

From My Tank's Perch

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As told to Tricia Goyer*

When WWII first broke out, I was drafted and sent to Ft. Hood to be a part of the tank destroyers. Training and preparations went fine but bad news was awaiting me when I tried to board the ship leaving for the European theatre. My commander said I couldn't go because I wasn't an U.S. citizen. I had come to America with my parents from Finland when I was young, and I never realized I wasn't a citizen until I attempted to leave for Europe. Instead I was sent to California where I took citizenship classes and joined a new division—the 11th Armored Division. They too needed tank crewmembers and put me on a tank. I didn't have to walk, so I liked that position. The only problem was, I hated being cooped up, so I sat on top of the tank almost the whole way through Europe. I guess most people figured I wouldn't survive up there, but I liked it. I had a whole new view of the world.

Yes, I got quite a view from on top of that tank. As soon as we landed in France, our division was rerouted to Belgium. The Battle of the Bulge had just begun, and they needed us for support. Our armored trucks and tanks rumbled through the recently freed Paris, and all the girls came out to greet us. It was a big event. I can still see it, our tanks rolling through the crowds. I even got a view of the L'Arc de Triomphe. But we didn't stop to celebrate. We had work to do. The Bulge was hard. We lost many men, but finally defeated the Germans in Belgium. Our division attempted to move on to take Berlin, but instead we were sent south to Austria. We heard our President made an agreement with the Russians to allow them to capture Berlin.

On our way to Austria, there is one thing I will never forget. The image of what I spotted from my perch on that tank still brings tears to my eyes nearly sixty years later.

One day I was riding along and looking around with my binoculars, very curious. Our unit was in the advanced guard, and we were first in line. As we crested a hill a sight took my breath away. I radioed the Operations Major.

“Major,” I says. “I believe the whole German Army must be down there. The road is full of people. Just a black line.”

I couldn't distinguish what kind of people they were, but I could see that black line stretched out for miles.

I said again, “The whole German Army must be down there waiting for us.”

He answered very quietly. “No, son, that's the prisoners from Flossenberg concentration camp. The Germans wanted to clear them out before we got there.”

As I looked at that mass of people, I wish I'd known about this before. The Germans had emptied the camps and were attempting to march the prisoners further into the interior. The prisoners reminded me of walking skeletons. And as our tanks rolled past the columns we were told not to offer them food. The prisoner's bodies were no longer used to food, and it would kill them. It was hard moving on, not being able to help. But our commanders promised the medics coming behind would care for the prisoners.

Not too many weeks after that, we rolled into Austria and soon the war ended. While in Austria, General Patton ordered all his men in the 3rd Army to visit the camps. He wanted his soldiers to see what they had been fighting for. I didn't go. I didn't need to. I'd seen enough on that roadside. Enough to stir pained memories for a lifetime.

Yes, from the top of that tank I'd seen it all—the battles, the barbarity of men, and the joy of liberation. From my perch I witnessed what I'll never forget—the fight against good and evil. And I was thankful I was part of bringing in the good.

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