

George Chassy

00:00:11

>> Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Okay. Okay, Canon Chassy, if we could just begin by asking your name and where you're from.

>> Chassy: I'm the Reverend Canon George Chassy, an Episcopal priest residing in Columbia, South Carolina. I'm retired from the active ministry, and prior to that time, I was the Canon Administrator for the Diocese of Upper South Carolina.

>> Interviewer: Did you grow up in South Carolina?

>> Chassy: No, no. I'm a native of Massachusetts.

>> Interviewer: Massachusetts, okay.

>> Chassy: But I've been in South Carolina now for a number of years.

>> Interviewer: Okay, so you're a transplant by now. You're an honorary local by now.

>> Chassy: Absolutely, and actually, we moved south out of Massachusetts in 1947 --

>> Interviewer: Ah, okay.

>> Chassy: -- to Florida and then into South Carolina.

>> Interviewer: Right. If I could just ask you, before you went into the Air Force, what sort of work were you doing?

>> Chassy: I was a student.

>> Interviewer: You were a student.

>> Chassy: This was back years ago, and I was a student at a state college there in my hometown of Bridgewater, Massachusetts. And I enlisted in the Air Force right after Pearl Harbor; in fact, I still got that date indelibly imprinted in my mind when I enlisted, which was the 29th of December, 1941.

>> Interviewer: Mm-hmm. So you remember hearing about -- you remember Pearl Harbor was a very vivid --

>> Chassy: Oh, yes.

>> Interviewer: Where were you when you heard the news?

>> Chassy: Well, I was with my fiancé, who is now my wife, and if I recall, we were down at the local drugstore having a Coke when word came that they -- the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor.

>> Interviewer: And so within a few weeks, you signed up.

>> Chassy: Right. I left college and signed up.

>> Interviewer: Where were you sent initially?

>> Chassy: Well, we took our oath in Boston, Massachusetts, and then we went to Fort Devens out in western Massachusetts, which was a military establishment, similar to Fort Jackson, that was established prior to World War One. And from there, I was shipped to Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, and then from there to Hamilton Field, California. And it was at Hamilton Field that I finally, in 1943 -- '42, I was assigned to the outfit that I remained with until the end of the war.

>> Interviewer: And where did you see action in Europe?

>> Chassy: We went to England first, and I was in a fighter group. I was the crew chief in a P-51, and we first flew fighter escort for the Eighth Air Force bombers from England over into Germany. When the invasion came, we were the first fighter group to operate out of the Normandy beachhead, and we -- in fact, I went to Normandy and landed Omaha Beach on D Plus 11 in 1943 and -- or '44. Yeah, '44. And then we went from there down into Brittany, and from Brittany, went across France to a place outside of Saint -- outside of Paris was a little town called Saint-Dizier, and from there, we went down to -- near Nazi France. And from there, we went into Germany and went to

Ansbach, and from Ansbach, we went to a place called Herzogenaurach, which is a little town, but it's most famous now because it's the headquarters for one of these manufacturers that manufactures sports shoes.

>> Interviewer: Uh-huh.

>> Chassy: Adidas. I think it's Adidas. Anyway, but it was a little, small town there, and so that's where we were when the war ended.

>> Interviewer: When you finally went over into Germany, how did it feel for you to be beyond German territory?

>> Chassy: Well, it -- you have to understand that, that in those years, the great villain of the world was Adolf Hitler and his whole crew, along with Tojo in Japan. And for those of us that were young in that age, the great victory was to get onto German soil in order that we could defeat this, this great enemy of democracy. And prior to that time, we had participated in several campaigns that had led us to this point. And one of the interesting things about our fighter group is that we -- our tactical mission was to fly air support for Patton's Third Army, which was an interesting experience in itself. But to get on German soil, I mean, we were beginning to achieve the kind of, the kind of victory that we were there to do. I mean, it's a -- it was a great mission, I mean, to defeat what was perceived correctly as a great enemy and a great evil power, I mean, that was simply out to enslave the world.

>> Interviewer: As an American military man, had you heard any rumors? Had you heard any information? Was there any discussion about what was going on in terms of the treatment of the Jews?

>> Chassy: Not as I recall. I don't, I don't recall any of it while we were stationed in England or in France. I remember as we, as we got down closer to that period of time when we were beginning to push on across the river into Germany that there were beginning to be conversations about this, and little things

would be picked up. But when we got down deep into Germany, especially when we took up our first, our first station in Ansbach, then it was -- we began to hear more things, I mean, because the Allied troops were beginning to reach some of these places. And that's when we began to realize that there was more to this -- to what was going on than we had realized.

>> Interviewer: So you, then, had heard rumors from previous troops that had gone in.

>> Chassy: Yeah.

>> Interviewer: And what -- do you remember what your reaction was? what did you think about these things? Did you -- what -- how did you feel about these rumors you were hearing?

>> Chassy: Well, at first, you, you say, you know, one human being can't do this to another human being. I mean, it's, it's, it's incredible, you know, that this could happen. But I was a student of history before I enlisted, and, and I kept up with things, but for me personally, when I began to connect things that they had done when Hitler first came to power, what they had done to Jewish merchants and Jewish families and other things, you began to say, Hey, there is a possibility of this, but until I see it with my own eyes, if I can, I mean, I'm going to reserve complete judgment till that time. But you know, I brought this along. When, you know -- I picked this up in our air base in Germany, and, you know, this sort of symbolizes what that whole era was like, and like I told you before we began here a few moments ago, this is not a stage prop. This is a real thing which I keep simply to remind me, I mean, of what can be. I mean, it's, it's -- it is not a great witness to man's humanity, but to man's inhumanity.

>> Interviewer: Let me take you back to your mentioning that until you saw it with your own eyes. Let's get to that point in the story. Where were you when you came across the camp? Tell us, tell us that story.

>> Chassy: Okay. It was in the, in the early spring of 1945, and we were, as I said earlier, stationed at this, at this air base which was a former German base in Ansbach. I remember one thing, if I might --

>> Interviewer: Sure.

>> Chassy: I remember one thing about this base that we liked so much. It was a fairly permanent base, and we were in a brick barracks with tile showers, and it really was pretty good living, considering we'd spent most of our time in tents and pup tents up to that time.

>> Interviewer: So that was pretty luxurious.

>> Chassy: That was sort of luxurious, but anyway, we, we had two of our fighters that, on a mission, were forced down at a, really, an abandoned German strip up north of Ansbach, up in the vicinity of Erfurt, and Erfurt is not far from Weimar, and if you remember any of your European history, there was that short-lived democratic attempt called the Weimar Republic that existed in Germany right after World War One. So this was right near Erfurt, and there were -- several of us were dispatched up there with two replacement propellers and all we needed to do this. And it was quite a trip, and it's too bad I can't show you on a map. But anyway, it was quite a trip from Ansbach up through because we were passing through the Allied forces that were moving up towards the front all the time. I remember the gate specifically because on this journey, we learned that Franklin Roosevelt had died.

And so we arrived at the place, and we repaired the two aircraft that we had to repair and got them operating again, and they flew back to the base. And since we had some time, we thought we would look around and see what we could see in that part of Germany. And at that moment one day, I think it was a British colonel came through and mentioned that there was a concentration camp not far from there. So we said, "Let's go see

what we can do.” And it was in Ohrdruf, which is a very small town south and west of Erfurt.

So we took off. And I can still remember, as we approached this town, there was a -- just a pall and, and, and a sense of death around, and I experienced this before when -- if you go through a town like Saint-Lô that’s been thoroughly bombed and beaten into the ground and there’s still bodies buried under the rubble, there’s a certain odor that permeates the air. And this was what we experienced as we approached the village, and the concentration camp was out from the village some ways. And we went there and drove through the gate and got permission to tour the facilities. Now, as I got the story from one of the American officers there, the German people in the village said, “We did not realize this was happening. We did not know this was going on. We thought this was some other kind of facility.”

>> Interviewer: They had -- and those people, they had already told that to --

>> Chassy: Yeah.

>> Interviewer: Yeah, and so you were told that that’s what their reaction was.

>> Chassy: The American commander says, “I want every able-bodied person in the village to come up there, and I want you to see, yourself.” And they were given the task of removing the bodies and the remains of those that had been cremated and laying them out. Unfortunately, the pictures that I was able to take that day, it was a cloudy day, and they don’t show up well on camera, but they’re here, I mean, and, you know, as we looked at before, it, it shows them laid out and what they are, and I’ve labeled them that day that I got them developed.

>> Interviewer: When you first entered the camp, do you remember the very first thing that you saw?

>> Chassy: Yeah. I saw all these remains wrapped in sheets being laid out, just hundreds upon hundreds upon hundreds that were being laid out for burial.

>> Interviewer: And that was your -- that was the first sight that greeted you.

>> Chassy: That was the first, yeah. And it was a whole series of one-story buildings that were scattered around, and there was a big barbed wire fence, and there were the typical gun towers and all of that. And we began to wander through this, this facility, and what I remember and what I was told, I'll try to relay to you so you can get the picture. I mean, there was -- one of the things they did was to take, at various times, the able-bodied men of the camp along with those that were not so well, they'd take them out to the woods, and they'd cut a lot of timber, and then they would execute, by machine gun fire or other means -- and you could tell it was machine gun fire because some of the bodies had it across the chest -- execute them, and then the able-bodied ones would stack them up -- a layer of bodies, a layer of cordwood, a layer of bodies -- up probably a funeral pyre of 30 x 30 x 30, and soak it down with gasoline and burn it. And then laying across this place was all these long pipe poles that they used to mix it up so they could get it to burning well.

There was another place where they, where they did executions by hanging. There was another place that they would stack bodies. They had so many bodies, they couldn't get rid of them. They stacked bodies and sprinkled them with lime and other things like that, and that's how they tried to get rid of them. And that's basically what you saw. I don't recall now what they did at that camp, whether there was any manufacturing that went on of any small -- manufacturing or whether it was just a plain prison. I don't recall whether there was any gas ovens there or not, but there could have been. But I don't recall that.

>> Interviewer: Now, you had heard some kind of vague rumors about -- previous to your entering Ohrdruf. When you actually saw these things, were you prepared for, you know, for the reality, even though you had heard rumblings about what was going on?

>> Chassy: No, you're not prepared. You're not prepared to see hundreds and hundreds of people that have been put to death that, you know, their only crime is either that they were Jewish or that they were Polish but weren't of value anymore. I mean, it was, it was an incredible experience to see how human beings, I mean, creatures of God, I mean, had been used as things simply for the, for the so-called establishment of a master race.

>> Interviewer: When, when the townspeople were rounded up to come and look at what had been done, were you part of the detail and brought them back?

>> Chassy: No, no.

>> Interviewer: Do you know how that was done? Were there German speakers in the unit who came and got them, or, or --

>> Chassy: I would assume that they -- I can only assume that there was American military government officials that did that. You know, we were not part of the force that was controlling the camp. We were not a part of the force that liberated it. We simply appeared there and were given the opportunity to view what had happened.

>> Interviewer: How long in all were you there? How much time did you spend there?

>> Chassy: Oh, half a day.

>> Interviewer: Half a day. And how long, then, did your unit remain in that area?

>> Chassy: Oh, it was shortly after that that our detail, which was simply a, a very small temporary force that went up for a

particular mission, we left and went back to Ansbach in a couple of days.

>> Interviewer: And when did you eventually come back, because that was pretty shortly before the end of the war. When did --

>> Chassy: Yeah, we, we went from Ansbach, and then we went to a -- we were moved to Herzogenaurach shortly after that, and then the war ended. And I was fortunate that I had the opportunity to attend the University of Paris, so I spent the summer of 1945 at the University of Paris under a special arrangement between the French and American government for American troops.

>> Interviewer: The GI Bill?

>> Chassy: Well, it was prior to the GI Bill, but it was an excellent opportunity. And then I came home in September of that year and was -- came back to the States almost two years to the day that I left.

>> Interviewer: If I could just take you back a bit, were there any -- did you actually encounter any survivors when you were in the camp? Were there still any -- were there still any inmates there?

>> Chassy: That, I can't recall. I -- it -- my impression is that the survivors had already been taken to hospitals in other places, but I could be wrong.

>> Interviewer: What -- the men -- your fellow -- the men from your detail, in your unit, do you remember the -- any discussions that you had had when you came across this? Did you share what was going on or --

>> Chassy: The main thing was, there wasn't much talking. I mean, you know, this was incredible. You know, it was incredible. You know, we don't believe that people could do this, I mean, and, and, and to many of us, I know, of that detail, and this was a small group from my fighter squadron. To

many of us, this was a -- validated all that we had done in terms of the war, the invasion, the whole thing.

>> Interviewer: It was very concrete then. It was right there. When you got back home finally after those very eventful two years, did you talk to friends and family about what you had seen there?

>> Chassy: Oh, yeah, yeah.

>> Interviewer: You did?

>> Chassy: Yeah, yeah, and that's why I've still got those two photographs. I mean, I've showed them around. So I used to teach history, and in fact, I came to South Carolina to teach American history at Rock Hill High School. And when we got to world war Two, I used to use the same story and same pictures and same illustrations.

>> Interviewer: Do you remember the general reaction? Were people incredulous when you told them this? Were they -- do you remember in general what kind of feelings your telling the story elicited in the listeners?

>> Chassy: Many said, you know, "we cannot let that happen again." Many said, "I just don't believe that people would do that." And others just said, "well, I wondered, and this affirms what I've wondered about."

>> Interviewer: How did you then eventually get into the ministry after your teaching stint?

>> Chassy: Well, that was a long story. I think, I think part of my experience in the war brought me to this, and, you know, not something that says, you know, I'm going to save the world by being a clergyman. I mean, not that. But I do remember that one of the things in my mind was that I really wanted to spend my life, however I could, building lives instead of destroying lives and to affirming people instead of using people. So

education was one way, but then I sort of got led into the Episcopal priesthood, and I'm glad I did.

>> Interviewer: What effect did that, that, that day in the middle of April of 1945 have on your life then?

>> Chassy: Well, I think -- and I don't want to be on a soapbox kind of thing, but one of the things that I've said at times has been on Ash Wednesday. You know, on Ash Wednesday, in the Christian tradition, we traditionally sign people with the sign of the cross made of ashes. And I've used the comparison that ashes, on one hand, tell this experience of this concentration camp. This is a sign of man's inhumanity to man. I mean, it's a sign of the depravity of humankind if left to their own devices without, without some guidance and help, primarily from outside themselves. And on the other hand, ashes in the Christian tradition and the sign of the cross is also a sign of the affirming of God's love for the world. I mean, and so you get these two contrasts, and that our task, it seems to me, is to labor in such wise and in such ways that we don't allow, I mean, that kind of racism and that kind of using people to explode out of hand. And the German people, many of them, were just as at fault -- they were at that time, and many of the church. But there were those, also, that were on the other side. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran clergyman who hanged about this same time in April in a concentration camp because of his stand against them.

>> Interviewer: Sorry; I wasn't able to hear you, Rose [phonetic]. Ah, okay. If I might ask, Canon Chassy, have you experienced -- in your experience, have your fellow clergyman discussed things that you've been just discussing right now, the, the, the meaning of the Holocaust or what lessons it can teach? Or has this been something that, in your experience, has come up through the years?

>> Chassy: Well, it's a -- I've never sat down with -- there's been times when, I know, and with other, other clergy people,

that we've talked about various things when I have brought up my experience and what it means in terms of man's relationship to himself and to others. But we've never -- I've never sat down and talked about the Holocaust per se.

>> Interviewer: You know that there's a very, a very large group of people who, out of either ignorance or through the revisionist movement, don't believe that the Holocaust happened, believe it's all a hoax or a myth. As a former teacher of history, are there a few words that you might like to say to somebody who would come to you and say, I don't believe it, that's just -- that's a, that's a myth, that's a hoax, that's just Jewish propaganda?

>> Chassy: I would say it did happen, and just briefly, I mean, that I'm here to witness to the fact that I saw the results in one place of what had happened. And that to say that it's a myth, I mean, is to distort history, and that I have the evidence, both imprinted in my mind and in my heart and on these pictures that it was there and that it was something that took place. How many were lost? I don't, I don't know the numbers, but I know that this concentration camp at Ohrdruf, you don't read about it like you read about some of these others, Auschwitz and Dachau and these others, but there were many of them there, and this is one, and this is the experience of this person at that place.

>> Interviewer: Canon Chassy, I'd like to thank you very, very much.

>> Chassy: Thank you.

>> Interviewer: Thank you, sir. Okay, Rose? Okay. You did very, very well.

>> Chassy: Oh, excellent, excellent.

>> Interviewer: Because I've talked to a number of people and --

>> Female speaker #1: Hold on just a second because you have the
--

>> Chassy: Oh, wait a minute. I'm walking off, I'm walking off with your microphone.

>> Interviewer: That happens all the time.

>> Female speaker #1: [indistinct] over to the light shoot, the
--

>> Female speaker #2: Allen [phonetic] said that he'd like to, he'd like to shoot that map that you brought along.

>> Chassy: Oh, okay.

>> Female speaker #2: So we need to do, I guess, whatever needs to be done to do that. Maybe you can even point?

>> Chassy: Yeah, I'll point it out.

>> Female speaker #1: Oh, are we going to shoot the map while he's in the chair? Of him holding the map?

>> Male speaker: Sure.

>> Female speaker #2: Yeah.

>> Interviewer: Is it in Greenville, the Diocese, the Upper Diocese for the upper part of the --

>> Female speaker #2: Have him point it out and kind of tell us what it is or whatever. Okay. Okay.

>> Chassy: Ready? All right. This is Ansbach. This is the base we first went to when we came into Germany. That is a -- was a permanent German Luftwaffe base that we occupied. Shortly thereafter, we went over to here to Herzogenaurach. That's where we were at the end of the war. But the concentration camp that I told you about is up here at Ohrdruf, which is just outside of Erfurt, which is a major German city and just west of Weimar, which was the headquarters of the old German Weimar Republic.

But this is the little town where they had that concentration camp.

>> Male speaker: [indistinct]

>> Female speaker #1: Okay.

>> Chassy: You got it?

>> Female speaker #2: Okay.

>> Female speaker #1: And we're going to have you unfold the armband. Once again, we're going to get a picture of that, too, and I'll take the -- we kind of got it in the shot, but they want to make sure they have it.

>> Chassy: Okay, if I can find it. High school students get a big fascination out of this, you know. You want me to say anything?

>> Female speaker #1: Okay. Let me --

>> Chassy: Do anything?

>> Female speaker #1: Let me tuck your mic back into here.

>> Chassy: Oh, okay.

>> Female speaker #1: Just the cord, and then when you turn it, as long as, like, the camera can see --

>> Chassy: Okay.

>> Female speaker #1: -- that's --

>> Chassy: All right. Oh, yeah. Do I have to say anything?

>> Female speaker #1: Mm-mm.

>> Female speaker #2: They're just rolling it on tape right now.

>> Interviewer: With this, with this picture. They're just trying to --

>> Chassy: Don't, don't have to say anything at all. That's good.

>> Female speaker #1: That good, Allen? Is that it? Okay, thank you.

00:30:18