

1

00:00:26,238 --> 00:00:34,480

[FRYDMAN] This is November 1994, and we're in Dayton, Ohio, and we are speaking to a liberator

2

00:00:34,480 --> 00:00:42,160

of one of the concentration camps from World War II, during the holocaust, and next spring will be

3

00:00:42,160 --> 00:00:49,680

the 50th anniversary of that liberation and we are listening to the testimony of someone who

4

00:00:49,680 --> 00:00:59,760

was there. Mr. Donald Key, Union City, Indiana.

[Key] Yes, my name is Donald Key, pronounced just

5

00:00:59,760 --> 00:01:05,600

like it's spelled—K-E-Y, Key. Been mispronounced in many ways, you wouldn't believe that

6

00:01:06,240 --> 00:01:12,880

people could mess it up quite like that. I was born in Union City of Ohio,

7

00:01:14,080 --> 00:01:19,760

and under a year old, I was moved to Union City, Indiana with my parents and I've been

8

00:01:19,760 --> 00:01:26,560

a lifelong resident of Union City, Indiana.

[FRYDMAN] At what point did you go into the army?

9

00:01:26,560 --> 00:01:37,360

[KEY] I went into the army in 1942. It was recommended that—almost uh demanded— that upon

10

00:01:37,360 --> 00:01:42,080

graduation from high school you'd go right down to the draft board and register for the draft.

11

00:01:43,520 --> 00:01:53,040

I graduated in June 1942, married my childhood sweetheart, Dakota, in July of 1942,

12

00:01:53,040 --> 00:01:58,480

and was drafted in the military service in

December, that same year. It was a year.

13

00:01:58,480 --> 00:02:02,800

[FRYDMAN] And then then, you
were in in what unit and—

14

00:02:04,160 --> 00:02:07,840

and you went to where to for your basic training?

[KEY] I was drafted into

15

00:02:09,440 --> 00:02:17,920

the Third Army—no, the First Army. I was drafted
into the First Army originally, and took our basic

16

00:02:17,920 --> 00:02:27,200

training in [unintelligible], Georgia, and Camp
Sutton, North Carolina—North Carolina in uh 1943,

17

00:02:28,160 --> 00:02:30,000

under the Second Army.

[FRYDMAN] And that's

18

00:02:30,000 --> 00:02:34,720

when you had this uniform that—

[KEY] No, the uniform wasn't issued

19

00:02:34,720 --> 00:02:41,280

until later— until later in 1943, before we
were shipped overseas. [FRYDMAN] I see. [KEY]

20

00:02:41,280 --> 00:02:44,480

We were in a training uniform up until that time

21

00:02:45,360 --> 00:02:52,800

and the training farm— and training uniform was
not the overseas uniform and the training uniform

22

00:02:52,800 --> 00:02:58,480

was— had the Second Army patch on it. [FRDYMAN]
I think. [KEY] And we were transferred into the

23

00:02:59,040 --> 00:03:04,560

Third Army unit and we sent overseas. Still in
the Second Army, but we were transferred from

24

00:03:06,240 --> 00:03:12,000

the Second Army into the George Patton's Third Army while we were in advanced training in

25

00:03:12,000 --> 00:03:16,240

England. [FRYDMAN] I see. You went into advanced training in England and, then, where did you go

26

00:03:16,240 --> 00:03:22,560

from there? [KEY] We had our ranger training there in the southern part of England, in a

27

00:03:22,560 --> 00:03:29,120

little community called Hereford, where we were trained for the assault troops on the French

28

00:03:29,120 --> 00:03:36,720

coast and we went into the French coast with the assault troops landing at Utah Beach on the

29

00:03:36,720 --> 00:03:42,080

Normandy peninsula [FRYDMAN] So, you were part of that invasion? [KEY] We were part of the invasion

30

00:03:42,080 --> 00:03:49,200

force, yes. [FRYDMAN] Um, as you moved across Europe, had you heard anything about concentration

31

00:03:49,200 --> 00:03:56,640

camps? [KEY] No, we were aware that there were various camps—DP (Displaced Persons) camps, also

32

00:03:56,640 --> 00:04:03,680

Prisoner of War camps, but uh the concentration camps—or what we call death camps—

33

00:04:04,240 --> 00:04:09,440

were a complete secret. We had no idea until the day that we walked into their gates. [FRYDMAN]

34

00:04:09,440 --> 00:04:15,440

And when was that, that you came upon that—

[KEY] That was in the spring of uh '45.

35

00:04:18,560 --> 00:04:19,440

Previous to that,

36

00:04:21,760 --> 00:04:29,280

going across the country of France, with
George Hitch Patton's armored columns,

37

00:04:29,920 --> 00:04:34,320

it was leapfrogging just almost continually
all the way. Very slow, at first, through the

38

00:04:36,560 --> 00:04:42,240

small fields and the hedgerow country,
but then as we went across France we

39

00:04:43,440 --> 00:04:50,320

were leapfrogging in with the— behind the uh um
armored columns, as the armored columns would

40

00:04:50,960 --> 00:04:56,720

obtain their objectives and several service troops
to the rear were moved up into those groups.

41

00:04:58,240 --> 00:05:07,360

And we were in Nancy, France, preparing to
cross the Rhine River there and get into the

42

00:05:07,360 --> 00:05:15,120

German countryside, when the Germans pulled their counter-offensive up into the Belgium area and we

43

00:05:15,120 --> 00:05:22,000

were transferred up to the Bastogne area for the relief of the troops that were surrounded there

44

00:05:22,000 --> 00:05:28,720

in the Bastogne area and after that conflict, then we went right down the Rhine River

45

00:05:31,440 --> 00:05:34,720

with the crossing at Remagen Bridge

46

00:05:35,680 --> 00:05:42,000

and then on South, along the Rhine River, to the West Baden, Frankfurt area, and

47

00:05:43,120 --> 00:05:47,680

still following George Patton's armored columns and their assault where they would

48

00:05:49,760 --> 00:05:58,560

surround large amounts of land and large amounts
of German troops and, as they were surrounded,

49

00:05:58,560 --> 00:06:08,480

then the German troops are entered in very large
numbers. Sometimes brigade and lots of uh— several

50

00:06:08,480 --> 00:06:15,760

hundred— and sometimes even thousands— and, in
one place, the whole army had been surrounded

51

00:06:15,760 --> 00:06:22,960

and uh surrendered. [FRYDMAN] So as you were
moving, suddenly you happened upon this place

52

00:06:22,960 --> 00:06:30,000

called Buchenwald? [KEY] Yes, I was a messenger in
the Third Army service and was on the road almost

53

00:06:30,000 --> 00:06:36,880

continually, from our army headquarters, to our
group headquarters, and our core headquarters,

54

00:06:36,880 --> 00:06:41,680

and back to my own company. [FRYDMAN] So,
you moved ahead a little bit of your troops?

55

00:06:41,680 --> 00:06:48,880

[KEY] Yes. Very seldom into the forward armored
column troop, but once in a while into the armored

56

00:06:48,880 --> 00:06:56,160

column troops. Pretty much knew what was coming
and what was going, but still the order was sealed

57

00:06:56,960 --> 00:07:03,760

and I had no inkling of ever coming across these
camps. I think the first camp that we saw was a

58

00:07:05,280 --> 00:07:13,680

Prisoner of War camp, where a bunch of American
and British airmen had been interned and, of

59

00:07:13,680 --> 00:07:19,840

course, they were in much better shape than what

the— we found the political prisoners, and the

60

00:07:21,760 --> 00:07:29,040

other DPs, and prisoners of the Germans in these
death camps. I believe the death camps are sent

61

00:07:29,040 --> 00:07:35,200

there— or were established just for that reason.
Just caused death— [FRYDMAN] Right. [KEY] —Large

62

00:07:35,200 --> 00:07:41,520

groups. [FRYDMAN] So, so, tell us what—
what happened when you came into Buchenwald.

63

00:07:41,520 --> 00:07:48,000

[KEY] Well, this particular morning was after
another one of uh George Patton's forward assault

64

00:07:48,000 --> 00:07:54,880

groups. Their objective had been reached on the
far side of the camp and as we were ordered to

65

00:07:54,880 --> 00:08:02,480

move forward, there was this camp and uh the big
wooden gates and uh— [FRYDMAN] Do you remember the

66

00:08:02,480 --> 00:08:08,000

date? [KEY] No, I don't. [FRYDMAN] Approximately?

It was— [KEY] It was— it was in the spring that

67

00:08:08,000 --> 00:08:13,520

year. Still cold and we wondered just why those
people didn't freeze to death, because we were

68

00:08:14,320 --> 00:08:23,280

clad in our heavy jackets yet and winter had just
was over and it was cold, but still these people

69

00:08:24,320 --> 00:08:27,840

had very little clothing— if any at
all— and most of them were barefooted,

70

00:08:28,480 --> 00:08:34,080

but still they...Some of them were still
hanging onto life. [FRYDMAN] When you walked in,

71

00:08:34,080 --> 00:08:42,320

what did you see? [KEY] We were warned at the gate by combat MPs, that had been following the

72

00:08:43,280 --> 00:08:47,440

main assault troops, that it was not a pretty sight

73

00:08:48,720 --> 00:08:53,280

and that was just putting them mildly [FRDYMAN] Right. [KEY] But they said "do not take any food

74

00:08:53,280 --> 00:09:01,280

in and do not take any weapons, except sidearms," and so these were all kept on outside the gate.

75

00:09:02,800 --> 00:09:09,120

Myself, I had a sidearm and I— I wore it into the compound,

76

00:09:10,160 --> 00:09:18,800

but they were afraid that the sight of military men in full armor and full arms

77

00:09:20,720 --> 00:09:27,920

might uh cause some bad feelings and some— even
trouble— [FRYDMAN] Sure. [KEY] —within the camp.

78

00:09:29,680 --> 00:09:35,040

So, we were warned and uh also warned not to
give them any food at all because these people

79

00:09:35,040 --> 00:09:39,200

had starved and their bodies just wouldn't
take— [FRYDMAN] They would get very very

80

00:09:39,200 --> 00:09:44,320

sick as they ate— [KEY] Yes, and most of us
always carried a bar of candy or two for the

81

00:09:45,200 --> 00:09:51,360

French children and German children as we'd
come by them, and Americans are soft that way,

82

00:09:51,360 --> 00:10:00,480

they're very sentimental people, and it was really
all we could take when we got into the camp to see

83

00:10:00,480 --> 00:10:06,480

what it was and— [FRYDMAN] You have pictures you
took— [KEY] Yes, we— I— I had a two dollar box

84

00:10:06,480 --> 00:10:12,720

camera that had been a graduation present,
just a few months before, and somehow I was

85

00:10:12,720 --> 00:10:18,480

still able to keep that, and, I think at the time
maybe, I still had a half a roll of film or I'd

86

00:10:18,480 --> 00:10:24,160

have probably taken every picture that I could
possibly take, but I took a few pictures that

87

00:10:25,440 --> 00:10:31,840

I thought, well it'd be something I'd show the
folks at home, when I got back, because they had

88

00:10:32,880 --> 00:10:43,120

no idea just what they were sending us into, and

it was bad enough to see death on the battlefield,

89

00:10:43,120 --> 00:10:50,640

even when the enemy was shooting at us, but to go and see death on this grand scale, it was

90

00:10:52,880 --> 00:11:02,240

just a terrible thing. And terrible is a mild word. [FRYDMAN] Were you there for hours or for

91

00:11:02,240 --> 00:11:07,840

long— [KEY] Just hours. [FRYDMAN] Hours. [KEY] Our unit was continually on the move to back up

92

00:11:07,840 --> 00:11:13,360

the troops— the assault troops that were ahead of us, the armored columns and the mechanized

93

00:11:13,360 --> 00:11:21,040

infantry columns that had gone ahead. [FRDYMAN] You saw piled bodies or live people? Were there

94

00:11:21,040 --> 00:11:29,040

men women or children? Do you remember? [KEY] The
bodies we saw were dead people, dead and dying.

95

00:11:32,080 --> 00:11:34,240

The bodies were stripped.

96

00:11:36,320 --> 00:11:38,240

Yes, that's the camp main entrance

97

00:11:40,160 --> 00:11:48,400

and I took those pictures. Uh this wagon load of
bodies, here, is at the crematorium— or the uh

98

00:11:48,960 --> 00:11:57,440

furnaces where the uh bodies were burn— uh were
burnt and destroyed and some of these bodies,

99

00:11:57,440 --> 00:12:04,800

even on this wagon, um are possibly still
alive, because the body just no longer moves

100

00:12:06,080 --> 00:12:10,960

outwardly and in appearance they were

still loaded on this by other prisoners.

101

00:12:13,040 --> 00:12:15,920

And this is the outside of
the crematorium picture.

102

00:12:20,800 --> 00:12:24,080

This picture is of another
wagon, just about like it, was my

103

00:12:25,200 --> 00:12:29,040

commanding officer and his platoon
leaders in the background, there,

104

00:12:29,760 --> 00:12:37,840

and the uh, our staff sergeant uh with his
back towards you there and with the clipboard.

105

00:12:42,000 --> 00:12:44,000

This picture is another group of

106

00:12:46,240 --> 00:12:48,640

prisoners that were the burial detail,

107

00:12:49,600 --> 00:12:55,360

at getting some of the streets cleaned up. Now
this was probably the last picture that I took

108

00:12:55,360 --> 00:13:03,120

at this camp because um up until this time—
this late [unintelligible] of this first day

109

00:13:04,080 --> 00:13:11,280

the uh— everybody was just standing around
, either for payment for or their uh

110

00:13:12,440 --> 00:13:17,600

[FRYDMAN] Were there still German
guards or I mean— [both speaking]

111

00:13:17,600 --> 00:13:23,760

Just the prisoners. [KEY] They had escaped
out the back, as— as I was told by one of

112

00:13:23,760 --> 00:13:29,840

the prisoners that I had talked to, that they

had escaped when the Americans approached the

113

00:13:29,840 --> 00:13:33,840

gate. [FRYDMAN] Sure. [KEY] So, they went out the back gate a lot faster than we went in the front.

114

00:13:38,160 --> 00:13:41,840

But this— this barrel detail went into effect after we left.

115

00:13:43,440 --> 00:13:48,480

This is another picture of another wagon there at the crematorium.

116

00:13:52,760 --> 00:13:53,760

[FRYDMAN]

117

00:13:53,760 --> 00:13:59,440

It must have been very difficult for you, as a young man, to view things like that and

118

00:13:59,440 --> 00:14:07,760

imagine— [KEY] It certainly was. It was— it was a

hard thing for us to even still stomach because uh

119

00:14:09,120 --> 00:14:15,440

the uh filth and the scurfy and the
dysentery and the open sores and,

120

00:14:17,280 --> 00:14:24,240

I have heard, that there even had been some
cannibalism in this camp, but uh I never had

121

00:14:24,240 --> 00:14:30,160

anybody to uh admit it or say that they saw
any cannibalism. [FRYDMAN] But it wouldn't

122

00:14:30,160 --> 00:14:35,040

be hard to imagine that anything happened in
a place that was that horrible. [KEY] Well,

123

00:14:35,040 --> 00:14:40,880

that's right. Uh some of the prisoners— here
you see prisoners that look like they're

124

00:14:42,400 --> 00:14:47,600

able-bodied man, but their payment
for doing these duties that they're

125

00:14:47,600 --> 00:14:54,560

doing was just a crust of bread and uh
it was bribery. The uh— A man would do

126

00:14:54,560 --> 00:14:58,400

anything for crust of bread if he's starving to
death. [FRYDMAN] Stay alive for a short time.

127

00:15:00,520 --> 00:15:06,800

[KEY] This camp is also one of the
camps that was famous for a lot of

128

00:15:08,640 --> 00:15:15,680

experimentation on human bodies and one of the
pictures that I tried to get, that I didn't get,

129

00:15:16,640 --> 00:15:26,800

was a picture of uh— that was taken of lampshades
and paraphernalia that was built because

130

00:15:26,800 --> 00:15:34,960

a woman, possibly a wife of one of the
commandants, had taken an interest in tattoos

131

00:15:35,840 --> 00:15:41,920

and bodies were even murdered for a tattoo that
might be on the person's back or on his arm

132

00:15:42,880 --> 00:15:50,000

and displayed as lampshades or
novelty items. But that picture uh,

133

00:15:50,880 --> 00:15:57,120

I must have run out of film before I got that. It
was hard for troops, moving forward continually,

134

00:15:57,760 --> 00:16:04,320

to even get their picture developed after we got
them. But these pictures were developed in a small

135

00:16:05,280 --> 00:16:10,480

community in Paul village, there
in Germany, and the German that

136

00:16:12,160 --> 00:16:19,040

developed pictures for me said he had no idea that
such a thing was going on. [FRYDMAN] When you came

137

00:16:19,040 --> 00:16:25,440

home did you talk about what had happened or did
you take it inside? [KEY] Like most veterans, I

138

00:16:27,680 --> 00:16:35,840

left that part of my life— just fade away.
I woke up to nightmares several times,

139

00:16:37,200 --> 00:16:44,560

my wife would uh get me up and we'd walk around a
little bit and maybe drink a cup of coffee or cup

140

00:16:44,560 --> 00:16:53,280

of hot chocolate or something and it was bad.
The trips through the barracks themselves were

141

00:16:55,760 --> 00:16:59,440

something that we were asked to
do but we were not told to do it

142

00:17:00,240 --> 00:17:06,720

and one of the barracks we walked
through, possibly a hundred feet long,

143

00:17:09,120 --> 00:17:15,840

uh 60 or 70 feet wide, contained
hundreds and hundreds of bunks—

144

00:17:17,200 --> 00:17:25,520

some four high in the room some, five high in
the room, and with uh live and dead bodies just

145

00:17:25,520 --> 00:17:31,120

side by side, just as close as they could be
stacked in there, without any blankets uh— some

146

00:17:31,120 --> 00:17:37,200

with an extra coat, some without a coat, some
with no clothes at all because they had already

147

00:17:37,200 --> 00:17:42,960

died and they were stripped of their clothing

by other prisoners trying to keep warm. And

148

00:17:42,960 --> 00:17:50,640

as I walked through the aisle between the uh
bunks, there's a man who said "hello" and uh

149

00:17:53,120 --> 00:18:02,400

I was quite surprised to hear a prisoner speaking
the German language so plain and I said "hello"

150

00:18:03,680 --> 00:18:13,680

and he says "so nice to see you" and I said
"you speak beautiful English and very plain"

151

00:18:13,680 --> 00:18:19,440

and he said "yes, I speak seven languages."
He was a German professor that had spoken

152

00:18:19,440 --> 00:18:28,320

out against the uh— in school and he was a German
nationalist, but, still, he was a Prisoner of War,

153

00:18:28,320 --> 00:18:33,680

because he was in there suffering the same
fate that the others in the death camp had

154

00:18:33,680 --> 00:18:41,840

come to suffer, just because he had spoken
out. And I lo-lost touch with this man,

155

00:18:41,840 --> 00:18:46,880

wish I would've got his name and wish I would
have kept a relationship with him, but I didn't.

156

00:18:49,360 --> 00:18:56,480

He was an older man than I was myself—
I was just turned 22 years old and

157

00:18:58,560 --> 00:18:59,920

he was possibly in his

158

00:19:02,560 --> 00:19:12,480

late 20s, early 30s, but still looked like a
man of uh 50 or 60 or, maybe even, 70 because

159

00:19:13,360 --> 00:19:19,040

the teeth was rotten and he had
just been put out of a way and

160

00:19:19,600 --> 00:19:25,720

forgotten and sooner or later he would have been
eliminated along with the rest of them. [FRYDMAN]

161

00:19:26,560 --> 00:19:33,600

Has— has this experience that, after you got
home, has it affected your life? [KEY] Oh,

162

00:19:33,600 --> 00:19:40,400

yes, yes. I have a daughter that is a
Hebrew student. She lives here in Dayton

163

00:19:42,560 --> 00:19:46,640

and uh she's been back to home— homeland uh—

164

00:19:48,960 --> 00:19:58,960

the third time plans to go again in 1995 and we
subscribed to several Jewish publications because

165

00:20:00,640 --> 00:20:06,160

they are people that we've fallen in
love with. Great people. [FRYDMAN] Well,

166

00:20:06,160 --> 00:20:13,440

you're obviously a humanitarian and we— we in
this country owe you a debt of gratitude and

167

00:20:14,240 --> 00:20:18,800

we know it's difficult for you to recall
these times, but for the sake of history

168

00:20:19,520 --> 00:20:33,840

we have to. [KWY] Let this never happened again.

[FRYDMAN] Thank you, Mr. Key. [KEY] My pleasure.