matter drop.

Many of the soldiers were thankful they had reached the camp in time to save the lives of many of the inmates, but they discovered it was virtually impossible not to be repelled by the awful conditions in the camp. Sidney C. Horn, a member of I Company, 157th, recalled the terrible overcrowding and the lack of proper sanitation: "The people wanted to hug you and love you for what you were doing, but the stench was so bad, you couldn't keep from running from them."

As the gray, sunless day settled into a cold night, a sense of relief spread within the inmates of KL Dachau. From the barracks came sounds of laughter, singing and prayers of thanksgiving. There was little joy, however, among the American liberators. Although they had undoubtedly helped save thousands of lives, many of the men of I Company felt sick and depressed over

what they had seen and heard that day. For some, it was a delayed reaction.

John Lee recalled: "That night was when the realization really hit. We had to guard the bakery, our squad. No one ate chow that night...everyone was sick. I was sick constantly all night long. I don't think there was a guy who slept that night, and I don't think there was a guy who didn't cry openly that night." He added: "I really didn't feel good about what happened there, but also I have to admit there was a certain amount of revenge and, in a way, I felt that even though these [guards] may not have been the men who perpetrated this sort of thing, at least you paid back a little bit for these people, what happened to them. I realized you can't resolve it by doing that—it was wrong, what happened there, but you had to have been there to see what we saw."

The 222nd remained in the Dachau area until the next day, April 30, when it pushed forward and opened a new command post in Munich.

An artillery battalion relieved Sparks' 3rd Battalion of the 157th at Dachau, and his troops followed the rest of the division into Munich, where the anticipated German "fight to the last man" failed to materialize. The 45th and other units were placed in charge of maintaining order in the city where the Nazi system had been born.

On May 1, Sparks was relieved of command of the 3rd Battalion—apparently, he thought, the result of his having threatened a general officer. "On May 1st, General Frederick came to see me in Munich," Sparks recalled. "He said, 'Things are getting hot. General Linden is raising a stink. I'm going to send you back to the States immediately. Our division is scheduled to invade Japan and I'm sending you back. You can take a leave and rejoin us when we come back to the States.'" Sparks called his company commanders together, told them he was going to the States and said goodbye.

Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Whitaker, the Seventh Army's assistant inspector general, spent several weeks interviewing as many participants and witnesses to the events of April 29 as he could reach, then wrote up his findings. Once his report, stamped "Secret," was complete, it was sent to the office of the Seventh Army judge advocate general, who recommended that Lieutenants Walsh and Busheyhead, Tech. 3rd Class Wells, and Private Albert Pruitt—who had finished off the four Germans Walsh had herded into the railroad car—should be charged with murder and tried by court-martial. Other men were charged with lesser crimes.

Lieutenant General Wade Haislip, who had succeeded Alexander Patch as com-

mander of the Seventh Army, however, refused to proceed with the recommended courts-martial, saying that the inspector general had failed to take into account the emotional state of the troops, who had been in nearly continuous combat for more than a month. Haislip approved only of charging Walsh and Pruitt with shooting the four SS soldiers in the boxcar, but he stalled long enough for his Seventh Army to be reorganized and ordered to push on into Austria. Patton's Third Army, relocating its headquarters from Regensburg to Bad Tölz, south of Munich, would take control of Bavaria. Because the 45th Division was reassigned to become part of the Third Army, the matter was handed over to the Third Army for disposition.

Patton, not uncharacteristically, also chose to take no disciplinary action. His position, no doubt, was that it was the Germans who were the enemy. The SS had run the concentration camps, and, if some of them got killed in the process of liberation, that was just too damn bad. Furthermore, the surviving leaders of the Nazi regime were being rounded up and imprisoned in anticipation of war-crimes trials that were to take place in the upcoming months in Nuremberg. To conduct a court-martial of Americans involved in the Dachau massacre would not only besmirch the honor

of the American fighting man but could also seriously weaken the Allies' case against the Germans accused of atrocities. According to Sparks, Patton—in his presence—destroyed Whitaker's report, and no courts-martial were ever conducted. Only a single copy of the inspector general's report survived, and it lay undetected within the bowels of the National Archives for half a century.

The civilians living in or near Dachau, who claimed that they knew nothing of the horrors being committed in their backyard, were given a lesson in the brutality of their countrymen. Medic Peter Galary recalled that once the camp was in American hands, "We made the civilians who lived around there parade past the boxcars full of dead bodies, and they said, 'We never knew about it.' They cried, but what good is crying going to do?—it wouldn't bring any of those people back to life."

Half a century after the incident, Walsh said, "I don't think there was any SS guy that was shot or killed in the defense of Dachau that wondered why he was killed." While some accounts have claimed that upward of 500 guards were killed during the liberation of Dachau, according to the inspector general's report, the official body-count was 24 dead SS men.

And what of the prisoners—all 31,432 of them? Whether their redeemers wore a thunderbird patch or a rainbow was of absolutely no concern to them. Medical teams from the XV Corps tried to save as many of the critically ill former inmates as possible, but an additional 2,466 died between April 29 and June 16. Because the danger of typhus was high, the inmates had to remain quarantined inside the camp for several weeks before they were repatriated to their former homelands.

One of the Polish inmates told the inspector general about the joy felt by the liberated inmates: "Prisoners swarmed over the wire and grabbed the American soldiers and lifted them to their shoulders amid many cries. I helped to lift the soldiers.... All that could were crowding in to kiss their hands and clothes.... For the past six years we had waited for the Americans, and at this moment the SS were nothing." □

Flint Whitlock is the author of The Rock of Anzio: From Sicily to Dachau—A History of the 45th Infantry Division.

Sources are listed in Notes for Chapter 13 in [The Rock of Anzio: From Sicily to Dachau-A History of the 45th Infantry Division.](#)

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