

6. "Death Marches" and "Death Camps"

Uttermost horror of the closing days of the war were the stark evidences of inhuman German brutality encountered in Bavaria and Austria. At once nauseating and terribly fascinating, these vestiges of the Nazi terror made the average American almost doubt what he saw with his own eyes. Harder to doubt was what he smelled with his own nose.

The first things encountered were the survivors, and those who had not survived, from "death marches", – the fleshless bags of bones, living and dead; clad, if at all, in the ragged striped uniforms marked with the "KL" of the Konzentrationlager; scattered along the roadsides where they had fallen. Of all these marches overrun by XII Corps the one which might stand representative of the rest was that from the Flossenburg Camp, 10 miles northwest of Weiden, which was terminated by the arrival on the scene of elements of the 11th Armored Division. The story is briefed dispassionately in the XII Corps G5 Summary for 26 April 45, over the signature of Colonel "Josh" Billings, G5 who had just become a full colonel as of that date:

"On 16 April, 2,800 political prisoners were started on a march from Flossenburg by SS; on 18 and 20 April more were put on the road so that by 20 April, an estimated 15,000 German-held political prisoners and forced laborers were conducted on an SS 'March of Death'. They were driven for three days and three nights; as the weak fell by the wayside, they were either murdered or left to die. No food was provided during the period and, in their weakened condition after years of concentration camp inhumanities, many had insufficient energy to withstand the torturous journey. Survivors report the cruelest treatment throughout the March; shootings by SS guards were reported to be continuous. The slaughter continued right up to the arrival of our armor; then the SS guards departed leaving the human wreckage to stagger away; the strongest, taking to the highways; the weak crawling into the woods and barns or other shelter. About 3,000 died on the March; about 3,000 were able to get out of the immediate area where turned loose; the balance of 9,000 were holed up in the general area Cham, Roding, Posing, and Neunberg."

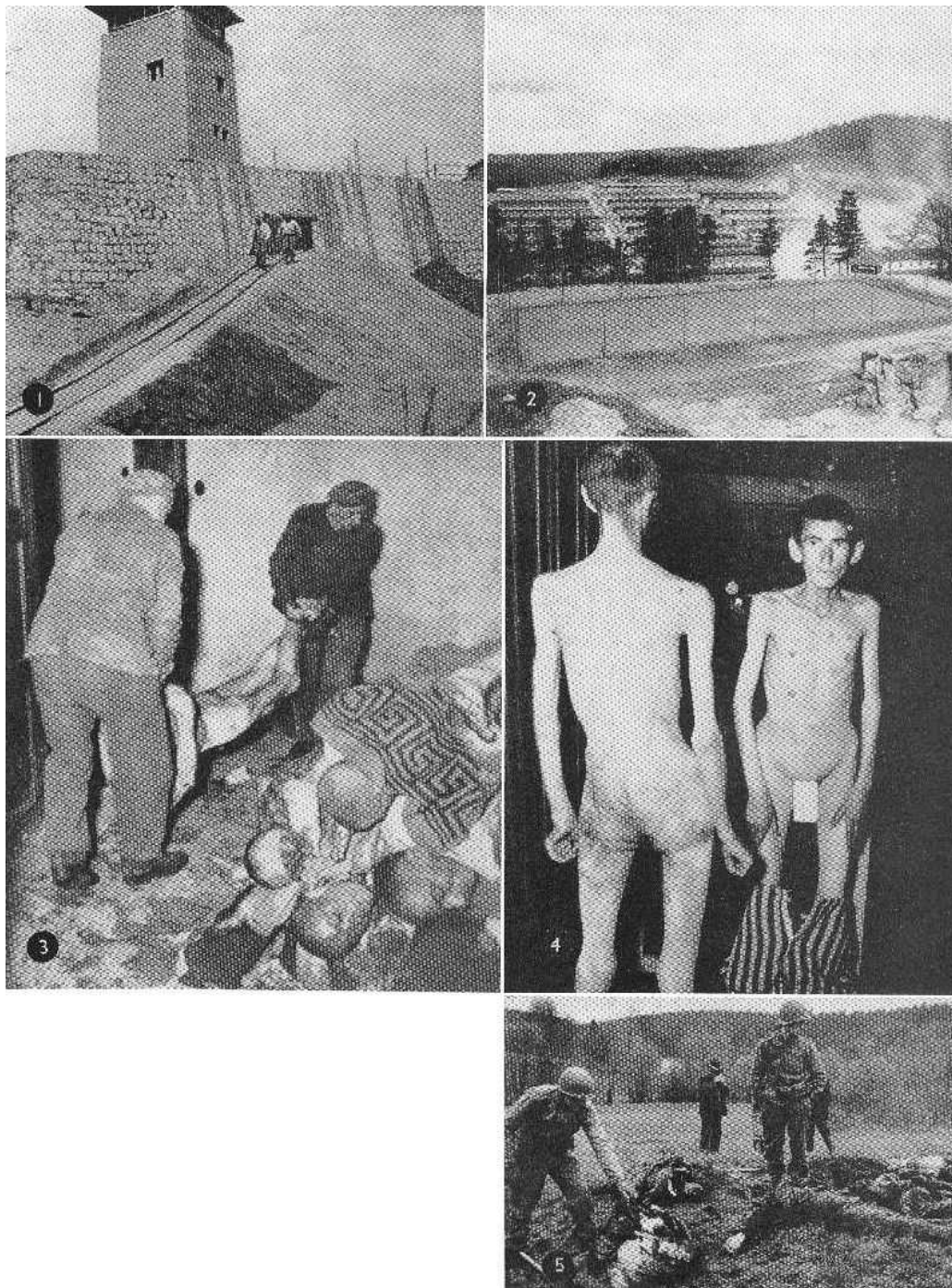
Near the town of Neunberg (16 miles northwest of Cham) the SS guards had one final orgy of butchery. Colonel Frank Weaver, Assistant G5 and Captain Merle Potter, found such aftermath of this activity that the latter returned to the village and supervised a mass burial for 204 victims of the "march." Colonel Hayden Sears, formally CO of the 17th Armored Group and more recently of the 4th Armored Division is credited with organization of a custom by this time widely popular throughout XII Corps. In accordance with it, the people of Neunberg were required to supply coffins for the poor wretches slaughtered within their township, dig the graves, and attend the burial services. At conclusion of the ceremony, in the name of the Corps Commanding General, a message was read in German over the public address system of a sound truck to the assembled men, women and children of the village. "Only God Himself," the message ended, "has the terrible might and infinite wisdom to visit upon you and your leaders the total punishment you deserve. ... May the memory of this day and of these tragic dead rest heavily upon the conscience of every German so long as each of you shall live."

The worst discovery of this nature was reserved almost for the last. On 5 May 45, a reconnaissance party from Troop D, 41st Cavalry Squadron, 11th Armored Division, advancing down the beautiful valley of the Danube, uncovered near Linz two concentration camps, Mauthausen and Gusen. The former was such a spectacle of horror as subsequently to compete in the opinion of the world with Dachau and Buchenwald for the title of worst example of its kind. It was certainly the most hideous thing that many members of XII Corps had ever seen. "Here were 16,000 political prisoners, representing every country in Europe, all reduced to living skeletons and ridden with disease," the I & E

pamphlet history of the 11th Armored Division reports. "The bodies of more than 500 were stacked in an area between two barracks. The few long term prisoners still alive said that at least 45,000 bodies had been burned in the huge crematorium in four years. Other thousands were killed in the gas chambers, injected with poison, or beaten to death."

Details of such camps have since received so much public notice in connection with post-war trials of guards and superintendents of these hell-holes, that this volume need not repeat the stories of the torture chambers, killing pens, the walking dead, the emaciated bodies stacked like cordwood. Suffice it that a visit to Mauthausen was an unforgettable experience, –unfortunately. As one XII Corps Headquarters officer wrote home: "It is really the smell that makes a visit to a Death Camp stark reality. The smell and the stink of the dead and the dying. The smell and stink of the starving. Yes, it is the smell, the stink, the odor of a Death Camp that makes it burn in the nostrils and memory. I will always smell Mauthausen, just as I can still smell the bodies we found from the Flossenburg death march. ..."

MEN OF XII CORPS UNITS THAT OVERRAN SUCH CAMPS AS FLOSSENBURG WILL SEE THEM IN DREAMS FOR YEARS



(1) Tunnel entrance to the Flossenburg concentration camp near Weiden, Germany, where slave laborers by the thousand were worked and starved to death, beaten, machinegunned and hanged. This gateway into Hell might well have borne the inscription from Dante's Inferno: "All hope abandon, you who enter here." (2) General view of Flossenburg, 30 April 45, shortly after the camp had been overrun by the 97th Infantry Division. Workers were herded to labor and the nearby Messerschmitt factory and quarry. (3) Prison laborers prepared to carry more victims to the Flossenburg crematory furnaces. 30 April. (4) Those that we found alive were walking skeletons. (5) The notorious "Flossenburg Death March" started from this camp: SS guards attempted to march the workers beyond the reach of advancing American columns, and shot down all those unable to keep up the pace, like those under examination by infantrymen of the 97th Infantry Division. 1 May.