Robert D. Turner

00:00:38

Interviewer: Could you please give us your full name?

Turner: Robert D. Turner.

Interviewer: Where and when were you born?

Turner: I was born in New Brookland, South Carolina, which is now West Columbia, July 22, 1919.

Interviewer: Could you tell us about your life growing up?

Turner: Well, I guess I grew up about like most little boys, you know, shooting marbles and things like that and playing a little ball in the sandlots. A little Boy Scout program.

Interviewer: What was your family life like?

Turner: It was very nice, yeah, very pleasant.

Interviewer: Could you tell us about the time when you first entered the service?

Turner: Yes. I had started work for the telephone company in June of ‘40 and was doing a good bit of traveling with them on some detached service, and the draft situation came up, and I was drafted in November of 1941 for one year’s service, I hoped, but it didn’t work out that way.

Interviewer: What was your role in the military?

Turner: I was in a communications section in the artillery battalion.

Interviewer: And what did you do there?

Turner: Well, we furnished the radio communications for the different units, for the fire direction centers and things like that.

Interviewer: Could you tell us where you went?

Turner: Well, we left New York heading for England. Our forward party had gone to England to prepare a camp for us, and about two days off of the English coast, there was some slight change in plans, and we did not go to England. We went to Le Havre, France. And consequently, we had no forward party there, so we were just thrown out in the countryside, you see, because our forward party was in London to have a place prepared for us, but we didn’t reach England. We wound up in Le Havre, France.

Interviewer: And how long were you there for?

Turner: In Le Havre? Well, we had no equipment, no vehicles and things, and I think we were there several days, and they had to send up to Belgium or somewhere and get some vehicles for us to travel in and to pull the artillery, and they came back with some vehicles that had been shot at and hit, I think, but we left our beautiful equipment stateside, and we picked up stuff there to travel with.

Interviewer: Where did you go after France?

Turner: After France? Well, we went into Germany, and we first set up our equipment in the Siegfried Line there near Saarlautern, I believe, on the Siegfried Line, and I think we were there several weeks, shelling the artillery fire. And it seemed like the resistance dwindled, and we left and went through the Siegfried Line and continued on down through Germany into Austria, looking for the enemy.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Turner: They were in retreat, full retreat.

Interviewer: Could you tell us about the time you first encountered the camp?

Turner: I think it was the latter part of -- or probably the first part of April of ’45. We were nearing the border of Austria. Went through this small village and came upon this compound that we really didn’t know what it, what it consisted of. So we stopped to investigate, to see what was behind the barbed wires and things, and ran across the remnants of this concentration camp.

Interviewer: What did you see?

Turner: Well, as we approached the camp, it was not occupied by any of the Germans. They had probably had left, we think maybe within an hour before we arrived. And as we entered the camp, we saw about a dozen or two of the POWs or whatever they were on the ground. They had been shot dead, probably an hour before we arrived. The blood was still fresh in the dusty courtyard, and they had -- they were very ragged-looking individuals, ragged clothing and things.

Interviewer: Did you see others in the camp?

Turner: There was no one occupying the camp. None of the Germans were there, but in looking around, we found what appeared to be quarters, like long horse stables, with straw that they might have slept there, and they had vessels they may have poured soup in or something like you’d do rabbits or whatever. But there’s no one in the building, but in looking around, we found a storehouse-looking building similar to a smokehouse, I guess, in the olden days, that people cured meat, but they had a bunch of bodies in this building, and they were yellowish and dried-up and appeared to be -- they maybe had lime on them or something, but anyway, they were just stacked like cordwood in the building. And we decided we’d get some -- the civilian people in the little village to come and bury the ones that were still there. And looking further around, we found some of the -- looked like a gas chamber. They may have gassed some of them.

Interviewer: Could you describe that chamber to us? Could you describe that chamber to us?

Turner: Yeah, it looked like a huge steel chamber of probably 6-feet high and that wide, and I don’t know how long. It was a lengthy thing, yeah.

Interviewer: What did you see inside of it?

Turner: Well, it was empty. There was nothing in there. The door was open, but there was no victims in there, none.

Interviewer: So you decided to get the citizens to do some burying.

Turner: Yes. We got the mayor of the little village. He’s the in-charge man, and he got some of the group to come out with their picks and shovels, and they had to remove these bodies from this smokehouse-looking building we came across. And they were in very bad shape, the corpses, and they used 6- or 8-foot poles with mattress covers just so they could pick them up and not fall apart as they loaded them on the GI trailers to take them out to the place they were going to bury them.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Were -- do you remember the name of the town?

Turner: No, I don’t remember the name of the town. It was a small town, and it was very near the Austrian border, not too far from Linz, Austria, because as we continued our journey, we wound up in Linz a week later, maybe, and at that time, the war ended in Europe while we were in Linz, Austria.

Interviewer: When you told the mayor about what you saw, did you ask if he had known about any of this?

Turner: We didn’t ask, but he said that he -- they were not aware that these conditions existed there. You know, it was right on the outskirts of the little village. Whether they did or not, we don’t know, but they said they had no idea such things were going on.

Interviewer: Did they resist the idea of burying these people?

Turner: No, no. No, no. We were in charge, yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: Did you encounter any German military while you were there?

Turner: No, no. They had gone just prior to our arriving there evidently, yeah.

Interviewer: When you and the other American soldiers first got to the camp, what was it like for you to see these bodies?

Turner: It wasn’t very pleasant. And we really didn’t know what to think, you know. We just assumed that they had shot them so there would not be anybody around to describe what really happened in these places; you know, silenced them as such.

Interviewer: Had you heard about the horrors of the war before you got there?

Turner: No. We had probably read or heard something about the larger camps, Dachau or some of them, you know, with thousands and thousands of situations like this, but we weren’t expecting to encounter this one on our trip there, yeah.

Interviewer: Did you talk about the camp and what you saw there with the other American soldiers?

Turner: Yes, well, all of us were viewing them, you know, see? Everybody in the convoy went into the compound or went out to the graveyards or out there where they had the crematory or whatever. They tried to cremate the people. We just talked to one another. It was just a fact of life, I guess. I mean, here it is.

Interviewer: Was there any way that you would have been able to identify the bodies, who these people were, their backgrounds?

Turner: I’m not sure there was. We did not attempt to do that.

Interviewer: There was no mark on their clothing or anything that would indicate their background?

Turner: No, there clothing was all different types clothing and very ragged.

Interviewer: What happened once the burial was conducted?

Turner: After the burials? Well, we continued on our journey, looking for enemy. We had just stopped there. We were pursuing them at the time, and we stopped to investigate the camp.

Interviewer: Did you report your findings to anyone?

Turner: No. Someone probably did, you know, the intelligence thinking or something, but, no, we just thought that was part of the game, you know. Matter of fact, didn’t think too much about it. Didn’t look good, you know, and all that stuff, but we just kept pursuing the enemy.

Interviewer: Do you have any photographs of this camp?

Turner: Yeah, I had sent some home. We had taken them, and of course, it takes a while to develop them because it was no commercial activities going on at the time. The war ended not too long after that, and we found a place that would develop them. And I have some of those.

Interviewer: Could you show them to us and tell us about them?

Turner: Well, as the convoy drove up, we parked the vehicles, and we saw these several buildings and this barbed wire around, and we decided we’d go in and see what was happening there or what had happened.

And as we entered the compound, we found this group of people that looked like they were very recently shot. The blood was still warm, and it was an awful dusty courtyard, and it was very fresh. We figured they had not been shot very long.

This is another view of the same group. They just must have gathered them in the courtyard and gunned them down just prior to our arrival, I assume.

As I mentioned earlier, looking around, we found this horse barn-looking affair. We assumed -- it looked like straw mattresses, maybe, that they had slept there when they were alive and things like that, and some of the containers that they would feed them in, maybe pour the soup or whatever.

We just discussed the gas chamber earlier. This is what we saw. There was no one in it. The door was open. We assumed that’s the way they disposed of some of them.

Interviewer: Were the bodies that you saw piled up, were they people who were shot, or did it look like they may have been gassed?

Turner: They probably were gassed. We didn’t see any blood around, and they were very thin, like they had not had much groceries along the way, like they had starved almost. And this is a picture of the smokehouse-looking affair we saw them stacked. Looked like it had lime. They were yellowish.

And to take them out of the building they were stacked in, the civilians, they had poles cut, and they would use mattress covers to place them in so they didn’t fall apart on the way to the graves they had dug. And they would load them on our trailers. It wasn’t a very fancy hearse, but it would take them out to the burial grounds.

Here’s some with the covers on and some with the covers not yet on. That’s a good many of them. I don’t know how many. I don’t have a count of them, but it was lots of them.

Here’s some been placed on the trailer to take out to the burial grounds.

These are some of the civilians loading them on the trailers.

This particular one looked like he’s broken in two at the hip area. Must have been a lot of malnutrition going on; I’m not sure.

This is a photo of the civilians digging the graves.

Near the gravesite, it seems as if they have taken some out and put them on railroad irons and attempted to burn them. It looked like the fires had evidently not burned well, and they did not really do a good job burning them.

Some of the skulls with the white did fairly well, but some of the others nearby were just parched. It didn’t burn into the bones.

This is another view of the same burning area.

Evidently, they had buried some of them or dug trenches with the bulldozers, and you can’t see the bodies in this one, this photo.

But in this one, it seemed like with the erosion and things, if you’ll notice closely, there’s a leg protruding from the earth there. They didn’t do a good job of covering them.

This is another one of them loading them in the trailers to take them out to the burial grounds. And that’s the only photos I have of that.

Interviewer: Have you shown these photographs to anyone close to you?

Turner: I mailed them home, and my wife had seen them, and we have had lots of photos of -- during the service, but they just got in a shoebox or something over the years, and I had never really shown them. This is the first time I’ve shown them to any people other than my family. And I didn’t show them to my family -- my daughter and son, growing up, but I talked to my daughter several days ago, telling her about this situation, and she said that she knew that thing existed because she’d seen them over the years, but I had never made it a point to display them to them. I didn’t know it was that important.

Interviewer: You showed your wife the photographs?

Turner: Oh, yes.

Interviewer: What was her reaction when she saw them?

Turner: She thought that was very horrible, yes.

Interviewer: After you were in this camp, where did you go from there?

Turner: Well, we continued on down into Austria and wound up in Linz, Austria, and we were there at the time the war ended in Europe. So then they still had the war in the Pacific, so we were on a hold pattern until we could get transportation and go to the Pacific and try that war awhile.

Interviewer: And then what happened?

Turner: Well, we moved back out of Linz into a farm area. You know, we had quarters in a dairy farm. And then we were up in, up in the Alps in -- big lake, a resort-type thing like Lake Murray, Lake Ebensee, with cottages around the mountainside, and we were in a holding pattern there until we got transportation to go to the Pacific, yeah.

Interviewer: Did you go to the Pacific?

Turner: No, no. Fortunately, before we could get turned around, the war ended there, which we were very happy to hear that.

Interviewer: Did you go back to the States?

Turner: Yeah, about a month later, yeah. I had been in for about four years, and I was married, and I think they had some point situation that, if you had children, you may get out early, which I had none, but married may help you a little, so I was able to get out right about four years.

Interviewer: Did you talk -- when you got back, did you talk with anyone about what you saw in the camp?

Turner: No, no. All -- really, all I was -- I was very happy to get back and get back into the civilian life and back with my wife and my coworkers and go back to work, yeah. No, I thought no more about this situation because I figured everybody else was in the shape I was in, so that’s old hat, you know. All the people in the service probably saw this or worse things.

Interviewer: Did the memories of what you saw ever come back to you?

Turner: Yes.

Interviewer: When did they come back to you?

Turner: Well, you see the movies now of the Holocaust or read all these things. I said, “Yeah, it wasn’t real good.” You know, I had first-hand information on a small scale. I certainly wasn’t a liberator, but we came across these things, and it did exist, and we were there first-hand, and that’s one way to find out they really do exist when you have your baby blues on ‘em, you know. It’s not propaganda any longer.

Interviewer: What do you think when you think back to what you saw?

Turner: I just can’t imagine how people can do one another this way, you know. We treated our prisoners well. I had a bunch of photos of our prisoners, but they were -- had good treatment, yes.

Interviewer: Have you since had a chance to talk with the soldiers you were with at the time about what happened?

Turner: No. We talk, but we talked about how good it is not to be there anymore and things, and we mention it, and it wasn’t good, but we don’t make a big deal out of it, no.

Interviewer: Have you had a chance to see the other soldiers again?

Turner: Yeah. My division, the 65th Infantry Division, they have a reunion annually, and I had attended one in San Diego last year. And a few people in Columbia were in the division but not in my outfit, and about a dozen, some in Rock Hill or Charleston, and we had a mini reunion out at the Fort six or eight months ago, about a dozen of us, and they talk about the little things that happened, not particularly this situation, but being shot at while eating in farmhouse, you know. Some sniper shoots through the window and doesn’t hit any of ‘em, you know. Yeah, they had a lot of tales going, but not much about the concentration camps. I don’t know why.

Interviewer: Is there anything that you would like to add that I haven’t asked you yet?

Turner: Not as I know of, no. I -- Rose [phonetic] had called and found that I had some pictures and I had visited this place and wondered if I would come out and let you talk with me.

Interviewer: Is there any message you’d like to leave with the children of South Carolina?

Turner: I would leave this message. Any question in the mind about it happening, I would think that these photographs I have just used this morning -- it’s not like seeing it, but maybe it would let them understand it actually did take place.

Interviewer: Thank you very much, Mr. Turner.

Turner: You think we’re gonna make it?

Interviewer: That’s it.

Turner: No, people, you know, have to live, you know, and --

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Turner: This is just everyday stuff, you know. It’s --

00:26:08