

Paul Pritcher

00:00:45

>> Interviewer: Please tell us your name.

>> Pritcher: Paul Pritcher.

>> Interviewer: And tell us where you were born and in what year.

>> Pritcher: I was born in Orangeburg County near Holly Hill, South Carolina, in -- you want the date?

>> Interviewer: If you would share it with us.

>> Pritcher: 3-22 -- 3-16-22; sorry.

>> Interviewer: 1922. Tell us a little bit about what life was like growing up in Orangeburg County.

>> Pritcher: Well, I was the youngest of 12 children. Farmers, my father was, and the entire family at that time. And during the Depression, of course, is where my memory begins because I was only about eight years old when it began, and, oh, then it was hectic times so far as finances is concerned. But by the fact that we were members of a farming family, we did have sufficient food. Now, the actual cash money, that was a different story. We didn't have much of that, but we were able to get almost all of our food from the farm.

>> Interviewer: And did you go to the public schools?

>> Pritcher: Yes, I did. I went to Providence School, which is now burned down. I graduated in 1939, the 11th grade then, of course.

>> Interviewer: And how did you enter into the military service?

>> Pritcher: By choice of Uncle Sam. I was drafted. At the time, I had been working for the civil service down at the Charleston Naval Shipyard, and then I was drafted in November of 1943 and entered the service here in Fort Jackson. Then I was transferred down for basic training to Camp Shelby, Mississippi.

>> Interviewer: And tell us a little bit about the training that you got and what the orders were and where you went after your training.

>> Pritcher: Well, we -- most people know what basic training is. It's learning how to adapt yourself to military life, make sure you're able to follow orders and then know some of the instructional conditions that were required for -- at that time, for combat. I spent a year down there in Camp Shelby. Then we received orders by division. The 65th Division, we received orders to proceed to New York for departation to France. We landed in Le Havre, France. I think it was approximately the 5th of January, 1945. And we were then transported to Camp Lucky Strike, which was a camp set up there -- tent camp, tent city, so to speak -- until we could get our equipment available to us, which took approximately three weeks, I think, or two weeks.

>> Interviewer: What job did you have in the Army? What was your assignment?

>> Pritcher: I was a jeep driver for the 65th Recon Troop. Now, the Recon Troop is divided up into four platoons: a headquarters platoon, which is special troops of the division, and then there were three platoons that were called line platoons, and we are given orders to reconnoiter the area and provide the information as we gather it back for the regiment that we are assigned to.

>> Interviewer: So you provided intelligence kinds of things.

>> Pritcher: Intelligence information, whatever, yes.

>> Interviewer: Prior to your departure from the United States, did you have any information about the horrors of the war that we know about today?

>> Pritcher: Not a great deal, except for the fact -- not so far as concentration camps and/or prison camps. We knew that they existed, we heard of them, but first-hand information, we didn't have much on that.

>> Interviewer: Okay. I would like for you to tell us how you happened to come to see some of these camps, the circumstances in which you found them, and what exactly you saw when you arrived there.

>> Pritcher: Well, when we began our combat duty through southern Germany, at that particular time, the German army was partially dispersed, you know. It was after the Battle of the Bulge, and we were

proceeding through southern France -- I mean southern Germany. And we went on -- periodically we were given assignments to go to the varied towns and check those out to determine if there was any enemy forces available or there. Along the way, there were prisoner of war camps that we came to, and we finally went on into Austria. And at war's end, we met the Russians at Enns, Austria, just outside of Linz, Austria. Now, there was a prison camp -- I mean concentration camp just outside of Linz, Austria, that I went into, and it was more or less an aftermath of the conditions there, but there were still bodies strewn all over the place on the -- all over the ground, you know, just laying out individually. There were some stacked on -- as you would cordwood, on carts to be carried away, I guess, for mass burial. Some of the areas that we saw was where they were supposed to be able to sleep; more or less a shed with bags of straw to be used as mattresses. But by the time we were there, there were very few live prisoners at the time.

>> Interviewer: Do you know the name of the camp? It was --

>> Pritcher: It was -- I remembered it just a moment ago. McLaut [phonetic] -- I forget the name of that particular -- just outside of Linz, Austria.

>> Interviewer: Okay. Well, if it comes to you, you can just stop our conversation and let me know. Were you the first troops into that camp?

>> Pritcher: I'm not certain whether I was the first troops or was among the first, we'll say. And we more or less toured the camp and checked out the conditions, but so far as whether or not we were the first, I wouldn't say for sure.

>> Interviewer: Did you attempt to do anything for the few that were still alive or do anything about the bodies that you came upon?

>> Pritcher: Well, some of the bodies, of course, was partially decayed. And they were just, I don't know -- it's hard to try to describe a condition that is so horrible until -- you see, your mind, or my mind, at least, attempts to block out the most horrified conditions you see, especially over many years. But as best I remember, they were bodies that may not have starved to death, but

they were on the verge of it because you could see -- they were unclothed, most of them. They were mere skin and bones is best I know how to describe that condition. You could tell the suffering; they had sores on them, some of them, and just as much a pitiful sight as you could imagine. That's the only thing I can say on that score.

>> Interviewer: Was this camp near, nearby to a village or a larger town?

>> Pritcher: Yeah, it was near Linz, Austria.

>> Interviewer: Okay.

>> Pritcher: This particular one.

>> Interviewer: Did you ever have the opportunity to speak to the people in the town to find out what was going on in this camp?

>> Pritcher: If you had asked those people, most of the people would answer by, "I didn't know such as that was going on. We knew there was a camp there." But the conditions that existed there, they wouldn't give you much information. They would deny most of it.

>> Interviewer: Were there any survivors in this camp who could speak?

>> Pritcher: I personally didn't talk to any of those, no.

>> Interviewer: Okay. Was there anyone that you had heard from, anyone in your group, who did have the opportunity to find out exactly what went on in the camp?

>> Pritcher: I think maybe Henry Allen has some information on that. He may remember more of that because he has been interested in that insofar as keeping up with some of the conditions over there by the fact that he stayed in the service quite a bit longer than I, so he would have more records than I would on that. I don't have any records, period.

>> Interviewer: How long did you stay in the location of the camp?

>> Pritcher: Approximately -- well, in the camp, I spent only one day there, just more or less an inspection of the camp. Then we went back to our area that we were located in, which was just outside of Linz in a little town called Traun, Austria.

>> Interviewer: Do you recall the conversations you had with your Army colleagues about what you had all seen in this camp?

>> Pritcher: You're referring to how we would relate to the conditions --

>> Interviewer: How did you react?

>> Pritcher: -- that we saw?

>> Interviewer: That's right. I understand that it's difficult to remember or you tend to suppress the way it looked.

>> Pritcher: It is.

>> Interviewer: But do you have a memory of your reaction to it or what other people said to you upon seeing it?

>> Pritcher: Well, it was things that, when we saw that, we would talk among ourselves a bit, but then in a -- I think the ability the human has to suppress horrifying conditions, we didn't talk outside of the group very much that, you know, conditions at the camp except for we were well aware of the methods of -- the Germans used for killing the people, some of them. They would put them in this building that appeared to be a shower room, and there, there would be masses of them entered in that area, and there were gas pipes in there that could well be used for gassing the people. And they were moved out in carts, like I spoke to you about having them on carts and strewn them out over the land. And from there, they would put them in mass graves.

>> Interviewer: Did you see shower gas chambers in this camp?

>> Pritcher: We saw the shower rooms, yes, that was used as the asphyxiation, I guess you would call it.

>> Interviewer: So this camp was a death camp.

>> Pritcher: It was a death camp.

>> Interviewer: Was the name Mauthausen?

>> Pritcher: Mauthausen, this is it.

>> Interviewer: It was Mauthausen, yes. Were there any Nazis left in the camp when you entered?

>> Pritcher: I personally didn't encounter any Nazis at the camp. Now, I do know that for a period of time following that, some of the survivors was transported from there to be flown to various areas from, I think it was -- between -- oh, it was an airport -- between Linz and Wels, Austria; in fact, we had to guard that airport for a while -- that they used for transporting some of the survivors out of there, but I wasn't a member of the air force, and therefore I don't remember the details of that.

>> Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Did you have -- aside from the experience in Mauthausen, were there any other camps that you saw in the course of your travelling?

>> Pritcher: Now, we went to a POW camp in Ohrdruf, and there we were assigned the duty of going to that place and attempting to make sure that the prisoners of war was kept in the area for fear if they went about through the community, they would find themselves unable to go very far. In fact, as we were coming into this particular camp, oh, say, 10, 12 kilometers from the camp, we could see a body over to the side of the road, and the nearer we got to the camp, the more frequently we would see a body alongside the road. This, evidently, was conditions -- they were too weak, but yet attempting to travel away from there in search for food possibly.

>> Interviewer: You say this was a prisoner of war camp.

>> Pritcher: Yes.

>> Interviewer: Who were the prisoners in this camp?

>> Pritcher: They were varied nationalities. Some were American troops. Some were British. Some were French. Some were even Russian.

>> Interviewer: What were the conditions in this camp? What did you see when you entered Ohrdruf?

>> Pritcher: The biggest thing I saw and will never -- always remain in my mind is American soldiers standing by a wire, begging for food. We went there with the preparation of trying to keep them there because we had orders that the main forces of the U.S. would come, helping those people in very short order. But in order to keep them there, we were to do our best to keep them there. And when we got

there, they saw the American vehicles. The American soldiers, prisoners, saw American vehicles, and this, they recognized. And of course, they knew that we were coming to give them aid. So we had in our possession about a supply of two or three days of food for our own consumption. When we arrived about 3:00 in the afternoon, well, in less than an hour, we had nothing. We gave everything we had to those people, and just as an example of how hungry those people were and how sharing they were, even though they were in this condition, I don't know if you're familiar with a D bar or not. It was a chocolate bar that came in some of the rations, K rations, that was presented to us during World War Two. It was about 3 inches long, maybe, and just solid chocolate for one person's consumption. I saw 15 people eat one chocolate bar. That's how sharing they were, and if that isn't touching, I don't know --

>> Interviewer: What is. Did you have the opportunity to hear from them about the treatment that they got in this camp?

>> Pritcher: Most of their treatment in the POW camp was lack of food and some punishment if they didn't follow the direct orders that were given them and so forth.

>> Interviewer: Did you see any evidence in Ohrdruf of prisoners who were in slave labor?

>> Pritcher: I couldn't verify that they were in slave labor, no.

>> Interviewer: Did you see stacks of bodies as you had seen in Mauthausen or evidence or murders?

>> Pritcher: Not to that degree, no. There was evidence of some bodies, but most of those bodies, if I'm not mistaken, I think this was from starvation.

>> Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

>> Pritcher: Primarily. As I quoted to you before, entering the area coming up to the camp, the highway leading to the camp, there were bodies strewn alongside, but I think they were trying to escape in search of food.

>> Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

>> Pritcher: Most of those, if I understand it correctly from the information I received, were not American troops or English-speaking troops because of the fact that our air force dropped some leaflets prior to our arrival informing them that someone was coming. This was during the time that the German guards had already fled, knowing that the Allied armies was coming.

>> Interviewer: In the course of your travels through Europe, did you have experiences with the German soldiers -- or SS troops versus the German soldiers themselves, the ones fighting in the fields? Do you have any impressions of those people?

>> Pritcher: The only time we had any contact with the troops was possibly those that we captured along the way periodically, and -- but after the war, we didn't have much contact with any except civilian personnel. Now, we did have some POWs that were still prisoners of war of the U.S. or the Allied forces. They would use those for some minor labor conditions, like in the motor shops to repair and clean up vehicles and this type stuff.

>> Interviewer: And after your experience at Ohrdruf, were there any other camps that you went into?

>> Pritcher: Not me personally.

>> Interviewer: Any other things that you --

>> Pritcher: No, I didn't have any more experiences other than those two.

>> Interviewer: And how long did you stay in Europe after the war ended?

>> Pritcher: The war ended, I think it was in May -- am I right -- of '45, and I left there in May of '46. I was occupational forces for that period of time in and around Austria and southern Germany near Munich.

>> Interviewer: When you got back home, did you, did you think about what you had seen, particularly when you began -- I assume that you saw some of the footage that we've seen on the war. Did that bring back your memories and --

>> Pritcher: Well, at this particular time, I was what I'd call fed up with war. I wanted to get it out of my mind as soon as possible. And so even the news about the war, I didn't bother it too much.

>> Interviewer: Have you found, over the years, that the memories of that time have come back?

>> Pritcher: Some of them, yes. There are some things that you experience through life like that that you will never forget, but yet there are details that you can't tie together very closely.

>> Interviewer: Have you been troubled with these memories? Do they affect your life in an adverse way at this point or at any time during your life?

>> Pritcher: I think maybe you should ask my wife that.

>> Interviewer: All right.

>> Pritcher: Really, I don't think it affects me a great deal. My wife says I had changed just a bit because that was one of the things that I wanted to get out of the Army for because I got married only three weeks before I entered the service. And of course, all that was against my will. But anyway, following that and I came home, I went back to my job in the shipyard for a period of time, and there may have been some ill effects, but major, no.

>> Interviewer: The information that you've given us today will be available for the children in South Carolina, and I'd like for you to take a moment or two -- if there's any message you'd like to give to the children based on your experiences, something that you've learned or that they should need to know, we'd like for you to share that with us.

>> Pritcher: When we're talking about children, schoolchildren, the biggest advice I could give to them is make sure they do the best they can in school always. The background there is the basics for life, really. I know that I have made mistakes in that area. I didn't follow through as best I could. I graduated from high school, yes, with grades that could have been better, yes, far better, but my ideas then are approximately like most people, most children are today that didn't realize the value of an education. And if there's anything that

I could pass on to them, it's make sure you use the value of that education. I preached that to my children, and they accused -- well, the wife and I of driving them, so to speak, but I am very fortunate in having three fine children. All have finished college and are in their careers. I'm very proud of that fact.

>> Interviewer: Well, that's very good. Thank you, Mr. Pritcher, for coming and sharing your experiences with us today.

>> Pritcher: Thank you.

00:25:49