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Leading the Way

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Leading the Way

Veteran Frank Towers tells of a train full of Holocaust survivors he navigated toward shelter

BY ALLISON CANDREVA

Black and white photos of a concentration camp in Buchenwald, Germany, decorate a foam presentation board. World War II veteran Frank Towers, sitting at his dining room table, slowly points to the pictures, giving each a short explanation.

In one photo, a man poses with a skeleton. The remains, along with the gallows, were used mostly for psychological purposes.

"They would show this to the Jews," Towers said. "Do you want to be hung up there like an animal?" or something [like] 'do you want to end up being like that?' They were threatening the Jews."

As a young man, Towers was eager to enter the military instead of waiting for the draft. After a few years, detours and training, he was deployed to Europe on February 12, 1944. While in Germany, he encountered some

Jews who were liberated from a train in Farsleben, and who have affected him even to this day.

According to his memoirs, companies in 1940 were hesitant to promote employees because of the impending draft into WWII. At 23 years of age, Towers eagerly registered for the draft in Burlington, Vt., but his number was never called. He then volunteered, and although he was placed at the head of the list, he still never received a phone call.

Still impatient, Towers looked in to the National Guard and there happened to a spot open as a private.

On December 1, 1940, he joined Company "K," 172nd Regiment of the 43rd Infantry Division. This was a temporary enlistment for one year, which would have satisfied the draft requirements.

After vigorous training, an alert

came in February notifying the division they would soon be leaving Burlington. On February 24, 1941, they were federalized at the Armory, which meant working 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. with additional training in the evenings.

A few weeks later they were relocated to Camp Blanding in Florida. While at Blanding, Towers was assigned to help his commanding officer, Capt. Arthur K. Tudhope, who had been reassigned as the regimental supply officer. At the end of his first six months, Towers was promoted to private first class.

After doing well with training in Louisiana during the summer and the Carolinas during the fall, the company was told they would be able to pack up and go home around the first of January. However, those plans would quickly change.

On December 7, 1941, news of the

Pearl Harbor attack came on the radio. A few days later, official word came that they would be staying for the duration.

Three years would pass before Towers, then 26, was deployed to Europe. After some detours – including Officer's Candidate School at Ft. Benning, Ga., and his wedding on March 1, 1943 – Towers was transferred to the 30th Infantry Division at Camp Atterbury in Indiana. In that time, Towers had also become a second Lieutenant and then was promoted to a first lieutenant.

The division left Boston Harbor on the S.S. Argentina to Europe. About 10 days later, they arrived in Glasgow, Scotland.

In the spring of 1945, there was a lot of propaganda about the Jews being persecuted. They had heard about it back in the U.S. before they

◀ Photo by Allison Candreva

Every year, World War II veteran Frank Towers has a reunion with the 30th Infantry Division. He has recently invited the Holocaust survivors that they liberated.

went overseas, but did not pay much attention to it.

"We thought it was exaggerated propaganda," he said, "to bolster us up to be anti-German so that when we got over there we would tear these Germans apart because of what they were doing."

As time went on, Towers said they ran into a number of small allied prisoner-of-war camps. His group heard stories about how those at the camps were being mistreated; about how the Jews were being tortured and massacred. It was not until April of 1945 that he actually had any contact with Jewish holocaust victims.

The 743rd Tank Battalion, which was attached to Tower's division, was the first to come to a train filled with about 2500 survivors on its way from Bergen-Belsen to Buchenwald, Treblinka and Auschwitz. Towers said the Germans were trying to evacuate the prisoners because they did not want the allies to see the conditions the people were in.

The German guards scattered and the Jews were unloaded from the train. Towers said that although the survivors were happy to see the Americans, they were fearful of the soldiers when they first approached.

"They had heard about Americans coming," he said, "but of course, the Germans had indoctrinated them that they should never have any contact with the Americans because we were brutal savages, and we were going to kill them. That there'd be no mercy shown to any of them."

Towers said some of the cars were antique passenger cars and the people on those were riding somewhat in luxury. Others were freight cars left over from World War I, which were much smaller than American freight cars.

"We called them 40 and 8," Towers said. "They held 40 men or 8 horses, because we used them for transport during World War I. So, here are these 40 and 8 freight cars, and they were just loaded with Jews. Probably 75 or more jammed into one of those cars."

The survivors were in those cars for five days and were only allowed off once a day to eat. When they were finished eating, they had to get back on

the train so they would not run away, Towers said.

The soldiers were not medics, but could tell that the people were not well, Towers said. They tried to separate them as best they could in terms of the walking wounded, those who could not walk or take care of themselves, and those close to death.

"We had a war to fight. We were not the caretakers for these people," he said. "We weren't prepared for this kind of thing. We didn't have food. We didn't have clothing to give them. We didn't have anything to give them."

The tank battalion contacted the 105th Medical Battalion who had medics, doctors and supplies to take care of ill people.

Towers was a liaison officer with division headquarters at that time and had become friends with a Tank Battalion liaison officer. The officer knew about the train situation and asked Towers if he wanted to see the Jews that they had liberated the day before.

"It was my first contact with seeing these holocaust victims," Towers said, "and it was a frightful sight. To see these victims; the condition they were in."

As a liaison officer, Towers's job was to go from the Regimental Headquarters to Division Headquarters several times a day. He said it was not very difficult, but bridges were blown out, and he had to take secondary trails to get there. He knew the trails very well because he had been taking them for several days in that area.

The survivors were in the midst of a battle area, and Towers said the soldiers felt from a humanitarian standpoint they "had to get those people out of there."

"One of the first things we needed to do was to gather up as many vehicles as we could and load these Jews on there and get them out of there," he said.

A few days prior, they had liberated a large German airfield in Hillersleben, Germany, where there were some large empty barracks. They decided to take the survivors back there and give them temporary living quarters.

Towers was given the job of leading the convoy because he knew the quickest route to the airfield.

"This was my contact with these people," he said. "I led them out of their situation to living quarters."

In the meantime, the military government basically took over

from there.

In mid-1945, at the end of the war, Towers was sent home along with the rest of his division. They were assigned to Ft. Jackson, S.C., but later it was determined the division was no longer needed and on November 26, 1946 it was deactivated.

Each year, the division has a reunion in Fayetteville, N.C., and Towers said it would be nice to have some of the survivors attend. With the help of Matthew Rozell, a high school history teacher in New York, and his students, Towers was able to contact some of the survivors, five who came last year and nine who are supposed to come this year.

When Towers enlisted in the National Guard in 1940, little did he know he would be spending the next five years training and fighting in World War II. During that time, while longer than anticipated, Towers met his wife and navigated liberated Jews to shelter. \$



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