

## THE LIBERATORS OF THE FOURTH ARMORED DIVISION

A brief talk by William Martin, on the occasion of the reunion of the veterans of the  
4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division at the  
Holocaust Museum Houston,  
September 6, 2000

When I was asked to participate in this program this evening, I readily accepted, for the same reason you are here. I wanted to be in the company of men who had been eyewitnesses and early testifiers to one of the most stunning and horrifying episodes in all of human history.

The Nazis did not invent mass murder. Still, these murders, conceived and carried out as they were, were beyond anything human society had experienced. Indeed, they have become the indelible symbol, the benchmark for evil.

I am neither a military historian nor a scholar of the Holocaust. But even though I was only four years old when America entered the war after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, I remember a great deal about the war, and those memories have been reinforced repeatedly by books and movies and the History Channel and personal experiences. Early on, the images captured as allied forces liberated the Nazi concentration camps burned themselves into my young consciousness. Though I lost no one to the systematic, scientific, rational, calculated evil these camps represent, I have spent considerable time contemplating it.

I have seen "Shoah" and "Holocaust" and three versions of the "The Nuremberg Trials" and other movies and television shows; pondered the exhibits here and at the museum in Washington and at Anne Frank's home in Amsterdam; read books by Elie Wiesel and Richard Rubenstein and Robert Abzug and others, and visited Dachau on a day when the blackest of clouds rolled over the buildings that housed the remaining crematoria, the foundations where barracks housing thousands had stood, and the gate with its mocking words, "Arbeit Macht Frei." And I have talked to my students about the philosophical and theological problem the Holocaust poses for those who try to make sense of the universe and human existence.

I was also keenly aware of the men who fought in that war, including an uncle who was on the aircraft carrier Lexington when it was sunk by the Japanese, but who survived; another uncle, who fought with the Marines at Peleliu and elsewhere in the South Pacific; a third who was blown to bits by a German mine on a beach in Belgium; and a beloved older neighbor who landed at Omaha Beach on D-Day and fought in the Battle of the Bulge.

Tom Brokaw has called the men who fought in World War II and those who supported them in the field and at home, "The Greatest Generation." It may be true. It seems almost certainly true that their collective achievement—making the world at least safer for democracy—decisively shaped the course of human history for the rest of the twentieth century, and perhaps for all the future of civilization.

The Allied forces comprised millions of men and women, and thousands of heroes, and by no means were all of them Americans. But the men who will share their remembrances and reflections with us tonight were clearly among the bravest, the toughest, the finest men who fought in the war that kept us free.

#### THE FOURTH ARMORED DIVISION

The Fourth Armored Division landed at Utah and Omaha Beaches on July 11th, 1944, 36 days after D-Day. They were led by Major-General John S. Wood, who announced that, "This division will attack and attack. If the order is ever given to fall back, it will not come from me."

On August 1, 1944, the division was assigned to General George Patton's Third Army. In less than a year of fighting across the breadth of France and Germany and on into Czechoslovakia, often moving with astonishing speed, soldiers of the Fourth Armored Division killed, wounded, or captured more than 110,000 German soldiers, destroyed 847 German tanks and more than 3000 other vehicles. Their own losses were heavy, but amounted to less than one-fifth of those of the enemy's.

A letter from General Eisenhower's headquarters declared that "The Fourth Armored Division is both feared and hated by German front-line troops because of its high combat efficiency. Some American POWs who could speak and understand German were told by enemy soldiers and officers that the Fourth Armored Division has gained a reputation amongst the Wehrmacht of being a crack armored unit dangerous to oppose."

At one point, General Patton told the commanders of the various combat groups from the Fourth Armored, "The accomplishments of this division have never been equaled. And by that statement I do not mean in this war. I mean in the entire history of warfare. There has never been such a superb fighting organization as the Fourth Armored Division....The record of [the] fortitude, audacity and valor...of this incomparable group of Americans...will endure as long as history lasts."

In June 1945, the division was presented the Distinguished Unit Citation by order of the President. This was only the second entire division in U.S. military history to receive the presidential citation.

Bear in mind that these were not, for the most part, career military men. They were young men, many of them mere boys who, just a few months before, had been working on farms or in factories or at service stations or drugstores or sitting in a classroom. By the time of the events we remember tonight, they were battle-hardened warriors, but nothing could have prepared them for what they encountered in April 1945.

#### OHRDRUF AND BUCHENWALD

By early April, the defeat of the Germans was assured. Their cities and factories had been flattened. At front after front, their lines had been broken, their troops routed, and reports of mass surrender were becoming common. As the Allies advanced through the eastern reaches of Germany, near Weimar, they began to

encounter “cadaverous refugees” along the road. They were, one recalled, “like none we had ever seen; skeletal, with feverish sunken eyes, shaven skulls.” Then, on April 4th, members of the Fourth Armored overran Ohrdruf-Nord, one of 136 *Aussenkommandos*, or sub-camps, of the central camp at Buchenwald. Inside this relatively small labor camp, they found a group of corpses, each with a bullet hole through the back of the skull. A survivor led the Americans to a shed stacked high with stiff corpses. Elsewhere, bodies were stacked in the open or littered aimlessly. The day before, 3,000 Jews had been killed, their bodies put into a shallow trench.

A week later, members of the Fourth and Sixth Armored Divisions came upon Buchenwald, where Elie Wiesel was imprisoned, and which had the reputation as being the worst camp in Germany.

### THE GENERALS VISIT AND REPORT

As reports of these scenes got back to General Eisenhower, a high-ranking aide, Lewis Weinstein, persuaded him to visit Ohrdruf. “General,” Weinstein told him, “The world must know [of these] atrocities; if General Eisenhower and others like him are there on the scene and can relate exactly what happened, that will make a great deal of difference.”

On April 12, the same day President Roosevelt died, Generals Eisenhower, Patton, and Omar Bradley visited Ohrdruf. Bradley: “The smell of death overwhelmed us even before we passed through the stockade.” Patton was so shaken that he slipped behind a barracks to vomit and refused to enter some buildings.

Bradley and Eisenhower took the full tour. Visibly shaken and seething with anger, Ike ordered all soldiers in the area who were not in combat to see the camp. “We are told that the American soldier does not know what he is fighting for,” he said. “Now, at least, he will know what he is fighting *against*.”

He also ordered the mayor of Weimar, near Buchenwald, to select 1000 inhabitants of the city to view the camp and the hospital attached to it before it could be altered. They were to include large numbers of men and women from 18 to 45, from a range of social classes, and particularly those who belonged to the Nazi party.

Writing Washington about his visit, Eisenhower said, “I made the visit deliberately, in order to be in a position to give a firsthand evidence of these things if ever, in the future, there develops a tendency to charge these allegations merely to “Propaganda.” The things I saw beggar description....I can state unequivocally that all written statements up to now do not paint the full horrors.”

Soon, discoveries of small and larger camps became a daily occurrence. Mauthausen, where Simon Wiesenthal fainted in the arms of the liberators. Bergen-Belsen (British), where Anne Frank had died. Dachau, the first of the major camps, in operation since 1933. Nordhausen, and others.

Ironically, these German camps were not the primary scenes of mass, systematic extermination. Those were mostly in Poland--Auschwitz, Treblinka, Majdanek, Belzec, Chelmno, and Sobibor--hidden away from the world’s view.

Partly to meet Germany's need for increased war production and partly to cover the existence of the death camps, hundreds of thousands of Jews were sent to Germany and dumped into what had been slave labor camps populated heavily by political enemies of the Reich. And at least some effort was made to sanitize the death camps, to minimize what had gone on there. When the Russian Army discovered one after another from mid-1944 to January 1945, their reports were met with limited interest and, too often, disbelief.

Thousands died on the trips west. Thousands more perished of starvation, epidemic disease, and slaughter in the overcrowded camps, creating the apocalyptic scenes discovered by allied troops in the spring of 1945. These scenes would not be ignored or forgotten.

At Eisenhower's urging, members of Parliament, Congress, and the French Chamber of Deputies, and numerous representatives of the world's leading media came to see and to serve as unimpeachable witnesses to the atrocities.

Even for those who had believed the reports, the grim pictures portrayed an evil far beyond what they had been capable of imagining. Margaret Bourke-White, after photographing Buchenwald, wrote to her editor at *Life*: "The sites I had just seen are so unbelievable that I don't think I'll believe them myself until I've seen the photographs."

Even today, 55 years later, the pictures, the letters, the stories held up to us in books and movies and television programs and in precious museums like this one still haunt us, still challenge our comprehension. These, we trust, will always survive in some form, to remind future generations of the depths to which "the vicious heart" can plunge.

But for a little time more—a long time, one hopes, but clearly a time with an end—we have the opportunity and privilege, as unsettling as it may be, to hear on occasions like this and others arranged by this museum and like-minded organizations, the accounts of those who were actually there. Sometimes it is the liberated. Less often, but occasionally, the captors. Tonight, we hear from the liberators—men who not only brought freedom to the captives but were the first American eyewitnesses to the consummate evil we know as the Holocaust.

Gentlemen, though we cannot put ourselves in your place or your minds, in 1945 or in this new century, everyone in this room understands and sincerely values what you have done for oppressed and enslaved people, for your country, for the free world, and indeed for the world that is not free but yearns for the kind of freedom you helped make possible. It is a privilege to be in your company.

In preparing this speech, I drew on a variety of sources. Material regarding the Fourth Armored Division is drawn primarily from a typescript copy of *The History of the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division*. Materials relating to the camps and their liberation are from Jon Bridgman, *The End of the Holocaust: The Liberation of the Camps* Brewster Chamberlain and Marcia Feldman (eds.), *The Liberation of the Nazi Concentration Camps 1945: Eyewitness Accounts of the Liberators* (Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Council, 1987); Robert H. Abzug, *Americans and the Liberation of Nazi Concentration Camps: Inside the Vicious Heart* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); and a chapter by Abzug in *Liberation 1945* (USHM Council, 1995). The quotations are all from these sources. In some cases, particularly the quotations from Bradley and Eisenhower, different sources reported slightly varying versions of what appeared to be the same statement. I have used ellipses and brackets to indicate a melding of versions to achieve the most felicitous rendering. The reference to “cadaverous refugees” is from Abzug, p. 21; the phrase, “the vicious heart,” is taken from the subtitle of his book. The quotation from Lewis Weinstein is from *The Liberation of the Nazi Concentration Camps 1945*, p. 76.

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