

Ethel Stafford

00:00:05

>> Interviewer: I've been here for three years now.

>> Stafford: Where are you from?

>> Interviewer: Connecticut.

>> Stafford: Oh, I'm from New York originally.

>> Interviewer: Where about?

>> Stafford: St. Albans.

>> Interviewer: Oh, okay.

>> Stafford: Long Island. That's where I was born.

>> Interviewer: Uh-huh. I feel like we're neighbors.

>> Stafford: Yeah. So I knew all about the Nazi Party back then because our neighbors were Nazis.

>> Interviewer: Oh, really?

>> Stafford: Yeah.

>> Interviewer: Maybe that's something we can --

>> Stafford: I used to go out to Camp Yaphank when I was little.

>> Interviewer: It'll be a few seconds before we start.

>> Stafford: Oh, okay. I used to go out to Camp Yaphank because my neighbor didn't speak -- well, she didn't speak English. So her mother was a real Nazi.

>> Interviewer: Okay. Could you tell us your full name?

>> Stafford: Ethel J. Stafford.

>> Interviewer: And where and when were you born?

>> Stafford: I was born in St. Albans, New York, January the 8th, 1923.

>> Interviewer: Could you tell us a bit about your life before the war?

>> Stafford: Well, I lived in a -- you would like to know the type of community, I presume. I lived in a community that was predominantly Scandinavian and German. It was an immigrant neighborhood is what it was. And my father was Norwegian, my mother, Scotch -- and my older brother was born in Scotland -- and my younger brother and I were born in this country. I went through the school system there, and when I graduated from Andrew Jackson High School, I went into nurses' training in Cumberland Hospital in Brooklyn, New York. Graduated from there in January 1944. Went to work for Brewster Aeronautical Corporation as an industrial nurse, and in the end of June 1944, I went in the Army. After basic training, I was at Halloran General Hospital on Long Island -- no, on Staten Island; I'm sorry.

Then I got my orders to go overseas. I thought it was a mistake. I hadn't been in the Army that long. And shipped out with the 113th Evac Hospital. We landed in Great Britain, and we were sent to Wales, to Aberporth, Wales. While in Aberporth, I was also sent to the 34th General Hospital on detached service in Stockbridge, England. We were there till just before Christmas, went back to Wales, and then from Wales, we went to Southampton and landed at Normandy. We went over the side of the ship on a -- it's not -- let me see -- like, a rope ladder, but, you know, four or five people could go over at the same time into a landing craft. Then we landed there, and then we went to Rouen in France, and then from there, we went to Maastricht and Aachen, Germany. Then from Aachen, we went to Viersen, Germany. Then the hospital -- we were supposed to go to Menden, but the Army was moving so fast, we just went through Menden and Hannover, and we ended up at Gardelegen.

>> Interviewer: Mm-hmm. What were your responsibilities?

>> Stafford: I was -- I ended up being an operating room supervisor in what we called Operating Room Number 3, and Operating Room Number 3, it was all injuries from the neck up, so you worked, say, 12 to 15 hours a day, one nurse on each shift. You would have three operating room tables going at the same time, and I would scrub up, and I had a corpsman, and he would assist at one operation. I would assist at the other two using sponge sticks. And the recovery room was right outside

the operating room, so in between scrubbing up, I'd run out and have to suction everybody and check them because we just didn't have enough help.

>> Interviewer: Who were your patients?

>> Stafford: We had patients with the 102nd Division, the 101st Airborne Division. We had patients who were Germans, soldiers. I really didn't pay that much attention to how many divisions we were taking care of because we were with the Ninth Army, which was General Montgomery's. We came under General Montgomery. And the American commander was General Simpson. Our commanding officer was Colonel Seth Gayle. And it was sort of interesting in a way because when we would have the German patients, of course, we always had somebody from the Army interrogating them to find out what was going on on the German side, but we didn't discriminate so far as care between a German soldier or an American soldier. We all did the best we could.

>> Interviewer: What years were you in each location?

>> Stafford: Well, let's see. In England and Wales, I was there November and December of 1944. Then in January of 1945, it was in France. And then in February -- I'm trying to remember because we were not allowed to keep a diary, so I'm just sort of guessing. February of 1945, we were probably in Aachen, and then in March -- February and March, we left there -- we left there, I guess, sometime in February, and then we were in Viersen in 1945. And then in April -- it had to be April that we were in Gardelegen.

>> Interviewer: Did you know ahead of time anything about what was happening to the Jews?

>> Stafford: No, not really. About the only thing I knew concerning concentration camps was the Russian camps in Siberia, and this was because when I was in school, we were studying so much about it. But I didn't really know about the German camps.

>> Interviewer: Did your experience with the German soldiers teach you anything that you hadn't known before?

>> Stafford: Well, I was at Camp Rucker in Alabama, and I had three barracks -- you might as well call them barracks -- three buildings.

And one was psychiatric, one was prisoners, American prisoners, you know, who had gone AWOL, and the other was German prisoners. Well, the German prisoners, I mean, the average soldier was a pretty nice fellow. They were very polite. They were studious. They did anything you asked them to do. I didn't find them, basically, any different than our soldiers.

>> Interviewer: Could you tell us now about your experience going into Gardelegen?

>> Stafford: Well, when we arrived there, it was in the wee hours of the morning. It was maybe 5:00, 6:00 in the morning. And what we all noticed was that there were no white flags out. Normally, when an evacuation hospital -- because we were a mobile unit -- would arrive in a location, it would have been secured by the military. Well, we all looked around. There were no white flags, so we were a little bit leery about it. I guess I could show you these pictures now. And this is how Gardelegen looked when we arrived. Our commanding officer -- of course, I was young, and he was a lot smarter than me and the rest of us -- he knew what was going on, so he went into Gardelegen and told them that we were taking over the town of Gardelegen and wanted to know was there a hospital in the area, and it was a military hospital.

So we went to the area where there was this German military hospital, and at that time during the war, if there was a hospital standing or a building standing, we would take it over because it was much better to use a building, even if the windows were gone, than tents. So we -- this is what the nurses looked like when we arrived in Gardelegen. This is the military hospital in Gardelegen, and this shows our ambulances moving the German patients out. So we took it over.

Then, maybe a couple of days passed. I'm not sure of how many days because it's been so long ago. We heard rumors there was a camp there, so we went out to check it. I went because I guess I'm just naturally curious. We went out there, and I took pictures of the area, and this is the building. It's a stone building, and the walls must have been at least 2 to 3 feet thick. In this picture, it shows two openings, but there was a third opening, and on the opposite side of this building, there were openings, the same way with these heavy wooden doors. Well, when I saw what happened, I mean, I just couldn't believe

it. I, I, I could not believe that people could be that inhumane to other groups of people.

>> Interviewer: what did you see exactly?

>> Stafford: In this building, there were bodies that were burnt. And when we first looked at it, talking to the soldiers that were there, we had first thought it was flame throwers, but then I figured it couldn't be a flame thrower because it would have engulfed the whole body. These were burnt like from the waist down. And what happened was, they apparently put straw in these buildings -- in this building, I should say -- and set it afire. Closed the doors where these people could not get out.

And this is a picture here where it shows that these individuals tried to claw their way out, digging the dirt to get out. This one right here shows he had a bullet wound where he was shot trying to get away from the flames. This one, this picture -- it's hard to tell, but these are bodies, and one of them, it looked like his head had been bashed in with the butt of a gun, say, a rifle, which would be similar to the carbines that we had. At the time, I think it was estimated there was 1500 people burnt alive, but the final count, I believe, came up to 1800 people.

And what amazed me is, why did they do this? The war was winding down. They were burnt the night we arrived. We arrived, like, the wee hours of the morning, and they started burning, say, like that night before. And the stench, oh, it, it, it was terrible. It, it, it's just unbelievable that people could do this to other people. Because we later discovered that there was a farm nearby, and in this farm were horses, beautiful horses, and in talking to the people who took care of these horses, Hitler had ordered these horses evacuated from Berlin so that they wouldn't be harmed. And there were Lipizzan horses there. One of them was the French national champion because they had confiscated horses willy-nilly, I guess, from people. They were all thoroughbreds. They had a training paddock for these horses. You could eat off the floor in that stable, it was so clean. These horses were so well taken care of, but yet, the cruelty that they did to these people, innocent young men, it just blows my mind. I just don't understand it.

we did get survivors from the camp. It was a work camp. They -- this is where they were also building, I guess, the V-2 rockets, and they had field there, and that's where the rockets sat on top of the plane. The plane could go so far and then return and let this thing go. So it was a slave labor camp.

we also found building after building of medical instruments, and there's another thing that's ironic. According to the Geneva Convention, in war, you can use -- like, if there was instruments in that hospital that we took over, we were allowed to use them, but we had to leave them when we left. So you always had to keep inventory on your instruments, but you won't believe this, but our instruments were marked, Made in Germany. All our instrument packs were from German companies. So it was a little difficult, keeping track of everything.

>> Interviewer: You said you saw survivors.

>> Stafford: Yes.

>> Interviewer: Could you describe them for us?

>> Stafford: This is a picture of some of the survivors that we -- came to work for us. They volunteered. This young man was the one I was the friendliest, who was Mario [phonetic]. And it was difficult communicating with him because he was Polish, but we could sort of communicate with hands and pointing and this and that. And these are the young men who were also from the camp. And when the war ended in May, we were required to leave the area because we were going to be sent to the CBI, which would be the China-Burma-India area, and we left for Giessen to a staging area.

>> Interviewer: Did they, did they tell you why they had been in the camps?

>> Stafford: The only thing we knew is that they were captured by the Germans at -- this is all I knew; I'm sure there's other people knew a lot more than me -- and brought there to be slave labor. That's all I know. We did, we did make the Germans in the town come out to the site. Of course, they didn't want to. And we made them bury each body in an individual grave. And this is just one section of the cemetery of where these bodies were buried. I was also on duty one night. This was after May the 7th. I was on night duty, and the MPs brought in

this man. He looked to be 50 or 55 at that time. And he had slashed his wrists. He tried to commit suicide. And the MP said, "Sew up this blankety-blank individual. We want him to stand trial." He was responsible for the atrocity at Gardelegen. So I asked the soldier, "well, who or what is he?" And he said, "He was the *Bürgermeister*." But he also must have been in the military. I don't know that much about it as to whether a *Bürgermeister* would have that much authority because I was under the impression that all these camps were run by the military.

>> Interviewer: Did you get the chance to talk to any of the Germans from the town?

>> Stafford: I talked to them, but not about the atrocity. They -- you know, it was, "*Ich kann nicht verstehen Sie, American.*" They didn't understand the Americans anytime you asked them anything, and nobody was ever a Nazi, nobody. They all denied knowledge of what was going on. You know, that's as far as I know about them.

>> Interviewer: When you told them to come and dig the graves, how did they react?

>> Stafford: Well, they didn't have much choice because it was military. It wasn't, per se, me. It was the American military government who forced them to do this. They didn't like it. And even when we went to Berlin -- we were the first hospital set up in Berlin, and it was just amazing how these Germans reacted. If you understood a little German, you knew what they were saying about you, and the remarks about the Americans were very derogatory.

>> Interviewer: What kind of remarks did you hear?

>> Stafford: *Du verrückt*, which, "You're crazy in the head." And they just pretended to be nice to your face, and they did understand English, a lot of them, but pretended that they didn't. Now, this was more the civilian population. You didn't seem to run into that with, with the, what I would call the high-class military. I don't mean the Gestapo or the SS troops, but the regular army. They were much more professional.

>> Interviewer: Now, do you have a sense of the background of the people who were buried?

>> Stafford: From what I understand and what we were told at that time, the majority of them were Polish, but that there were some Dutch people there who -- I'm talking about those that were annihilated -- were from the Netherlands. As I understood it, they were political prisoners who disagreed with the German precept of the master race, so forth and so on.

>> Interviewer: Do you know about the religious background of those people?

>> Stafford: Most of them that were burnt were of the Christian faith. There were Jewish people also there in this camp.

>> Interviewer: What was the experience of seeing the bodies and seeing the whole situation like for you?

>> Stafford: It was such a shock that -- you're in a state of shock for days. You just couldn't believe that what you saw was what you saw. Now, that may sound stupid, but you just couldn't believe that people could do that to another human being. I mean, what kind of monster would try to annihilate people in such a manner? Why do you want to annihilate a whole race of people, a group of people because their religious persuasion isn't what you want it to be?

>> Interviewer: What were the reactions of others around you?

>> Stafford: Those that saw it, like myself, for some reason, we just never discussed it. And I think it was a case of, if you keep talking about it, you would just go out of your mind. It was too painful, much too painful to sit around and mull about it. You just didn't do it. That's -- may that sounds surprising to you, but we, we just didn't talk about it.

>> Interviewer: When you left, did you talk about it later?

>> Stafford: No, no. The only time I talked about it, I would say, was when my children were in high school and there were studying that period, and then they'd ask me questions about it.

>> Interviewer: And what was that like for you?

>> Stafford: Well, it was, it was hard in a way, but then in another way, they had to be aware of what happened to people in Germany in the

'30s and the '40s. It, it, it, it seems unbelievable that that could have happened, and I know there are people out there who say, Oh, it never happened. That's just Jewish propaganda. And I want my children and my grandchildren to know that that is not propaganda, that it actually happened. And I want my children to grow up where they respect people for the person that person is, not because this person may be Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim. If they live up to their religion, you respect that person for that. I don't like them to grow up in a bigoted society. This may sound strange to some people, but I think you have to judge a person for what they are, not from what you heard about them.

>> Interviewer: I appreciate your saying this and for taking the time to talk with us.

>> Stafford: Oh, you're quite welcome.

>> Interviewer: Thank you very much. Do you have any questions to ask of me or any other comments you would like to make before we close?

>> Stafford: No, I don't think -- well, the only thing I would hope is that people learn and try to be a little bit kinder towards each other.

>> Interviewer: Thank you.

>> Stafford: Oh, I'm a nervous wreck.

>> Male speaker: They are rolling, Rebecca?

>> Female speaker: Okay, [indistinct] are rolling.

[indistinct]

>> Male speaker: [indistinct] It has, like I said, it could be any quaint little town in Europe, but I don't think they really [indistinct].

[indistinct]

>> Male speaker: what's that on the left side? Is that a dead body? [indistinct] And on this, you can even see the burns -- where it was burned on top of the doors.

00:30:26