Senator Strom Thurmond

00:00:05

Thurmond: ...the machine.

Female speaker: Stand by. Rolling tape.

Interviewer: Okay. Thank you. Senator, if you could start out by talking about what you expected to find when you got into Europe and when you were going in as opposed to what you actually found when you got to the camps, to the concentration camps.

Thurmond: Well, I was with the First Army all through the war in Europe, and the First Army uncovered the Buchenwald concentration camp, which is located some miles from Leipzig, and I’ve never seen the like in my like, what I saw there. I was told that the attorney general of Luxembourg had been there and many other prominent officials and many Jewish people, and I was just amazed at what I heard. For instance, I was told, for instance, that the wife of the commandant of the camp there liked tattooing, and when they found anybody with tattooing on their arms or their back, that when they died, she would have them skinned and make lampshades out of that tattooing or use them for other purposes.

Well, in looking over the camp there, I was further told -- and most people died from starving. And there must have been several hundred people who had died from starving stacked up like cordwood, a big, great pile of dead people, and some of them were not dead. Some were barely living, and some of our doctors were able to save some of those people. I never saw such a sight in my life.

Now, I guess there were mainly by three ways that they got rid of these people. One was mainly starving. Information we had is that they’d give them a bowl of thin pea soup a day and that’s all, gradually starve them to death. And that must have been the case because so many had starved there. Now, also, another way sometimes, someone would put out the word that you might be able to get over the fence and get away. Then when they attempted to get over the fence and get away, they’d shoot them. That’s the second way they were killed. And the third way was, they had a box there like a telephone booth, and you’d go in from the front or the back. And I walked through that box there, and it was -- except it was deeper than a telephone booth. And there, I saw a big, old mallet, and I said, “How is it handled here?” And he said, “Well, these people would come in, walk into it, and then after they got in there, a big SS guard would take this mallet and hit them over the head and kill those people.” So those were the three ways mainly to kill those people.

It’s amazing how hard and difficult it was to tell that those who had starved to death on the ground were the living or dead. As I said, though, the doctor did save a good many, but I never saw such a sight in my life, and I couldn’t imagine anybody could be so cruel to people as to treat them like that. Now, of course, in some other concentration camps over there, they, they gassed them to death, and that’s when it’s very clear that that was the only source of killing the people there at those. This particular camp, Buchenwald, as I stated, it was a combination of the way they killed them there.

Interviewer: Senator --

Thurmond: And unless the people of the United States could actually see what went on there, they couldn’t imagine the dread to humanity as occurred in those places.

Interviewer: Senator, before you got to Buchenwald, had -- how did you hear about it? Did you hear about it in the United States, or when you got to Europe?

Thurmond: No, no, I had heard maybe -- probably when I first got over there, mainly.

Interviewer: When did you get over there first?

Thurmond: I landed on D-Day with the 82nd Airborne Division in Normandy, and then we took that part of the country there in France and then worked our way on through Saint-Lô into Paris. We camped on the peace grounds as we went through Paris, and then we went on into Belgium. Of course, when we got in Belgium, that’s when the Battle of the Bulge occurred, and we were in Spa, Belgium. We had to drop back to Liege, Belgium, and going back, the Germans were dropping those bombs down on the people going back, and several -- just a couple of cars from me, a bomb dropped and killed a lot of people. And just as I crossed the street in Liege, from one side to the other of the street, a bomb dropped there. So I’m pretty lucky, I think --

Interviewer: You are.

Thurmond: -- that I didn’t get killed. At that time, it was extremely cold. Ice, I guess, looked like it was 4 to 6 feet thick, maybe. Extremely cold, but anyway, that, that was terrible fight, the Battle of the Bulge, but we stopped ‘em and were able to succeed and turn the situation around. Then we went back through Belgium, went on, and Alken was one of the cities that -- some of the churches was destroyed and other things. That city was about 85% destroyed. And our pilots tried not to destroy churches if they could, and they had specific instructions about that.

But we went from there, one place to the other, and finally crossed the Rhine River. The bridge had been blown up just before we got there, and we crossed on a pontoon bridge and then went from there on into Germany, in one city after the other, on into Germany as far as we could go. And then we got to -- near Berlin and sat on the banks of the river while the Russians took it. I don’t know why the word was ever given to let the Russians take Berlin. The Germans, I think, knew they were going to lose. They were hoping we’d take it because they hated the Russians so, and they knew they’d be punished a lot more and lot more of them would be killed if the Russians took it. But that was the orders that General Eisenhower gave. Now, whether he made that decision or whether the President made that decision, I don’t know, but anyway, that’s what happened, and I know we were all just itching to take Berlin because we had fought all the way through from D-Day on, and we were disappointed that we didn’t have the honor of taking Berlin.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. And then you went on from Berlin to Buchenwald?

Thurmond: That’s right.

Interviewer: And when you got to Buchenwald, had anybody been there, or was the 82nd Airborne the first people in?

Thurmond: No, the 82nd Airborne had gone on another assignment.

Interviewer: So you were --

Thurmond: And I remained with the First Army.

Interviewer: I see. And then the First Army came to Buchenwald.

Thurmond: That’s right, the First Army.

Interviewer: And you liberated the camp?

Thurmond: We got there right after it was liberated.

Interviewer: I see.

Thurmond: Some troops ahead of us had just liberated it.

Interviewer: I see.

Thurmond: And that’s when I witnessed all these things I’m telling you about.

Interviewer: I see.

Thurmond: It was -- I just can’t imagine how any person could be so inhuman as to do to those people what I saw. It doesn’t matter who the people were or where they were from, how one person could be so inhuman as to treat another human such a way, but it was just outrageous. But that must have been Hitler’s orders that he passed down, and he was destroying certain people, people who disagreed with him and any Jewish people, of course. And why he did that, there’s various reasons assigned, but, but he was out to get them and destroy thousands of ‘em, thousands and thousands, and we were so disappointed just to actually see what we did see and to find the conditions as they were.

Interviewer: Did you have an opportunity to go to any other camps, any other concentration camps?

Thurmond: No, that’s the only concentration camp I had the chance to go to. Of course, I heard about these others, and they were mostly gassed, I think.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Thurmond: And this was somewhat a miscellaneous group there near Leipzig at Buchenwald. And some of the other camps, I understood, were mostly the Jewish people, and men and women and children, they would make them strip, I was told, and someone said they saved their clothes and made them strip and then they gassed them to death.

Interviewer: At Buchenwald, did you have an opportunity to speak with any of the survivors or have any contact with any of the survivors?

Thurmond: Well, actually, the survivors who did survive were lying on the ground and so weak they couldn’t talk.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

>> Thurmond: In other words, you couldn’t hardly tell whether they were living or dead. Doctors had a difficult time, even, telling hardly whether living or dead, but they could detect a few of them were living, and, of course, they were taken and treated and helped in every way we could.

Interviewer: Did you remain there for some time?

Thurmond: No, we didn’t remain there too long. We remained long enough to survey the situation and determine that it was all stabilized then, and then others came in and took over the actual work of removing the bodies, and then the medical corps still trying to tell who’s dead or alive, those who were piled up, as I said, piled up like cordwood, great, high wall of people, some living, barely living, others dead, of course.

Interviewer: Could you tell me what the barracks looked like that the people lived in? Were any of those barracks remaining when you got there?

Thurmond: Well, it was just about as sorry barracks as you could find, just a place to live in there. They’re on the floor, just open barracks, the ones we saw.

Interviewer: There we no beds or anything.

Thurmond: No.

Interviewer: Just -- could you tell me some more about how people reacted in your company or in your group?

Thurmond: Well, we wondered why the German people in Leipzig didn’t know what was going on, or if they did know, why didn’t they do something about it? And they claimed -- some of them claimed they didn’t even know about it out there, and they may not, but others were scared to do anything, scared to take any part, and some, of course, were indifferent and was trying to save their own lives and look after themselves for their own survival. It was just a situation that -- something that the world had never seen anything like it before, in my opinion. Of all the wars fought, I can’t imagine anything being more cruel than to treat people like they did here. Now, if they killed people, they’d die immediately, and they wouldn’t suffer. But these poor people were put in there and suffered for weeks and weeks and weeks, starved to death, become so weak they couldn’t stand up, and then finally they would die.

Interviewer: Do you recall hearing anything --

Thurmond: And they would dispose of them. Of course, they had disposed of, I guess, thousands before we got there, but these were the ones, at the time we got there, that they hadn’t disposed of.

Interviewer: How were they disposing of the bodies, best you could tell?

Thurmond: Well, I didn’t see how they disposed of them, but we were told that they would take them out and bury them.

Interviewer: Had you heard anything about any of these camps before you got to Europe?

Thurmond: Yes. We had heard during the war about these camps, but we were not in that particular area, at least my unit wasn’t, and we were told how they mainly killed people by taking them in these buildings and turning on the gas and killing ‘em, and they’d all just fall over dead. They had no way -- if they tried to run, they’d shoot them, and so I guess the people didn’t know what to do to survive, and most of them, I guess, submitted because they felt there was nothing else to do.

Interviewer: Had you heard about this in South Carolina? You were a Circuit Court judge before you went into the 82nd Airborne?

Thurmond: Yes, ma’am.

Interviewer: And had you heard about --

Thurmond: No, I hadn’t heard about it before

Interviewer: Okay.

Thurmond: In fact, I didn’t hear about it until after we got over there.

Interviewer: I see.

Thurmond: When I first went in the army, I went to New York with a police battalion and stayed down there until they took me up to army headquarters to work in G-2, it’s called, the intelligence section. And then I stayed there about 15, 18 months and went overseas with the First Army. And we were in London for about a year in getting ready. And then they wanted some volunteers with the 82nd Airborne Division, and I was one of the three that volunteered for a particular mission there and went in with them on D-Day.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Is there anything else about your experience at Buchenwald that you think you would want to --

Thurmond: I don’t think there’s anything else I could tell you. It’s just a sight, of course, you never forget to see humans treated like they were, human beings, men and women and children just being starved to death or killed with a mallet or shot trying to escape over a fence.

Interviewer: Do you have any idea how many people were left there by the time you got there?

Thurmond: Well, they disposed of them and told me at intervals they had disposed of them as they died. When we got there, this particular pile of people, as I guess you’d call it, like a pile of cordwood, it must have been several hundred there at that time, right at the particular place we saw.

Interviewer: And some of them dead, some of them alive.

Thurmond: Some dead, some alive; hard to tell whether they was dead or alive.

Interviewer: Jean [phonetic]? Yeah. Okay. Thank you very, very much, Senator Thurmond.

Thurmond: You’re welcome.

Interviewer: We really appreciate your doing this.

Thurmond: I’m glad to talk to you.

Interviewer: It’s real valuable.

Thurmond: Thank you very much.

Interviewer: Real valuable. Thank you.

Thurmond: Thank you.

Interviewer: Okay.

00:16:51