

INDESCRIBABLE HORROR

By Julien D. Saks

This is Julien D. Saks, formerly Lieutenant colonel on the Special Staff of Major General Roderick Allen, commanding the 12th Armored Division. This division was one of the best armored divisions in the United States Army. It successfully defended Strasburg against overwhelming odds; was the armor in the liberation of Colmar; spearheaded General Patton's drive to the Rhine; captured a bridge over the Danube River and broke that German defense line, the first time in recorded history that the Danube had failed to stop an invading army; and played the major part in blocking the Brenner Pass, thereby trapping over a million German soldiers in Italy as the war ended. En route to the Brenner Pass it overran eleven concentration camps at Landsberg, Germany.

I am going to tell you about my experiences at two of the eleven concentration camps at Landsberg about three or four hours after they were liberated by the 12th Armored Division. When the tanks liberated them they were in hot pursuit of the German soldiers and trying to capture a bridge over the Lech River. It was essential to block the Brenner Pass as soon as possible to trap the German soldiers in Italy. When our tankers saw what they had overrun they were shocked and angry. But they threw the survivors what rations they had and kept going. Also, I am going to show you pictures taken by Sgt. Robert T. Hartwig of Company C, 134th Armored Maintenance Battalion and give you his account of his visit to a concentration camp the next day, inspecting the camp, the dead bodies, and watching a group of about 200 prominent civilians from Landsberg act as a burial detail for the corpses. Then I am going to tell you of my trip to Dachau after

2003.071.001

the war and show you a few pictures of Munich and Dachau.

About 9:30 or 10 A.M. the morning of April 27, 1945, Captain John Paul Jones of Company C, 134th Armored Ordnance Battalion of the 12th Armored Division came by division headquarters and told us of his experiences while recovering a disabled tank. He told us of being near a camp where there were dead bodies lying in the streets, a burned building filled with dead bodies, and people in striped suits who had escaped being along the countryside. He told me that it was a ghastly sight, and I should to see it. I had become quite friendly with Capt. Jones as his company had installed flame throwers in three tanks for me in the snow at Dieuze, France.

We entered and looked about. We were so shocked at what we saw that we couldn't say a word. I walked down one short street and counted about sixty-five bodies lying in the ditches. The bodies were very emaciated, probably not weighing more than fifty to seventy pounds, and had been starved to death. Their clothing was sparse and in some cases they were naked. It was cold there in April – we were deep inside Germany. Madrid, Spain, is at the same latitude as New York City, so you can see how far north we were (about the same as the middle of the Hudson Bay). But because of the Gulf Stream, Europe is somewhat warmer than Canada. But even in summer we wore wool uniforms.

Many of the bodies had sores, like the skin had contracted and cracked. The smell of death was all around. It was much worse than the pictures show because the pictures don't show the odor or the sores on the bodies.

I looked in one of the many hutments used to house the prisoners. It was mostly underground, made by digging a pit with steps leading down at one end and constructing the building in the pit. The eaves of the building were about two feet above ground with a

slanting roof. There was a shelf about four or five feet wide about two feet above the floor on each side of the central aisle. The prisoners had to sleep on this shelf either with their feet hanging over into the aisle or crouched up. You will see pictures of these buildings.

We were in this camp possibly thirty minutes while the medics waited for us to come out. As I returned to the gate I saw a building in which the guards, previous to our troops' arrival, had locked about sixty-five to seventy prisoners inside and set it on fire. The bodies lay between the burned sills of the building. I heard that our medics had examined them and found three alive. They were sent to a field hospital. I don't know whether they survived. Photograph number 21 taken by Sgt. Hartwig shows a burned building. But this one was filled with corpses. My attention was given to this, and I was so shocked that I didn't see a pile of naked women about three feet high behind me. I was told about it later. We were combat troops used to death and destruction, but this was so shocking that we were speechless.

Most of the prisoners in this camp were Jews and Poles. We were told that before our tanks arrived the guards marched off some of the prisoners. But we never found out what happened to them. When our tanks came in our men took a quick look, threw the inmates who were left what rations they had, and kept going. They were chasing the German troops and trying to capture a bridge over the Lech River before the Germans could blow it up. They captured the railroad bridge and our vehicles crossed over it by putting boards on the rails.

We left this camp where everyone was dead or had escaped into the countryside. My driver and I went to another camp. This was a camp housing criminals. There were a

lot of live people around. One of the drivers, who had been there previously, warned us about giving them food – that we would be swamped by the inmates. When we drove in there was a wagon half-filled with bodies and bodies laying around on the ground. This was evidently the wagon that came daily to pick up the bodies of those who had died since the previous day. The detail was probably interrupted by news that our tanks were nearby and fled, taking the horse with them – with someone on his back. Our tanks were about five miles per hour faster than the German tanks. The Germans figured our speed at the rate of the German tanks and our tanks usually came before they were expected.

We looked about and there were a number of people around. One man shuffled up to us like he was so weak he could hardly walk – pointed to his open mouth indicating he wanted something to eat. The inside of his mouth was almost black, I suppose from starvation. Corporal Dwaine Sinkler, my driver, and I got out and raised the tarp over the back of the jeep where we had a wooden box of K rations in pasteboard cartons.

No sooner had we lifted the tarp than there was a big group of inmates grabbing and pawing at the back of the jeep, looking for food which they couldn't find because it was in sealed packages inside a covered wooden box. Sinkler and I were both pushed out to the edge of the group. I was afraid they might tear the jeep apart so I took hold of one man's arm and pulled at him. I think I could have pulled his arm off before he would let go. So I turned im loose. I woman did get our bottle of wine and ran about thirty feet, stopped, held the bottle up in her hand and stood looking at us. I suppose she wanted to see what we were going to do about it. I ignored her and hoped that the wine would not injure her weakened stomach. I edged my way under the steering wheel of the jeep and started the motor. I let it run a few minutes but that didn't faze the the group who were

pawing at the back of the jeep. One man took out the captured German rifle I carried because I was armed with a pistol. But when he saw what it was he put it back. Then I stood up on the front seat of the jeep, took my .45 out of its holster with the safety on, and with my finger out of the trigger guard to keep from accidentally shooting anyone if I were jostled or knocked over, I started waving it with the muzzle pointed up. Finally one man saw the pistol and pointed to it. The other dropped back from the jeep. Sinkler jumped in and I drove several blocks away. We then opened the cartons containing the K rations and returned. We distributed what we had. As we were exhausting our supply we got into the jeep and started the motor. As Dwaine drove away I dropped the last can we had into a man's hand. Another man grabbed at it and it rolled to the ground. One of them got it and broke away from the other by a couple of feet. The loser shuffled slowly away. I don't know what these criminals had done. They were in sad shape. But they were still better treated than the political or ideological prisoners. There were a number of ex-prisoners in striped suits wandering about the countryside. Some looked like walking skeletons. We were in hot pursuit of the Germans and didn't have time to look after them. That would be for the troops behind us. My military duties were urgent and I could not stay longer.

We returned to headquarters where I ran into Capt. Wurm, a Jewish boy from New York City, who was Chief of the "Order of Battle" Section of the Division Intelligence Section. He had captured one of the high officials of one of the camps. Capt. Wurm told me he had great difficulty getting the prisoner back to headquarters alive of interrogation as the soldiers, who were so incensed at what they had seen that they wanted to kill him.

Capt. Wurm also told me about an inmate he had talked with. The inmate was the middle generation of three generations of his family in the camp. One day the guards built a large fire and told him to push his father into it. He refused to do it. But his father told him to go ahead as at least the son would survive. So he pushed his father into the fire and the father perished. Some days later the guards built another fire and told him to push his son into it. He refused. The guards led him away. They were deciding what to do with him. Meanwhile our tanks arrived and the father was liberated. Capt. Wurm said the man was crazy with hatred and probably would kill Germans until the man himself was killed.

When I returned to Division Headquarters I found that my typhus shot was about to become outdated, so I took another one.

Now I will give you Sgt. Hartwig's story. Sgt. Hartwig visited the camp the next day when they were burying the bodies. Sgt. Hartwig begins by saying: "Last night we moved into a town – a very new town – new in the sense that the Krauts had just been run out of it. We roamed around a little catching all the new rumors. There were some people who had been released from a camp. They told us stories about some of the atrocities practiced by the Germans on their prisoners. We took their stories, as one might say, 'with a grain of salt' and didn't believe all they had to say. They told us of being slowly starved, having to eat snails, dandelions, weeds, and occasionally thin potato soup.

"Later in the evening at a meeting, our Captain John Paul Jones, commanding Company C, 134th Armored Ordnance Battalion, told us of a slave labor camp near us where some two hundred people had been burned that morning. That seemed impossible to us as did the other stories. The next morning I had a chance to ride to the scene, to actually view the results of this mass barbarism and to take some pictures. Our party

consisted of Capt. Jones, Tech. 5 Robert L. Tannehill, Pfc. Singer, and myself. After driving about eight miles we knew we were near a camp site because of the sickening odor of burning bodies. About a mile to our right were some smoking ruins. We drove past signs warning of typhus. As we drove toward the buildings the sight that met our eyes was unbelievable. There were rows upon rows of dead – dead who had died different and more horrible deaths. We learned that the majority had died from injections. Injections of what we were not sure. Some appeared to have been poisoned. I am told that people in their condition were also killed by an injection of oxygen into their blood stream. We know that some of them were as long as thirty hours dying. Even when we were there an occasional groan could be heard from someone I that mass – or movement of an arm or leg could be seen. The expressions on their faces were indescribable. The positions that they were in – some half sitting, others up on one arm or twisted – was grotesque.”

I will now digress from Sgt. Hartwig’s story to show you some of his photographs. [All pictures referred to in this narrative are located on pages ? - ?]

Number 1 is the entrance to the camp – simple wire gate about 6 ½ or 7 feet high topped with barbed wire and a small sentry house to the right.

Number 2 is a scene of about five bodies scattered about just inside the gate. The roof of a sleeping quarters building is in the near background and the edge of another building is on the left.

Note the expressions on the faces and how thin the people are in the following photographs.

Number 3 is a close-up of some of the bodies. One man’s face is shown adjacent to the lower edge of the photograph about one-fourth the distance from the left.

Number 4 is also a close-up of some of the bodies but it didn't develop too well. There were quite a few bodies in this group.

Number 5 is a close-up of two bodies. The face and neck of the one on the left is covered with sores. So is the nose of the body on the right.

Number 6 is a close-up of four bodies. Notice how gaunt they are. This photo shows the head and upper torso of the bodies.

Number 7 is a close-up of two more bodies. Note the ribs and sunken cheeks. This photograph shows the upper half of two bodies and the foot (on the left) of a third body.

These close-ups show something of the condition of the bodies and how the inmates of the camp were starved and worked to death. It was completely unbelievable that one human being could do this to another. All of the bodies shown in the following photographs looked this bad or worse.

We will now go back to Sgt. Hartwig's story.

"For now, let us identify the place as in the Landsberg Concentration Camp area. In the short time we were there we drove by five separate camp sites, each occupying possibly a thousand acres. One of these we explored rather thoroughly. This particular camp was known as the "krankenlager", meaning in English the "sick camp". This is where the biggest burnings took place. Many buildings were left standing. We went through some of those that were empty. The odor was nauseating. The floor of each building was of dirt and about three feet below the surface of the ground. It had a roughly constructed wooden roof that was covered with dirt. There was no provision for drainage and the slightest rain would leave water on the floor. Each building was about fifty feet

long and about fifteen feet wide. There was a wooden shelf about one and a half feet above the floor and about five feet wide along each wall. A small pad of straw was the bedding for prisoners sleeping on the shelf. They slept with their feet toward the aisle. There was one stove in the middle of each building and without fuel. I don't believe there was as much fuel in the whole camp as I have seen behind the average farmhouse in Germany. There was one window at each end. (The roofs of two of the buildings are shown in picture number 8 and one in picture number 9. Picture number 10 shows the inside of a building – note the disorderly condition.)

“The Germans claimed that the condition of the prisoners was due to typhus. Now we knew that this was generally not true. Their ill health was due to malnutrition and overwork. The kitchen was a filthy, half open building and contained large cooking pots used to prepare soup and liquid foods. There was nothing in the building that could have been used for preparing solid foods of any kind. Their food ration consisted of potato soup made to the proportion of one pound of potatoes to one gallon of water. To make it worse the cooks ate a considerable amount of the potatoes instead of using them in the soup. One one-pound loaf of bread was issued for eight men each day.

“Much of our information was gathered from two living inmates who had escaped into the woods a few days before the Americans came. They had known from the actions of the guards that the Americans were coming. One of these fellows was a Russian and the other Jewish. They told us that approximately four hundred in walking condition of the original four thousand were marched away the day before the Americans came. They showed us records kept in the camp. (Picture number 11 shows a prisoner explaining things to the GI's.) All the people in this camp were political prisoners. About three-

fourths of them were Jewish and the rest a mixture of other nationalities. The Jewish fellow had watched his wife and children be put in the gas chamber. He had been used on the work detail that cleaned the bodies of his wife and children out of the gas chamber when dead. He explained what the common method of mass burning was before the gas chamber was perfected. A pit nine by thirty feet was filled with burning coals and live human beings were dumped into this pit from railroad cars. The ashes were used for fertilizer.

“The first pile of dead contained about five hundred bodies. Some were burned, many given infections and many more were beaten to death. (See picture number 12 for a portion of the five hundred – note the grotesque positions.) Others were killed with an axe. (See picture number 13 for a man killed by chopping his head off.)

“These were all freshly killed with their bodies still soft. Their skin was waxy and wrapped tightly around the bones. The largest average diameter of their thighs was about five inches. The hands were like claws. The skin was worn through to the meat on the hands and knees of those who couldn't walk but could only crawl. Many carried open wounds – old wounds for there was no nutrition to repair the tissues. Arms and legs were broken, hanging rotting. (See picture number 12 again. Picture number 14 shows some additional bodies.)

“The GIs went into Landsberg that morning and collected about two hundred Nazi citizens and marched them out to the camp. They were real nice Germans – the wealthy ones. Let me say here that no one has money unless he is a Nazi. These were fat Nazis, well dressed, yes, and some with shiny bald heads.

Out at the cap they were divided into two groups. Part of them were put into

digging mass graves. (See picture number 15 which shows German civilians digging a mass grave.) Each grave was thirty feet long and fifteen feet wide – rows of them. The GI's were in charge. The digging didn't stop nor was there any hesitation on the part of the diggers. Rifle butts and bayonets were used freely. Here let me put in that the released Russian had the run of the place. He was one of the busiest persons I have ever seen. His working tool was club similar to a baseball bat. He just wandered back and forth among the civilians picking out the slackers. He used that working tool. Occasionally he took time out to talk to us. Sometime before we got there the soldiers brought a captured SS man to work. This particular trooper had been a guard at the camp and had beaten the Russian many times. The trooper, it seemed, couldn't stand the pace. His body was added to the ever growing pile of dead awaiting burial. He, the big husky superman, was so noticeable among the emaciated corpses.

“Other civilians were paired off and marched to the area, something more than a mile away, to bring back the dead. Two carried one dead. (See picture number 16 which shows several pairs of civilians carrying corpses under the supervision of the GI's.) I remember one fellow who claimed inability to carry such a heavy load. He was allowed to bring back heads, legs and arms found strewn about. We walked the railroad track to find the worst. Here some sixty had been put to digging their own graves with spoons and dishes. For some reason the detail was interrupted. Everyone of these were violently murdered, chopped to pieces. The ax was still there.

“As we drove from the camp we saw more horrible sights. Some prisoners had escaped. Either the infection hadn't taken effect or else they had been skipped. Some were lying dead two or three miles away and some were walking – walking dead. They

could barely move their legs – stooped almost double. One particular fellow I'm never going to forget. He could hear our jeep coming along before we got to him. With the most painful effort he turned toward us, brought himself to attention and saluted. The amount of effort to do that was more, far more, than he could spare.

Written by Tech Sgt. Robert T. Hartwig

Company C, 134th Armored Ordnance Battalion

12th Armored Division

[Saks' account resumes]

There are four more photographs obtained from Sgt. Hartwig. These show the German civilians from Landsberg rounded up by soldiers sent by Lt. Col. Edward F. Seiller, Military Government Officer of the 12th Armored Division, to make them witness what went on in the Landsberg concentration camps. Col. Seiller was in charge of burying the bodies and said it was horrifying experience.

Number 17 shows Col. Seiller (right) and Max Beer of Col. Seiller's Staff Section standing among the bodies facing the German civilians. Col. Seiller is talking to the civilians from Landsberg while Max Beer is translating his words into German. In the foreground is a first lieutenant not from the 12th Armored Division.

Number 18 shows a man in civilian clothes standing among the bodies.

Number 19 shows Col. Seiller standing in front of a group of bodies with GIs in the background.

Number 20 shows col. Seiller standing in a different position in respect to the bodies. Two soldiers on the other side of the bodies appear to be taking pictures.

It is likely, if the facts which have gradually unfolded are true, that the capture of the bridge over the Danube River had a profound effect upon the shortening of the war.

The April 1982 issue of the magazine of the 12th Armored Division Association, reminiscing about April 1945, stated: "The Danube River had never before in recorded history been crossed in force by an invader...Raiders and armies tried for hundreds of years but none were able to cross in force until the 12th Armored Division "Hellcats" did that which could not be done."

What happened was that in the early morning hours of April 22, 1945, several of our task forces consisting of tanks and of armored infantry and several bridges blown up as they approached. One task force came to the outskirts of Dillingen. There was a bridge on the far side of the town. Firing all guns furiously they dashed down the main street of Dillingen leading to the bridge. The German soldiers dived for the basements as the task force passed. The guards at the bridge, expecting the town to be taken first, were caught by surprise and were either shot or taken prisoners. The explosives were defused. The holding only the bridge and its approaches and surround by German soldiers the task force radioed the division for help. The division fought its way down a lightly defended two-lane road leading to Dillingen, twenty-five or thirty miles away, holding only the road and as far as it could shoot to either side. In a couple of hours or so it rescued the task force and poured across the bridge, quickly establishing a bridgehead six miles deep and ten miles wide. 7th Army sent tanks, half-tracks, trucks loaded with soldiers, etc., as fast as they could go two abreast down the two lane road further expanding the bridgehead on the south side of the Danube.

It could be that the German soldiers cut off on the north side of the Danube River

by the blowing of the bridges acted similarly to the German soldiers when we spearheaded General Patton's drive to the Rhine. When the bridges over the Rhine were blown the German soldiers trapped on the west bank felt that the war was over for them. They surrendered in such droves that we simply pointed in the direction of the prisoner of war enclosures. They walked to them without guards and turned themselves in. There is no reason why the German soldiers, who were to retreat across the blown bridges to defend the south bank, did not do likewise. The Danube River defenses were overcome actually before they were set up – particularly as the German High command probably figured that the Danube river would hold us as it had help invading armies for centuries.

The blowing of the bridges over the Danube and the capture of the bridge at Dillingen could have been a matter of great importance to the ending of the war. The Germans were greatly strengthening the defense of the Redoubt Area in the Bavarian Alps where Berchtesgarden was located. They expected the Danube to hold our forces for weeks, possibly for months, since it had never been crossed in force in recorded history. Meanwhile, they probably expected to bring a large number of the German troops through the Brenner Pass into the Redoubt Area. They probably felt that the larger number of the German forces facing us north of the Danube could be brought across the river before the bridges were blown. When this happened we would be stopped at the north bank of the Danube.

But the capture of the bridge at Dillingen changed all that. It caused the bridges over the Danube to be blown before the troops on the north bank could cross. The defense of the south bank of the Danube and the Redoubt Area was deprived of their services. Mountain fighting is very difficult for the attacker. Had the reinforcements

reached the Redoubt Area we would have had a most difficult time.

Five days after capturing the bridge over the Danube, on April 27th, we liberated the eleven concentration camps at Landsberg. Seven days later on May 4th we played the major part in completely closing the Brenner Pass, getting five of the six exits while the 14th armored Division got the sixth. This trapped over a million German soldiers in Italy and the war drew to a close. The air Force had been bombing the Brenner Pass but the Germans had been reopening it, possibly allowing German soldiers to escape from Italy into Germany to bolster its defenses.

The war in Europe was officially over on May 8, 1945. I wanted to visit Oberelsbach, Bavaria, which was the birthplace of my father. He had emigrated as a child to the United States in 1875. I was able to go on Sunday, June 17th, 1945. Sgt. Ellis Smith, Pvt. DuBois who drove us, and I left very early in the morning. En route we stopped at Munich for about an hour. We visited the "putsch beer hall" where Hitler conspired to make the "putsch" by which the Nazi party took over the German government in, I believe, 1933. Picture number 22 shows the entrance from the street to the grounds on which the Burger Brau Keller, the putsch hall, was located. I am standing to the right of the sentry in the picture.

Picture number 23 shows the entrance to the actual beer putsch hall with GI's lounging around. We went to the enormous open-air stadium at Munich where Hitler spoke to tremendous crowds. This is shown in picture number 24. Note the size of the stadium and the statue in relation to the people moving about.

We then proceeded toward Oberelsbach. But en route we noticed a sign that Dachau was only a few miles out of the way and decided to see what it looked like. We

arrived about midmorning Picture number 25 shows Sgt. Smith and two guards at an entrance to Dachau.

We started through the camp unescorted as the tours had already begun. The camp had been cleaned up. We fell in behind a tour being conducted by a lieutenant. I recall that about halfway through he stopped at an execution place which had banks of dirt around it. There were ditches about eighteen inches deep and about two feet wide with wooden gratings over them. The prisoners to be executed kneeled with their heads over the grating and were shot in the back of the head. The blood went through the grating into the ditch. The lieutenant had ridden into the camp on the back of tank when the camp had been captured. No had any idea of what was going to encountered. The American soldiers were first shocked and then angry. They shot whatever guards they could find. The inmates picked up the guards' weapons and started hunting other guards and prisoners who had cooperated with the guards. It was a real mess until all of the guards that could be found were dead.

The soldiers found bodies stacked like cordwood outside the crematorium and a train load of bodies waiting to be unloaded. For sanitary reasons the U. S. Army used bulldozers to bury the bodies in mass graves. But show visiting troops one crematorium was kept operating for few days by a Yugoslavian inmate, who had been forced to operate it for the SS troops. The stench often caused the onlookers to vomit.

I talked to the lieutenant during the break. He asked me if I had seen the dog houses. I said, "Yes, I have taken a picture of them." (Picture number 26) He then asked, "What do you think they used the dogs for?" I replied, "I guess they used them to catch escaped prisoners." He said, "Yes, they were used for that. But on long, tiresome Sunday

afternoons they used them to relieve the boredom. They would tie a prisoner by the hands to a rafter of the ceiling. Then they would 'sic' the dogs on him. The dogs had been trained to bite off his genitals."

I took pictures of the entrance of two of the gas chambers. One of them, picture number 27, shows Pvt. DuBois by the door of number 2, and another, picture number 28, shows a Russian first aid man by the entrance to number 4.

We also looked at the crematorium and I took a picture of one of them (see picture number 29). This consisted of a brick furnace with an iron stretcher. This was built on wheels so that it could be filled with corpses and run in and out of the furnace.

The prisoners brought to the gas chamber were told "to undress and put your clothes in neat piles." They were expecting to get a shower bath. When they entered the chamber and were locked in, the pipes, instead of giving them a shower, spewed out poison gas.

When all were dead, the gold was taken from their teeth and their clothes and other belongings were sent to a warehouse. Then the bodies were taken to the crematorium and burned. The ashes were used for fertilizer.

Dachau was the first and one of the largest extermination camps. During World War II it became so overcrowded that it was necessary to establish a number of satellite camps. It was a grisly place. But after the American troops cleaned it up it had a more peaceful appearance (see pictures of the barracks area, pictures number 30 and 31). But for many years – from 1933 to 1945 – it was one of the most terrible places in the world.