

NAME: MIGUEL MONTESINOS

INTERVIEWER: ELIZABETH JACOBS

CAMP: DACHAU

DATE: JANUARY 24, 1980

Q: The thing that we need for the record is if you will state your full name, please.

A: My full name is Miguel Jose Montesinos.

Q: And your address.?

A: 4155 Leslie Drive, College Park, Georgia.

Q: Date of birth?

A: February 6, 1915.

Q: And your age at the time of liberation?

A: I was about 28, 29, I guess.

Q: Your prospective profession at the beginning of the war?

A: My prospective profession was Army officer. That's what I intended to do.

Q: Your present occupation?

A: My present occupation is an administrator with a school of medicine.

Q: Military unit you were with?

A: T Force working out of 7th Army, which was an Intelligence Assault Force.

Q: Your rank at the time of liberation?

A: I was a Major.

Q: And which camps did you go to?

A: Just Dachau. It's the only one.

Q: How did you first hear about the camps? You said you were in an Intelligence unit.

A: We were not even briefed on Dachau at all. Our main objective was Munich. And we were moving toward Munich when we ran into Dachau. We didn't even know the camp was there.

Q: And you had not heard any other...?

A: Nothing. Actually, troops in the line are very ill informed about what's going on. People at home read more in the newspapers than troops in the line do, so you would not know what was going on up there.

Q: Do you remember your specific date of arrival at the camp ?

A: It was the 29th of April, 1945.

Q: And do you remember what time of day, by any chance?

A: We got into Dachau in the early morning hours, around 5 o'clock in the morning. We heard that this camp was there, a concentration camp is all we knew.

Q: There was another unit there already?

A: There were other people already there. There were other units moving up, and I don't know who all was in there. We were working at that time with one of the elements of the 45th Division, so we sent people down there just to see what was there, and I went down too. What we found was just utter chaos, because no one had been assigned to liberate Dachau, per se. We just bumped into it.

Q: Can you give me a description of the camp as you remember it? You said it was chaos. Any sights, or sounds, or smells?

A: No, I came up on the main gate, the gate that says "Arbeit macht Frei" on it. And I ran into three Dutchmen coming out, and they were in their pajama uniforms, the striped uniforms, and they stopped me and indicated that they would like to have something to eat. Of course, we were ill-prepared to feed any of them, because we were not carrying any rations at all, but we told them that we couldn't possibly feed them because it would make them sick. They were just emaciated. And so we talked to them for awhile and asked what was in the camp, and they told us there were Poles, Dutchmen, Frenchmen, Germans, and even some Danes that were in there. Of course, I never saw any of the Danes, but most of the people we saw were actually Dutchmen. We weren't in there too long, and then we ran up on one of those S.S. guards there and they showed like they wanted to make a fight, but they got the worst of that.

Q: Can you give us a walking tour of the camp ?

A: Well, we started in and then came down along the canal there, where the dog runs were, and by that time all the inmates were coming up toward where we were. They were interested in getting out. All they wanted to do was to get out and go home. And a lot of them did get out.

Q: They were just walking through the gates at that point?

A: Yes, that's right. The gates were wide open then, and a lot of them were confused. They didn't know what to do. Some of them couldn't walk and they were looking for direction, but there was no direction we could give them at all. Our job was to move on. We had to get ourselves together and move, but we talked to as many people as we could to find out what we could do for them. All we did was notify our Headquarters of what we found because we were not really set up to do anything at all. Of course, we contacted Bill Quinn. You see his name in the book [referring to the book Dachau], Colonel Quinn of the 7th Army, and they had, of course, already heard and they had C I C Detachments coming up. So we just pulled out of it.

Q: To your knowledge, did other units come up and help?

A: Oh yes. They came. As a matter of fact, they were moving in as we were moving out the next morning, and we pulled on out toward Augsburg and then on to

Munich. We got into Munich on the 2nd of May, and the war ended on, I think it was, the 8th.

Q: What else did you see in the camp after you had gone there?

A: We made a fast tour to see what we could see, and I took those pictures that you see there [referring to pictures of Dachau taken by Mr. Montesinos and donated to Project], and outside of that there wasn't anything else to see except, well, I don't know how you would say it. You don't know what it's like until you have been there and smelled it. And it's something you'll never ever forget. Those of us that went in were not disposed to taking any prisoners from then on out. This is the way everybody felt, so there's not much you can really say.

Q: I know that some of this stuff is painful to remember. Do you remember anything about the general layout of the camp?

A: No, because we didn't reconnoiter the whole camp. We went down in where the ovens were and some of the gas chambers were, and those were set up like shower units. They'd march people in and gas them and then haul the bodies out. You could see the bodies were piled up in rooms.

Q: Did the inmates show you this?

A: Yes, they were making sure that we saw everything. Of course it was hard to communicate because none of us really were German-speakers, or even speaking Dutch or anything like that. But a lot of them did speak English and very well. And

they, of course, were happy to see us and it meant the end for them. The end of this business anyway. I really don't know what happened after we left, because we just broke off completely from them.

Q: You have a picture of the S.S. guards. What did you find out about that incident, about what happened to them?

A: The main body of the administrative people of that camp had pulled out. And as soon as the German forces in that area had pulled back, they pulled out at the same time. The only guards that were left were a few of the Waffen S.S., and those who put up a fight were killed.

Q: By the inmates?

A: No, by us.

Q: By the Americans. Was there any actual combat going on while you were there?

A: No, there was just these isolated instances of the guards getting killed, because there were no big units there at all. Our own forces were no big units at all. It was just small reconnaissance units, that sort of thing. We were just moving up.

Q: There weren't any organizations like from the United Nations or any health organizations there?

A: No, if they came, they had to have come a lot later. The United Nations wasn't even in existence.

Q: That's true.

A: The International Red Cross and those people wouldn't have come for weeks after that, because there was no way to get them up there. Transportation just wasn't there.

Q: So they were allowed to go free in some way. How did your fellow soldiers react to them? Were you mainly with officers?

A: Well, my outfit was 285 officers and men, and everybody was horrified at what they saw. Unspeakable brutality is what they were looking at. They just couldn't believe it, but there it is.

Q: What were their reactions?

A:: Revulsion. Their reaction toward the inmates was to do anything they could to help them. They would even give them the clothes off their back if they thought it would help them.

Q: Did they, in some instances, give them what they had?

A: Yes, jackets and cigarettes, candy, anything they had, but I guess they didn't dare feed them, because hell, you'd kill 'em . Really would.

Q: Did the officers treat them differently than the rank and file?

A: No, no. Everybody got about the same level of treatment.

Q: A general reaction.

A: You see, we didn't run into anybody that you could say was a leader amongst the group. There were just people milling around. And the leader was mass.. And they all wanted to get out. This was their main wish was to get out and go home, and, of course, there was no way to send them home. We didn't have transports, you couldn't just turn all those people loose. They'd die. And this is why they brought field hospitals and that sort of thing in, to rehabilitate them and get them out of there.

Q: You said there were no leaders, but some of them did give you a tour?

A: Well, just one or two. Those that could speak English and communicate with us indicated that they wanted us to see all of these things, so we found them. But as far as being leaders in the community, there weren't any.

Q: If you can, tell me anything else specific that you remember about the camps other than what you have already said about the crematoriums and the showers and the dog runs that you saw. Was there anything else?

A: I didn't get into the barracks at all.

Q: About how long were you there?

A: I was only in there for about two or three hours, at the most 3 hours.

Q: Was the majority spent touring or talking?

A: Just talking and I guess that tour didn't last but 15 or 20 minutes that we took, because we were pressed for time and had to go on.

Q: Did their condition make it difficult for you to think of these people as people?

A: No.

Q: I mean, during the state that you saw them in?

A: No.

Q: Everybody there had been there a long time.

A: Oh yes. Some had been there longer than others, and if you notice in these pictures here, and also in Bill Glenn's book, there are some of them that look pretty fat and healthy and others that look just like walking skeletons.

Q: That's why I wondered.

A: No, everybody had not been there the same length of time; as matter of fact, they were bringing transports in from all over Europe, trying to get rid of them as we were advancing.

Q: Did you see any of the transports near the train tracks?

A: No.

Q: Do you know about how many people were there?

A: I have no idea.

Q: You say that there were some dead guards there when you reached the camp. Were there any live ones around?

A: Yes.

Q: And how did you recognize them? I mean, I know they didn't look like the prisoners. Did they have any insignias?

A: No, they were wearing a German Wehrmacht uniform.

Q: What did they do? Was anybody holding them captive?

A: Yes. Those that surrendered were just being held captive, and there was one instance where some of the inmates were trying to get a carbine off of one of my men so that they could shoot one of these guards. Of course, the men wouldn't give them the rifle to do it, and I'm sure that had they done so they would have gone ahead and shot the man.

Q: How did these prisoners react toward your unit?

A: They were just happy to see us.

Q: The German war prisoners?

A: No, the Germans didn't know what was going to happen. They were scared. And I guess anybody would be in the circumstances, but we turned all of those people over to the Divisional M P's that were following us. That was their job, to take care of POW 's. And they evacuated them out through POW channels. I don't know where they went.

Q: Did you hear of any instances where there was violence by the prisoners against the guards?

A: No.

Q: You said these were S.S. and not Wehrmacht.

A: They were what you call Waffen S.S., which is a unit of the Wehrmacht -- special units -- and they are not part of the normal army fighting units. They were special troops.

Q: How did your officers and your soldiers react once they saw the camp and they saw these people? How did they react toward the prisoners?

A: My people were just absolutely horrified at what they found and as far as reacting toward the prisoners, all they wanted to do was to see that they could help them as much as we could and then we had to go.

Q: What about with the German POW s?

A: We didn't run into any German people that were in authority.

Q: Are we talking about the Waffen S.S. that you saw?

A: The Waffen S.S.. I didn't see any officers in that unit at all. The only ones that we saw are the ones we took the pictures of.

Q: The others had already been given to the MP's.

A: Gone. I noticed in one of these pictures in the book here -- I don't know whose picture it was -- it shows a line-up. Here are some of your German officials right there, but who captured them I don't know. This is the sort of thing you were running into. Small groups of people trying to talk to the soldiers.

Q: What were your reactions once you saw the camp? How did you rationalize what kind of people could have done something like that?

A: I don't really know how to state that, because we had people in our own country that would do the same thing, really. And you don't have to go far to find them. People like J. B. Stoner and the Ku Klux Klan, the two of them, and of course the whole stated purpose of Hitler was to eliminate the whole Jewish population of Europe if he could. His aim was that the great Aryan civilization was going to be the master race. But nobody really thought that they would carry on in the manner that they did. But they did.

Q: Did you ever have any thoughts afterward about how they could have gotten away with it?

A: No. I didn't try to philosophize about it at all.

Q: Were there any German civilians around when you were there?

A: Yes, the whole town was full of them. And the people in the town of Dachau would tell you that they did not know what was going on out there in that camp. Of course, you knew they were lying, how could they not know? They were right next door.

Q: Were they in the camp touring it or helping to clean it up or anything?

A: No. Of course, if they did, we weren't there if that happened. We know that after we had left they did bring in German civilians to clean up and bury the dead and that sort of thing, but we did not get involved in that.

Q: Did you feel that they had any responsibility after seeing the camp?

A: Who?

Q: The German civilians in the town.

A: Whether they had responsibility or not, I don't know, but there wasn't much they could do about it. The whole thing was run by the Gestapo and the S.S., as far as I know. The German civilian just went along or he would wind up in there too.

Q: Were you ordered or do you know if anybody had orders to protect the civilians from the inmates?

A: No.

Q: How do you feel the American military managed to cope with this experience? Do you think the officers needed some kind of relief after experiencing something like this?

A: No. I won't go so far as to speak for people in rear areas or people who followed us. But for your officers who were constantly engaged in combat, this is something that didn't really bother them too much because they see death every day.

Q: Did you think of there being a differentiation?

A: This was just cold calculated murder, if you will, what we were seeing there. And in combat, it is completely different, it is impersonal.

Q: Do you know if anyone wanted to be relieved of duty or had any very strong reactions after being in the camp?

A: No. None.

Q: Was this because you had seen so much combat and people were used to it by then?

A: We took it for what it was, and then moved on. Like I say, we didn't try to rationalize it or philosophize about it, we just saw it and that's that.

Mrs. Montesinos.: It gave you more reasons to fight the Germans.

A: Yes, like I say, we took no prisoners from then on.

Q: So in some way it did motivate you.

A: Yes.

Q: Did you tell anybody about the camp after you saw it? Did you discuss it among yourselves?

A: Of course, you talked to other units and asked if they saw it, and a lot of them didn't if they didn't happen to go by there, and nobody was making a specific trip to go that way. Those that did happen on it did talk about it, and I presume that the press that followed later on made the stories about it. But, we didn't read a daily paper, so we didn't know what was going on.

Q: Did you feel obligated to tell people about it, to let them know that it had happened?

A: No, because other people were doing that.

Mrs. Montesinos.: You never did dwell on it very much after you came home.

A: No. What for?

Mrs. Montesinos: I mean you showed us the pictures, but I really didn't want to see them. They are horrible.

A: Well, it's just one of those things. I don't see any reason to dwell on it. We all know what happened, and there was precious little that I could do now, or then even, other than at the moment help somebody.

Q: What was your reaction to the "Holocaust" TV show?

A: My reaction to that was mixed. I don't know in my own mind whether everything that I saw was fact or fiction. I do know what I saw, and how they gathered people up and that sort of thing we don't know. I didn't know about that. I think it is a good thing that this is brought out, but how much good it is going to do, I don't know. Man being what he is.

Q: But you still think it is important enough that we should be reminded of it, just to remember that it happened?

A: Oh yes. Absolutely, because it can happen again. And it can happen here.

Q: In some places it already is.

A: You bet.

Q: Are there any other general lessons you think people could learn from what you saw?

A: I am afraid that we don't learn much from history ourselves. As you can see, history does repeat itself, and we don't learn our lessons from history, because we go right through the same things again and again.

Q: After your experience, when you got back to the States, did you have any trouble with your conscience or nightmares or anything related to the camp experience?

A: None. None whatsoever.

Q: Did you consider yourself a religious person at the time you were in the camps?

A: Not particularly.

Q: Do you consider yourself more or less?

A: No, I haven't changed in that respect at all?

Q: The camps did not change any of your religious attitudes?

A: You see, I came back from Europe and went immediately out of the States again as a military attaché to a dictatorship, the Dominican Republic. You could draw parallels there too with what Trujillo was doing to his people as to what Hitler was doing to his people.

Q: Did you ever have any conscious thoughts about God or religion in relation to the camps?

A: No.

Q: You didn't question how it could have happened or anything like that.

A: No.

Q: Did you experience any changes in political views towards a more liberal side or changes in attitude about the Viet Nam War after having seen it?

A: No.

Q: None whatsoever? I am just trying to get a grasp on how it affected you afterwards. Maybe you could sum it up more adequately than through the questions I'm asking.

A: In my lifetime I fought two wars, World War II and the Korean War, and had I stayed in the service, I would probably have fought in the Vietnamese War. My whole feeling toward that is as a professional soldier I am not a politician. That's not my game. My game would be to fight the war and to win it, and win it in the best way I can and stay alive. And this was my philosophy as far as wars are concerned. I didn't concern myself with the politics of it or the morality of it. I just did what I had to do to stay alive.

Q: It might have been a nice safeguard that you built up for yourself. Did you see this as primarily a Jewish persecution?

A: Actually, it was a dual thing. It was political as well as just eliminate the Jewish population, because there were a lot of people in it who were not Jews. And

if they even suspected you of being one, you would wind up there, but there were more than just Jews there. I had no way of telling who was what, really.

Q: Right.

Mrs. Montesinos.: You didn't know there were other concentration camps.

Q: Except for their various accents or languages. After what happened, did it change your attitude towards the Jewish people at all?

A: No. Because I had come from the Middle East into the War in Europe, across Africa. I spent 8 months in what was then called Palestine which is now Israel, and it did not change my feeling toward them at all.

Q: Did you think they had more of a right to their own state after you saw what happened to them?

A: There again I had mixed feelings about the Middle East. If you have ever been there you'll see that the warring armies have gone up and down that coast from Ladakeya all the way down to Alexandria and across since time immemorial, and who owns the land? This is what I question. And even go back to your Old Testament. You'll see where one tribe -- or nation as they called themselves -- was against the other, and it wasn't just a matter of running them off. It was to kill every man woman and child there. Eliminate them. Right now. So my whole feelings towards that whole area is gee whiz, live and let live. But nobody really owns it per se, not even since the beginning of time has anybody owned it. You had it under the

Ottoman Turks until World War I and then that was Lawrence of Arabia who got the Turks out. After that under the Geneva Conventions, you had the Mandates with the French having Lebanon and Syria, and the British having Palestine and Transjordan, and also Egypt. Even though Farouk was the King of Egypt, the British ran it. So there again, the politics of who was running what didn't bother me. Of course, I sympathize with the guy wanting a homeland, but I don't know. I have gone over this with lots of people. What is a Jew? Is it a nationality, is it a religion? Or what? I don't really know. And I wonder if he knows where the differentiation lies. I don't know but what I might be one myself.

Q: I agree a lot of people have had this land over time. Did you feel that because they were singled out under Hitler, that the least they deserved was a homeland?

A: Not only did Hitler single them out, but also the pogroms in Russia. Under the Czar they were singled out and persecuted. And I don't why this is. Everywhere they went they were persecuted.

Q: Do you think that they deserved Israel because of this or at least a part of it?

A: I don't know whether or not somebody deserves something because he was persecuted. Actually, as history will show you it goes to whoever is the strongest occupier.

Q: Might makes right.

A: That's right

Q: You've hinted a little bit at the answer to this question. I would just like to get it back down on tape. Did you feel a need to do anything in your continued service to make sure that something like what you saw at Dachau never happened again?

A: No. There was precious little that I could do in my position. If I were a general officer I might have been able to make an impression, but as a very junior field grade officer, there wasn't much I could do.

Q: Do you think that maybe that's what some of the German people said? You're right, they could have ended up in those camps if they had done it anyway, but do you think that if they wanted to resist they would have taken that same line?

A: Well, to resist is one thing, the will to resist is another. A lot of them didn't have the will to resist, they just go along with the mob.

Q: Do you think if you were placed in a camp or something like that that you would have had the will to resist?

A: Absolutely. Getting back to that sort of thing, my whole philosophy of being in the service was I would never be a captive. If I were captured, I was going to escape one way or another, but they would never keep me.

Q: Did you feel any disdain toward the prisoners who didn't resist?

A: No. Because everybody is different. I couldn't say that everybody should have my philosophy on life. There is no way that everybody could be the same.

Q: That's true. Very true. Is there anything else that you remember about the camp or any other thoughts on your experiences that you would like to add?

A: I don't know that I could contribute a whole lot other than what I have already said.

Q: What you are doing really helps us as far as the historical documentation, but is there was just anything else that you wanted to add?

A: What I do want to get across, though, is the fact that we were not aware of what we were going to run into. And there was nobody that I know of who was assigned the specific job of going in there and getting back to a specific camp. We just happened on it.

Q: I guess that's generally the way it happened with the rest of them. They were just along a certain military approach.

A: That's right. Our objective was Munich. We were set up to go in on the assault of Munich and that's where we were going. And this just happened to be a sidelight.

Q: You actually participated in the assault of Munich after you left Dachau?

A: That's right.

Q: Well, you have definitely done something as far as serving us and history goes.