

JAMES R. “Jim” JOHNSON’S MEMORY OF THE LIBERATION OF DACHAU By Jim Johnson



I am James R. (Jim) Johnson. I grew up in Norwood, Ohio. From the time of the 8th grade I wanted to be an engineer. When Japan bombed Pearl Harbor I was in my second year at Ohio State University and in ROTC. We enlisted in June 1942 and were told that we would be sent in time to OCS. Most of us assumed that would be shortly. Through a series of Army decisions many of us did not get to OCS until 1944. I was later told that in all the branches there were 60,000 ROTC folks waiting in line. I don't know how many Engineers were part of this delay. When I graduated from OCS I was first sent to a division that would have gone to Japan but never did. I was sent to Europe. I requested the Rainbow Division on my arrival in Europe just before the war there ended. It was a great choice.

I was traveling to my newly assigned division, the 42nd Rainbow, when the war ended. The division was headed for Munich and I joined them at Dachau. A week before that time the division had come across this infamous place, Hitler's first Konzentrationslager (1933). Its original purpose was to be a slave labor camp and as it grew it became an operation involving as many as several hundred satellite work camps scattered throughout southern Germany and Austria. (See [Dachau 29 April 1945 The Rainbow Liberation Memoirs](#), edited by Sam Dann, Texas Tech University Press, 1998). These camps were places where Hitler's captives were worked to death or near-death after which they were sent back to the main camp for their “final solution”. Death came in many horrible ways at Dachau.

As our division moved post-war to Salzburg over a period of a couple of months, we came across a few of the satellite camps and provided whatever help we could give. In effect we were their liberators. Few if any of us knew at that time the overall concentration camp picture. I was in the 142nd Engineer Battalion., Company A. It was the infantry that liberated the main camp and knew of the horrors there. We engineers learned of this segment of the Holocaust at those places.

One camp in particular remains in my memory. It was larger and had prisoners from all over Europe. It came as a shock to me, a young American, to find so many people who seemed to hate each other. They had in common that they were all victims of Hitler but they sorted themselves by nationality and mayhem often seemed to reign. A major need in this camp showed itself immediately. Their latrine (a 16-holer) was sickening even to approach. The holes were filled to the top. No one used this facility. I ordered a bulldozer to dig a channel and push it into the ground for burial. In a couple of days we had a brand new latrine built mostly by the displaced persons, “DP's”, with our help. To my dismay on the very first day some were doing their toilet on the outside walls and a space next to this brand new building.

Food was difficult to find and this did not help the situation. It was hard to understand the ways of people who had been so dehumanized by Hitler's SS. This

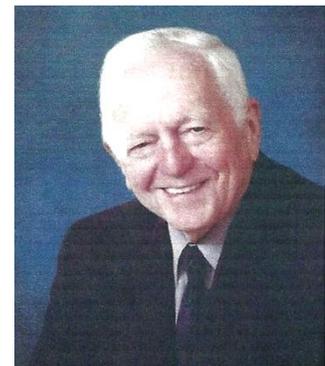
realization grew as we moved on and saw still more evidence of the Holocaust. Even a few weeks after we settled in Salzburg we found a small camp where the victims for the most part had been leaders in their communities. I gathered that they were considered dangerous by the Nazis for their possible influence in their home areas and thus were imprisoned. This camp seemed more settled but they had a huge problem with lice. Our platoon sergeant devised a "shower" that dusted on powdered insecticide as they walked through and pulled a string. They celebrated their freedom from lice by opening a secreted jar of black mushrooms.

I have often wondered what their future held. Did they finally get back to their homes? Or did their homes and villages even exist postwar. It was an awful time for these survivors.

I have been asked about encounters with Jewish prisoners. Like many of us then I was not aware of the terrible Holocaust and was not sensitive to the issue. I became aware later but in my encounters with the "DP's" in the satellite camps I was more taken with the broad range of nationalities in the camps and the division among them seemed to be of nationalities rather than religious differences. I noted that by far the most people among those I ran across were of Polish origin. A humorous story in that regard was of a Polish DP we had picked up as we traveled toward Salzburg. He was doing KP duty for us and dressed in a soldier uniform. He had wandered out onto a local road one day as General Collins' vehicle approached. Our DP had been trained to salute. The General's vehicle stopped and backed up to the DP. General Collins said to him, "That was the finest Rainbow salute I have ever been given, soldier!" Our DP had also been trained a bit in English: "No spik English." I, of course, do not know the truth of this since it was told to me by one of our Rainbow soldiers who may have heard it from yet another. General Collins was known to be adamant about the special Rainbow salute and it had to be right!

My belief is that the important matter is the plight of the people who were enslaved by Hitler, their dehumanization, and the role of those who first found them at the end of the war. We ordinary soldiers were shocked and did what we could to help but that was with very limited resources. Most of us then went on to other duties and know little of what happened to those folks. Their lives, as Europe recovered over the next decade or so, may likewise be a set of individual stories yet to be told.

In late 1946 I returned home and have had a wonderful life with my dearest wife of sixty-nine years, our six children, thirteen grandchildren and now seven greats. Most of my career has been as engineer, scientist, inventor and educator. I must have done something worthwhile. In 1972, I was elected to the National Academy of Engineering. It has been a busy life and I'm still paying social security taxes at 91.



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