

The Round Tablette

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Welcome to the February meeting of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table. Tonight's speaker is John McManus, author of *Hell Before Their Very Eyes: American Soldiers Liberate Concentration Camps in Germany, April 1945*. He will discuss the liberation of the concentration camps, and will be joined by veterans of the liberation and camp internees.

Tonight's topic is a dark one — that needs to be told over and over so there can be no doubt of its reality. Much of the writing on the Holocaust has focused on either the victims, the perpetrators, or the factual information on the event, but little has been done on the liberators. The soldiers who liberated or witnessed a concentration camp were viscerally affected; changing them for the rest of their lives. Historians crunch the numbers, sift through the archives, and watch the films, but they will never be able to fully comprehend the horror of the concentration camp. One thing a historian or any present day person will never know is that peculiar smell of burning and decomposing bodies conjoined with the fetid pall of the barely living.

During World War II, American industry produced the accoutrements of war with assembly line efficiency. So too, Hitler's Germany used this same industriousness to exterminate people. The industrial aspects of the Holocaust mark it for its singularity in history. The German people knew something of what was going on, but they did not want to see, for fear of the same fate befalling them. The Third Reich was a nation of prisons and prisoners. Thousands of camps were spread out over Germany and the conquered territories. The camps in the east such as Auschwitz and its subsidiary camps were for the express purpose of extermination. Those in Western Europe were prison camps or slave labor camps, though the line between them is very fine indeed. These camps were where the Nazi's housed criminals and also their political enemies such as Communists and people who did not agree with them, as well as Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and Jehovah's Witnesses. These were the camps the American soldiers

liberated — in places like as Ohrdruf, Buchenwald, and Dachau.

Ohrdruf, a satellite camp of Buchenwald, was named after the nearby town, and was used as a slave labor camp. The inmates were building a communications center, an underground government headquarters (*Führerhauptquartier*), and extensive tunnels (possibly for an armaments works and perhaps connected to secret weapons programs) as the Allied armies were approaching in January, 1945. Those who could, were forced marched to Bergen-Belsen or to the main camp at Buchenwald. Mostly, American soldiers encountered corpses, though some inmates did hide out from the rapidly departing guards.

Buchenwald was an older camp, known as a prison holding mostly Communist party members. It was the most politicized of all the German concentration camps with a hierarchy of power among the prison population even as there was a competition for survival. The Communists were the better fed prisoners and also kept watch over the non-Communist inmates.

Dachau, one of Germany's oldest concentration camps, having been set up in 1933, held a special distinction in other ways. While it contained the usual 'enemies of the Reich' it also contained many notable prisoners, such as the former Austrian Chancellor Kurt von Schuschnigg, Pastor Martin Neimoller, and even the sons of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

When US soldiers liberated the camps, their first reactions were a mixture of shock and revulsion at the sight of emaciated corpses, both the living and the dead, and anger at the Germans who committed these atrocities. The soldiers also felt the urge to help the inmates. This often took the form of giving them parts of their rations. This kind act was deadly — the worst thing they could do since the food was too rich for the prisoners' weakened digestive systems and they wound up throwing up which could cause even more sickness and even death.

The liberators had the grim duty of keeping the newly freed prisoners in the camps. The area was still a war zone, and the camps offered safety and the medical attention all the inmates needed. The medical personnel who

If you are a veteran, or know a veteran, of one of these campaigns — contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

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accompanied and followed upon the infantry encountered problems most of them had never seen before. Starvation, dehydration, malnutrition, and disease; all on an unimaginable scale – an industrial scale. The medical needs were overwhelming and the military personnel often drafted inmate doctors from the camp populations to help. Engineers were brought in to help re-build, clean, and sanitize the camps, so they could be used not just as medical facilities, but also repatriation centers and prisons for Nazis, particularly at Dachau.

After visiting the Ohrdruf concentration camp, General Dwight Eisenhower wrote to General Marshall in Washington, “I made the visit deliberately, in order to be in position to give firsthand evidence of those things if ever, in the future, there develops a tendency to charge these allegations to ‘propaganda.’” Eisenhower made all his generals tour the camps, along with politicians, the press, and film crews. Eisenhower’s words were prophetic because in the years that have followed, there has been a growing trend to deny the Holocaust, saying it was part of an opinion or just another historical interpretation instead of fact. All Holocaust denying is just anti-Semitism disguised as intellectual rigor. To deny the holocaust is to deny the sacrifice and greatness of the “Greatest Generation.” Their mission was to liberate Europe but they also exposed the world to the totality of the Nazi crimes – they were and are witnesses to history.

Further Readings:

John McManus, *Hell Before Their Very Eyes: American Soldiers Liberate Concentration Camps in Germany, April 1945* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015).

Dan Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps: The End of the Holocaust and its Aftermath* (Hartford, CT: Yale University Press, 2015)

Nickolaus Wachsmann, *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015)

Alex Kershaw, *The Liberator: One World War II Soldier’s 500-Day Odyssey from the Beaches of Sicily to the Gates of Dachau* (New York: Broadway Books, 2012)

Leila Levinson, *Gated Grief: The Daughter of a GI Concentration Camp Liberator Discovers a Legacy of Trauma* (Brule, WI: Cable Publishing, 2011).

Announcements:

Twin Cities Civil War Round Table - Feb. 16, 2016 – *Civil War Medicine* - www.tccwrt.com - info@tccwrt.com

St Croix Valley Civil War Round Table - Feb. 22, 2016 – *Civil War Cavalry* - 715-386-1268 – rossandhaines@comcast.net

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Rochester WWII History Round Table – 507-280-9970; www.wv2roundtable-rochester.org
Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345, 320-616-6050, <http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/>
Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - crazyjerry45@hotmail.com - 651-338-2717
CAF - Commemorative Air Force - www.cafm-n.org 651-455-6942
Minnesota Air Guard Museum - www.mnangmuseum.org 612-713-2523
Friends of Ft. Snelling, www.fortsnelling.org
Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, Granite Falls, MN, 320-564-6644, <http://www.fagenfighterswwiimuseum.org>
World Without Genocide, 651-695-7621, <http://www.worldwithoutgenocide.org/>
Airshow - Eden Prairie - 16-17 July 2016 www.wotn.org 952-746-6100
Fort Snelling World War I Weekend, 20-21 Aug. 2016
Military History Book Club, Har Mar Barnes & Noble: 24 Feb. Crowley, *1453 Holy War for Constantinople* - sdaubenspeck52@gmail.com

We need volunteers to drive our veterans to and from meetings. Please contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

Round Table Schedule 2016

10 Mar. From OSS to CIA
24 Mar. Birth of New Age of War
14 Apr. Operation Dragoon/Anvil
28 Apr. OSS Maritime Units — First SEALS
12 May Start of Cold War



Gens. Eisenhower, Bradley, Patton, and Eddy; Ohrdruf, 12 April 1945



Shed referenced in Gen. Patton’s diary

See also: U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum at: <http://www.ushmm.org>

See our programs on YouTube at <http://youtube.com/wv2hrt>