TRANSCRIPT OF MR. DWIGHT E. PEARCE
INTERVIEWER: Beth Machinot
DATE: August 7, 1978
CAMP: Buchenwald
TRANSCRIBED: Sue Epstein (rev. 6/12/80)

Q. (Beth Machinot) Your full name?

A. (Dwight Pearce) Dwight Edwin Pearce.

Q. Your address?

A. 1227 Clifton Road, N.E.

Q. Date of birth?

A. August 27, 1918.

Q. How old were you at the time of the liberation?

A. I think about 26.

Q. What was your profession at the time?

A. Well, I graduated from Wake Forest College in 1941 and had my orders to report in November of that year, but was deferred until February, 1942.

Q. Did you have any idea what you wanted to be when you got out of the army?

A. Yes, at the time my plans were to go into diesel engineering. I had already contracted with Electromotive Corporation in LaGrange, Illinois. But that didn't materialize when I was discharged in 1945.

Q. Your present occupation?

A. I am the Baptist campus minister at Emory.

Q. What military unit were you with?

A. 6th Armored Division, 86th Calvary Reconnaissance Squadron, Mechanized of Patton's Third Army.

Q. What rank were you at the time?

A. I was Warrant Officer, Junior Grade.

Q. What camp did you help liberate?

A. Buchenwald. The 4th and 6th were Patton's spearhead divisions, so I was in the area of Buchenwald.

Q. The next questions are about what you saw at Buchenwald. When did you know where you were going?

A. This was after the big siege on Kassel. When reinforcements came we skirted Kassel and started towards Jena, moving toward Leipzig and Dresden, towards the Elbe River. I think it was on the morning of about the 12th of April, I'm not sure. I remember very definitely that on the 7th of April I came about as close to "getting it" as I did during the entire war. A counter-attack by Germans cut us off from the division. We got out of that and I

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know it must have been two or three days later when elements of our Reconnaissance Squadron along with an infantry regiment liberated Buchenwald.

Q. The few days before you got to the camp, did you know what you were getting into?

A. No. I heard about it about mid-morning, the day of the 12th and we were there that afternoon. So I heard about it just a few hours before.

Q. What did you hear?

A. I heard that we had liberated Buchenwald and I wanted to see what was there, so I went over to see. I took a camera that had a few frames of film in it. I got a few pictures.

Q. Do you still have those pictures?

A. Yes. They wouldn't print the ones I really wanted. Too gross. But there's some of them I'll show you.

Q. Did you go back and tell the other men what it was like?

A. No. You see I was in the reconnaissance squadron and we were constantly moving and didn't go back. I was only there for about 30 minutes. Third Army brought up some MP's and rear-eschelon to take over the camp. As I said, I was in the reconnaissance squadron of the 6th Armored Division which sometimes was 20-30 miles ahead of the division. We would probe to find where the enemy was, so we were ahead of the front line on many occasions.

Q. What did you see, can you give me your first impression?

A. When we first arrived, there was cord-wood in front of the compound with a layer of wood, a layer of bodies, and so forth that the Germans didn't get a chance to burn. This is on the approach to the camp. They had so many bodies they were trying to get rid of that they couldn't do it within the camp, so they burned them wherever they could find a place to burn bodies, or dispose of them. So, this was the first thing I saw. The fence of the camp was very much like you've seen pictures of. The camp wasn't damaged by artillery because the biggest majority of German guards had already gone. Just a small cadre was left. There was an SS trooper who evidently was in charge. I don't know who he was. Why he wasn't killed I don't know, but I've never seen a person so beat up in my life. He didn't look like a human being. He couldn't see, his nose was broken and so was his jaw; he was just a bloody mass. We managed to get to him and get him into a cell to protect him. The prisoners turned on him and killed all the guards and a lot of their own who had been collaborators with the guards, seeking favors and so on. So there was a lot of useless killing. We didn't know who they were. There were so many dead people there.

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Q. Did you see any of that? Did you see the prisoners turning on the guards?

A. No, no..that was done before we came, the night before the unit reached there from what I understand. The prisoners overpowered the guards who were left. They knew we were coming because I read this in one of Dietrech Bonoeffer's books years later. He was taken from Buchenwald on about the 3rd of April. And even then they could hear the American artillery, so we were closing in on them and they were getting out. And then, of course, the inside of the camp was just awful. The people who had survived, I don't know how in the world they were living - walking skeletons. Looked like thousands of them. And there were dead people everywhere. They had evidently shot a lot of them, the crematory was still hot, where they had been burning bodies. Gas chambers, there were people in them. The gallows were filled, bodies still hanging from them. And then big trenches were dug in the courtyard, the red courtyard, and I don't know how many hundreds, maybe thousands, of bodies were there. The Germans didn't have a chance to cover them up or anything. They were stripped of clothing or anything that was wearable--shoes, clothes, anything. The prisoners took lots of things because they were of no use to the dead.

Q. Did you expect any of that?

A. I didn't know what to expect. After seeing some of the brutality that the Germans did use on some of our own men, I wasn't really surprised. I saw it on many occasions. I'd run across some of my own comrades who were shot, mutilated by the Germans. I'd seen so much of it, though I was horrified to see what they were doing to these people who couldn't resist or do anything about it. It was a sickening thing. And, of course, the odor. I'll never forget the odor, the stench of the place. It was awful. Burning bodies and decaying bodies and things like that.

Q. What is your reaction to this? When you were there, how did you take this?

A. This goes back I suppose to the time I first saw one of our American soldiers dead. I had a feeling of revenge, and this was the feeling I had when I saw this: "Let's go get 'em. We can't allow things like this to happen."

Q. Yet you still did protect that SS guard?

A. Yes, we felt like we needed to have somebody who was in official command. I don't know if he could be of help or not. I don't knowif his brain was working or not. I do know this..that after we put him in a cell, I went by before I left. There was a little iron sliding door that you could look through. And, beat and battered as he was, he tried to come to attention. When

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he heard the sound of that door open, he knew that somebody was watching him, and he would try to come to attention.

Q. Did you think he was insane?

A. I don't know. He was so beat and battered I don't know whether he was or not. He was bound to have some sense of where he was because he could at least rise. I guess he probably survived it all right. But this is the only high ranking person I saw. There were a lot of other dead Germans around. There were guards that had been killed, but how they died I don't know.

Q. How did you feel toward the survivors who did get revenge?

A. Well, we slapped and hugged them. They were so glad to see us.

Q. Did they react strongly?

A. Oh yes, they were the happiest people. Of course, we gave all the cigarettes and anything to eat to them. We didn't have much medical help with us a t the time. We did have some men, corpsmen, to help with those who were dying. We did what we could. I'm sure that the divisions came up with some people to help as soon as possible. I did get a chance to go through and look at one of the barracks. It's awful how they slept in those little narrow bunks. They weren't bunks, just cubicles. Once you go in, there wasn't even enough room to turn over and no mattress, no nothing. They were up to the ceiling. And just awful, with maybe one or two windows in the place..dark, dreary. I just walked in..it almost made me sick. I had to walk back out.

Q. Did you go to the gas chambers too?

A. Oh yes, there were some still there that had died. And looking around you could see where they'd been torturing some of the prisoners. They had huge hooks on the wall. And they would, according to some of the survivors, tie their hands behind them, slip a rope around their neck, and pull them just high enough on the tiptoes so that they would strangle themselves to death. There were deep marks in the concrete in back of them, concrete walls, where their fingernails gouged trying to get some sort of hold to take the weight off their necks. That's one of the things I remember. Strange you remember some little thing like that.

Q. What about the soldiers around you? How were they reacting to all this?

A. I think most of them had the same feeling I did. They were delighted that we had the opportunity to relieve these people. And we had no earthly idea there were such conditions. Although there was a terrible sense of remorse and sadness about what had gone on there; at least we knew we'd brought this to a halt.

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Q. So could you say you felt pride?

A. Yes I did. To be a part of something like this, this was really the first thing we had to chalk up other than military victories. Something that was a sort of personal thing, you know. We had done this for some people, other than the Germans. Lots of Germans there too, you know. Not all of them Jews. Most of the ones I talked with were Polish Jews. But there was a lot of German Jews and just Germans, political prisoners who were there. They took the high ranking ones, like Bonhoeffer, Muller, and the rest of them to another camp a few days before we arrived. A lot of the others were still there. I was surprised. I read later that 6 million Jews were killed and a total of 11 million killed altogether, so 5 million of those were others. So I don't think of it as just Jewish. To me, most of those I saw were Polish. Those were the ones that really registered on me. They all had their heads shaved and were so thin you could almost see through them. Just walking skeletons, and you felt so sorry for them. But they were just as happy as they could be that they'd been liberated. Everybody wanted to hug everybody because they were free, you know. They could hardly realize themselves that they had survived.

Q. So what heppened to them? Were they allowed to go free right away?

A. I don't know. We moved on. I just don't know what heppened. I always wondered what happened. I imagine that while we were there the radios were calling to send up supplies and things like that..somebody to take over the camp. So I imagine they stayed there until they had transportation and were able to move on.

Q. None of the men in your unit asked to be relieved of that duty? Were there real strong reactions from Americans? You made it sound like you were all so proud, so did anyone turn down the job?

A. No, no one. When they found out the camp was there they were all eager to go ahead and liberate it. I realized that this was perhaps the first of these big camps to be liberated. They were all in south-central Germany away from where they thought we would be headed, the main sources of industry and so forth. Some of my unit, the infantry I know, went on to Flossenburg where Dietrich Bonhoeffer was killed. So just think, if we'd gotten there a few days earlier, we could have saved him.

Q. Didn't you wait three weeks?

A. No, actually it was three days later. Patton believed that once you got the

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Germans on the run, keep 'em on the run. We'd go 12 miles a day sometimes. Our division, the 6th, set the record. This hundred mile dash, you know, to Kassel and then we skirted Kassel toward Jena. And this happened during the time when we were on the move. That's why I couldn't stay. I had to keep up with my unit.

Q. When you got to Buchenwald were there any German civilians around?

A. No. I didn't see any. Perhaps you've read somewhere about the mistress of Buchenwald, lampshades of skin? I saw those. So we saw it all, before it got cleaned up. The Germans had gone and they had done their best to get rid of most of the evidence, but they didn't succeed. They tried to eliminate most of the people in the camp. They tried to cover up some, but didn't have enough time.

Q. How could you tell they tried to cover up?

A. You could see where bulldozers had tried to cover up the trenches. But some of them they didn't get a chance to finish. And then those pyres where they were burning bodies; they wouldn't have left those had they had time to clean them up. That was evidence right there.

Q. Do you think the SS then were aware that they'd stepped over the bounds of war?

A. Yes. If not, I don't think that these trenches we saw would be there. They tried to cover up and they tried to burn a lot of them. If they didn't they would have just killed them and put them in a hole. Why burn them? So they knew something could be exposed.

Q. So your orders in the camp were what?

A. I had no orders. I just went in order to see the camp. There were three or four of us that went over there to see the situation, so we didn't stay long.

Q. So, were you the first there in the camp?

A. No, there were others there before it. They (Recon. & Inf.) had liberated the camp that morning. This was about noon, so roughly 4-6 hours later. I was in Hdg. of Squadron maintenance. If some of our vehicles were knocked out of action I had to go get them. Or if some mechanic needed parts for something, they'd come back to where we were. And this was how we heard about the liberation. When I heard this, I wanted to see it.

Q. When you came back to the U.S. and told a lot of war stories, did you tell about Buchenwald?

A. No, it was years before I could talk about it. My wife never knew what happened to me. There's a part of you that wants to forget and you try your

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best to block it out. Finally, I told her about my April 7th experience and after that did mention to her about Buchenwald. And I had these pictures and I showed them to her. It was years after and I told very few war stories.

Q. What was her reaction?

A. She couldn't believe it. She said that from letters of the time, she knew me well enough, she could tell I was depressed all during this time. Something had heppened to me and she didn't know what. She realized, I guess, that just in writing you reflect some of these things. Of course we weren't allowed to say anything. In fact, I was the mail censor for my group, the squadron maintenance. We had to just cut out everything that might give information to the enemy.

Q. Why?

A. Intelligence wouldn't allow us to do it. It might show where we were or some position, some description of what we saw could give the enemy our exact position. And also, a lot of this stuff would indicate the disposition of our morale.

Q. Do you think you would have told her had you not had to consor?

A. I don't think I would have. I just didn't at that time want my folks to know how these people were treated.

Q. What made you bring it up years later?

A. The writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I guess I have relived more of this since I started reading some of his books. Ten or more years ago these books began to come out. I said, well the world knows about it now so..I didn't tell E. H., who is my closest friend until about..2-3 years ago. Even when I read about it in the book and realized we could have saved Dietrich Bonhoeffer had we been there three days earlier.

Q. Did you feel you wanted to tell people?

A. Since then I have. I've told some now, my children and in a Sunday school class I used Letters from Prison and used that as a topic for discussion. And then I told them. They couldn't believe it. I didn't tell them all about Buchenwald, but about how we liberated it. I am now where I can talk about it without it bothering me too much. But it still brings back an awful lot of terrible memories.

Q. Did you watch The Holocaust show on TV?

A. No, I didn't. I saw so much of it when it was happening that I just didn't want to see it anymore now. My wife did.

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Q. Did she say anything about it?

A. She did. She tole me some of the things she saw. I said, "That's pretty accurate." But there's no way they can put on film what we saw there. But from what she tells me it was a whole lot worse than the TV, because censors just wouldn't allow that on TV.

Q. Did you consider yourself a religious man at that time?

A. Very much so.

Q. How did this affect you?

A. I know that it was the Lord's will that I got out of that mess on April the 7th. My whole outfit was just about wiped out. They started in on us about midnight and we held off until daybreak. But we couldn't hold off a company of tanks and about 2,000 infantrymen; it took the reserves two days to stop them, so we knew we couldn't do anything. But just before sunrise we escaped from the town of Struth where we were encamped to do some repair work. They encircled us and with tank, mortar, and machine guns, just about wiped us out. They got all my vehicles except three. Most of the men and other officers were killed or captured, but ten of us got out. We contacted division headquarters, got in touch with them by radio and told them what had happened. They brought up re-inforcements and counter attacked. But I know my religious faith is what brought me through that. God had some purpose for me and my life.

Q. When you saw the camp, how did that affect the feeling that there was some purpose?

A. I don't know whether I had any religious connections with that part of it or not. I was so horrified that individuals were treated like this. That was a humane feeling more than a religious, because mixed in with this was the feeling of revenge.

Q. Did you feel any guilt for having a revenge feeling?

A. No, I didn't. This is terrible, but I didn't. I'd seen so mugh fighting, I guess you sorta get callous to things. But when a soldier is killed he has the opportunity to defend himself. But these people, they had nothing to defend themselves with. This is the thing that stuck with me. When I look back, I don't think I had any religious feeling about it. My feeling of revenge was more dominant than anything else, although I was glad we had the chance to get them out of this situation. A lot of men kept their faith and expressed it. Men, I didn't think had any religious background, they would do some praying out loud. I heard it too many times. A soldier may not always admit it, but somewhere back in his heart and mind he knew there was something there.

Q. Did the war experience in any way affect that you became a minister?

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A. Yes, I guess it turned me around. At first I didn't have any earthly idea of being a religious person, professionally. Not until I was in combat, I made a vow, "if you get me through this I'll do what You want me to do." And even after I got out of service and operated an automobile business, I still knew He had saved me for something else. Maybe He wanted me to go back to my home church and be more what I ought to be there. Be a leader in my own community. It definitely turned me around. I didn't know what He wanted me to do but I definitely knew He wanted me to do something special, and I consider Campus Ministry something special because it's certainly different from what I was trained to do in college.

Q. Thank you Mr. Pearce. That's really about all I have to ask you today.

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