

>> Interviewer: Okay, we'll begin now. If you'll tell me, please, first of all, your full name and where you are from.

>> Wise: I'm Allen Carson Wise. I was born and reared in Saluda, South Carolina, and I've lived there all my life.

>> Interviewer: And when were you born?

>> Wise: In August of 1918.

>> Interviewer: So that makes you about?

>> Wise: Seventy-three.

>> Interviewer: Seventy-three. Dr. Wise, tell me, first of all, how you came to be in World War II.

>> Wise: Well, the war of course began at Pearl Harbor, and I was in medical school at the time. They accelerated our educational process so that we finished in the spring of 1943. And I had applied for internship at Columbia Hospital and came to Columbia Hospital on a rotating type internship there. You're supposed to go 12 months, but after 9, the Army sent for us and sent a good group of us at Columbia Hospital to a medical field service school in Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, and then sent us out to our various assignments.

>> Interviewer: And you were with which company?

>> Wise: I was sent -- ultimately, I landed at Camp Swift, Texas, where I joined the 2nd battalion, 405th infantry, or the 102nd division.

>> Interviewer: And this was in 1944?

>> Wise: This was in 1944.

>> Interviewer: Okay. If you'll try to remember back to that time -- and you're in the service, and you're in this country, you're still in America -- what were you hearing about the war in Germany? Were you hearing about any of the atrocities?

>> Wise: I can't recall that we were. Of course we were very interested in the war because we realized that, sooner or later, if things didn't turn out well, that we would have to go and participate in some of the combat. But I don't recall -- I can't recall much about atrocities. As a matter of fact, I can't recall that atrocities ever had much meaning to me until I witnessed one.

>> Interviewer: Okay, let's move on to that then. You were a doctor in the Army.

>> Wise: I was the medical man for an infantry battalion, the 2nd battalion of the 405th infantry.

>> Interviewer: And the incident that you witnessed took place where?

>> Wise: Near Gardelegen, Germany. It happened in April of 1945. The war was approaching its end. All units of our army had crossed the Rhine while rushing pell-mell for the Elbe River, and the Russians were coming from the other direction. And...where we -- I lost my train of thought.

>> Interviewer: That's quite all right. You were rushing for the Elbe River.

>> Wise: Yeah, and we were just traveling mostly in convoy and not meeting much resistance. On the -- I looked it up today -- on the 13th of April, which was on a Friday, our unit ran into our advanced guard, and they had been ambushed and were all lying dead on the side of the road. We stopped there, or shortly afterwards, and prepared. The next morning, we had been ordered to take the town of Gardelegen, Germany, which had a Luftwaffe airport nearby.

The next morning, we deployed in sort of combat formations, and we did meet resistance, and we had about a seven-hour fight on our hands, mostly from nondescript German soldiers, I think, and using machine guns and rifles, firing direct fire. Casualties were not real heavy, and after about seven hours on that date -- that was on Saturday -- there was a negotiated surrender, and we moved on into the town of Gardelegen and to the military airport. We spent the night there.

The next morning, when some of our patrols and units were out policing up and looking around, scouting around, they ran across this barn, which was not far from the airport, and there, they found a horrible scene. They found a barn sitting on a hill, a large barn, a masonry barn. It had brick foundations. And inside that barn, they found a large number of people, who were emaciated people who were obviously prisoners of some sort or another, some of whom had on the striped prison uniform; some didn't. And they had been burned to death inside that barn.

Around that barn, they had -- it was some -- they had dug graves. The Germans had had the prisoners -- I think the Germans -- dig those trenches for mass burial later on. But our getting there as soon as we did, they had to leave. Now, all this was done, according to what information we got, by German SS troops and not by the troops who had engaged us in combat the day before. And they were no longer on the premises. They had parted

and were gone. We didn't get them. They did find seven survivors.

The...about 300 of the people who were murdered there were still in the barn, and I went up there to see what it looked like. And I saw these people all piled up at the doorways where they had been, with their hands, trying to tunnel out of that barn. This barn was approximately 100 feet long and 50 feet wide. I don't know how you got a thousand of 'em in there, but that's what it turned out to be. But at any rate, I saw these people piled one on top of another. They were burned badly, but I got the impression that more of 'em suffocated than actually burned to death.

I say seven of these people had survived, and one was -- told a story that we can talk about, if you wish, later, or whenever you wish. But I didn't stay long. I saw enough to turn my stomach, and I didn't care to look at it any longer. It was not the kind of thing that you would want to look at.

>> Interviewer: Particularly as a doctor --

>> Wise: Yeah.

>> Interviewer: -- used to saving life, and there was nothing you could do to help any of these people.

>> Wise: They were all dead. The ones who survived had been sent to someplace else by -- I don't know where they went, but they were not evacuated through the military channel. I suppose they were sent to institutions within the town of Gardelegen. But I say there -- they, they did -- seven of them did survive.

Outside, in these trenches, the Germans had taken some of these people who had burned to death and deposited 'em in these trenches, and it was their intention to cover 'em up. And of

course, I suppose, if that had happened, then there wouldn't have been anything known about it. But we got there just a little too early, and they had to leave.

>> Interviewer: You have some pictures there. Would you like to --

>> Wise: Yes. I brought my division history, and I think it's hard to believe, what it looked like. This was at the door. This is a barn. This is a picture of the barn. This is a picture of the trenches that were dug around there where the bodies were supposed to be deposited and buried in mass. And these two pictures are pictures at the doorways of these piled-up bodies of these poor people, and they were all emaciated slave laborers and what have you. But it was just a horrible scene and just beyond my -- I can't describe it, and it's not the kind of thing that I cared about watching or looking at.

Our general the next day -- this was on a Sunday when this was found, and he sent to the town and got the Bürgermeister and had him assemble all the people that they could get at the town of Gardelegen out at this spot, at the barn. And he showed these people. He made them look at it, all that he could get out there. And then he ordered these people to take each one of these bodies and prepare it in some fashion and to bury it in an individual grave. And this is a picture of the services they had after the citizens in Gardelegen had taken all of those 1,016 survivors and buried each of them in an individual grave.

>> Interviewer: 1,016...

>> Wise: I mean -- survivors -- I mean people who had died, not survivors.

>> Interviewer: 1,016 victims.

>> Wise: Yeah, victims. And he made 'em promise to perpetually care for these graves. I don't know how well that promise has been kept, but.

>> Interviewer: Dr. Wise, what did the people of the town have to say when they saw this?

>> Wise: I couldn't tell you because I was not present when they were there, and I don't know. One of the Nazi -- the Nazi chief in that town was missing. They couldn't find him. They arrested his wife, and she committed suicide.

But I don't know about the people. I suspect few of 'em were surprised, maybe. I don't know. Because Gardelegen is not that big a place and I'm sure that by that time -- and I say the war was approaching its end -- no matter what they thought in the beginning, I think they were beginning to see the truth of the matter, and I suspect a lot of them had been misled. But I couldn't give you their reaction. I don't know.

>> Interviewer: Can you go back at this point and tell me about the survivor from this? You said there was a story about the survivor. What was the story that he told?

>> Wise: This was a Hungarian survivor, and he said that initially there was about 2,000 of 'em who were east of Berlin working in an aircraft parts factory, political prisoners and slave labor, and that as the Russians approached, they tried to stay ahead of them. Well, they finally reached the point that they had gone as far west as they could go because we were coming. And that's what happened at this place at Gardelegen. We were approaching from the west, and they couldn't go any farther, so they did away with 'em. I suppose they were trying to hide the evidence of their mistreatment of political prisoners, slave labor, and people who didn't agree with the Nazi creed.

>> Interviewer: Were these people Jewish people, or were there other citizens as well?

>> Wise: Not all of these people were Jewish. There were some Jewish, and you can see that because, on these crosses, you see the Star of David here scattered throughout this cemetery. But not all of them were Jewish. There was -- the -- this incident -- you know, the Holocaust, when I think of the Holocaust, I think of a planned process of elimination of the Jewish people: so many walk through the gas chambers today, and so many tomorrow, and go out and get some more. And that, to me, is what I thought of the Holocaust. What happened at Gardelegen, I think, was more an effort on the part of the SS to cover up their mistreatment of slave labor and political prisoners. It was not planned. It just happened because circumstances were such that they had to do something and were trying to hide the evidence.

>> Interviewer: When you went on back to your barracks after having seen this, do you remember what you were thinking?

>> Wise: I don't know. I had seen so much, I guess, by that time that maybe it didn't have as much impact on me as it would on lots of people. But it was -- I don't have the words to describe the horror of it. These people were scratching with their bare hands, trying to dig out and tunnel out under this doorway, and that, as a matter of fact, is how several of 'em got out. But I say I didn't spend much time. I saw it, I saw what had happened, and I didn't feel like it was something that I cared to witness any longer.

>> Interviewer: You finished the war in Germany?

>> Wise: Yes. The war was over a couple months later, and I came back. I was discharged from the Army in January of '46. My

mother died, and I think that's -- I didn't have enough points. I was all ready to go to Japan. But fortunately, I didn't have to go. Well, it, it...it worked out. I didn't have that much time, so my congressman pulled a few strings and...

>> Interviewer: When you came back home, did you talk about the incident at Gardelegen at all?

>> Wise: No, no.

>> Interviewer: Did you talk to --

>> Wise: I felt like Gardelegen was just like one flea on a dog's back. Because we had -- we knew that they had death places where they put people to death by the thousands. So Gardelegen to me -- even a thousand people, at that particular time, I suppose didn't register on me. But now that I think about it, today it seems worse to me than it did then, I suspect.

>> Interviewer: Once you came back and everyone was talking about the other atrocities, what was it like in this country at that point?

>> Wise: In?

>> Interviewer: In this country after the war, what was it like here? Were people just horrified?

>> Wise: I don't know. I couldn't -- I didn't -- I, I can't -- I didn't talk about it, and I don't recall ever having talked with anyone about it. If they had seen it, they would have been. But it's hard to imagine 300 people in piles trying to get out of a flaming building. And there were a thousand in there, and I don't see how you got a thousand in there, but we counted 'em -- or they counted 'em.

>> Interviewer: Do you have anything else that you would like to say at this point?

>> Wise: I don't know of anything more that I can tell you, unless -- well, I really don't know. I'm sure my experience was very limited as far as witnessing things of this kind. Other than that, I don't suppose I saw anything that would come under the classification of mistreatment of people, whether they were friend or enemy.

>> Interviewer: Thank you, Dr. Wise, for your time. Thanks for coming and telling your story.

>> Wise: Okay.

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