

DON COULSON

Feisty, impudent, sarcastic, and incorrigible, Don Coulson ended up in Dachau as a "political prisoner" because he clearly had an attitude problem--especially during interrogations. In Dachau he became a Sonderkommando, transporting bodies to the crematoria. He describes chilling stories about killer dogs, brutal guards, and the smell of death. For forty years, Coulson refused to talk about his experiences except to disinterested government authorities. But President Ronald Reagan's 1985 visit to Bitburg, Germany, to commemorate a military cemetery in which a number of SS soldiers were buried, changed Coulson's mind.¹ After all, it was the SS that was responsible for the horrors he witnessed and suffered, and now it was time to speak out.

I was drafted into the Army Air Corps in November of 1942 and ended up in England as a clerk. I wanted to get into combat, but nobody would listen. So I went on a couple of night missions with the British. They didn't mind; in fact, I guess they would have taken an all-American crew if they could have found one. When my commanding officer found out, I told him the truth. He told me he would not say anything if I promised not to do it again. I told him I couldn't make that promise. So he sent me to what the British called "a bomb-aimer's school" near Liverpool, and I became a bombardier on a B-17. The British were using the Sperry bomb sight, but I came back and used the Norden which made a helluva lot of sense. I don't know how the hell we won the war. I know the big boys claimed great accuracy for the Norden bomb sight. Well, I think you could hit a target maybe the size of Finland, but I don't think you could hit Helsinki. Then I got my ear drums loused up on our second trip on D Day and they wouldn't let me fly anymore.

After I got out of the hospital back in England they put me on a gun for base defense. It was a 75-mm, but no one taught me how to shoot it. If the Germans bombed the base, we were supposed to shoot back at them, but otherwise we were not to shoot. I was on that gun by myself, and I didn't even know how to put a shell in it. So I got a patriotic wild hair in my fanny and asked for the infantry--and they gave it to me--Lord, did they give it to me.

I joined the Ninth Infantry Division. They said they would give me a little training, so I was sent down on the Salisbury Plains to a British base. I got to dry fire an M-1 a few times. Then they gave me three rounds to zero it in. That was my training. I was sent over to northern

¹The German Government originally suggested that President Reagan make his 1985 speech at the site of one of the former death camps, but that would have been uncomfortable for the President. In separate earlier conversations with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal, Reagan claimed to have photographed the horrors of the death camps at the end of the war. In reality, Reagan never left the States during World War II, and political advisers did not want to remind the media of this embarrassing story.

France in late September of 1944.

In France, I was assigned to K-Company of the 47th Infantry, and I immediately got into trouble. In my home town of Tulsa, Oklahoma, cab drivers were the local bootleggers, pimps, and everything else that was the bottom of the barrel, and who should be my first squad leader but a Tulsa cab driver. When he tried to assign me to be a forward scout, I told him, "Boy, your ass sucks wind." He then proceeded to tell me, "Maybe you flyboys can talk like that in the Air Corps but you can't in the infantry." I asked him, "What are you going to do, send me into combat?" He promised to make me sorry. So he assigned me to be an ammunition bearer. I was supposed to carry Browning Automatic Rifle clips. He must have put a dozen bandoliers over my shoulder. I could hardly walk. Within five minutes of our first battle, our BAR man got hit. I told the assistant BAR guy to pick up the gun and start firing. He refused because it was drawing too much fire. So I gave him the bandoliers and I became the BAR man.

I then got hit in the thumb and sent back to England pretty close to where I started. They just wrapped my thumb up and sent me back. I don't know why an aid man didn't do it in the front lines. I was in England just long enough to drink a couple of beers and back I went into combat. I was then assigned to a Headquarters platoon, and that's where I met "friendly fire;" in fact, that's the reason I became a prisoner of war.

It was early December, and three of us went on this recon mission somewhere close to Malmedy. We were not supposed to engage the enemy--just find out what we could. We ran across a tank-refueling depot there. There must have been two acres of gasoline and oil drums scattered in among those tanks. So we torched it. We moved back about 200 yards to a little stand of trees where we watched those drums explode in the air like a giant fire works show. Some fat-ass, little son-of-a-Yankee mammy was sitting on a hill with an artillery piece and, seeing the fire, figured it was a target of opportunity. One of his short rounds got us. I woke up in a German aid station. I never saw the two guys who were with me again. I must have had 35 or 40 small pieces of shrapnel in my head and shoulders. For ten years after I got home, those little pieces tried to work themselves out.

After I woke up, I was interrogated. I guess I caused them a lot of trouble because I never quite told the truth. I had learned as a kid, if you run across a pathological liar, you should just tell a bigger lie. First the interrogator asked me, "What is your arm?" He meant what branch of the service was I in. I told him it was an appendage that hung from my shoulder. He got a little disturbed about my answer. I wasn't supposed to make it easy for those people. And I wasn't too sure I was going to get out alive anyway. We had heard rumors that they might very well kill us. So I had a kind of Katy-bar-the-door attitude. What the hell, if I was not going to make it, I was at least going to cause all the trouble I could. He then asked me again: "You know what I mean. What is your arm?" This time I answered, "It's a shoulder appendage that's got fingers on the end of it." He gave me a real nasty look and said, "I'll ask you one more time, and if you give me the same answer, I'll cut it off and hand it to you." I thought, "Well, hell, I better not give him the same answer." So I told him I was in the underground balloon corps. That left him kind of wide-eyed, and he asked, "What is that?" I told him, "You Germans wouldn't understand this because you don't have oil wells, but in Oklahoma, when water seeps into an oil well, they pack it with Duncan Cement which hardens when it gets wet. The Americans and the British have started tunneling under the English Channel, and they inflate these thick, hard, rubber balloons and pour Duncan Cement around them; then, they deflate the

balloons and pull them out. You know, we were damned near all the way across the channel when Churchill and Stalin got on Roosevelt about launching the invasion. Hell, we were almost there." I've never in my life seen anybody with such an incredulous look on his face. He just went running out the door to get the *Kommandant*. When he came back, his face was as red as a spanked baby's butt. That got me my shoulder broken. He aimed his rifle butt at my head, but I ducked, and he got my shoulder instead. He knocked a few pieces of bone off of it. Like I said, I didn't want to make it easy for them, and I didn't.

From there I was sent to Halle, Germany. I got there in a motorcycle sidecar, in which I was forced to ride head down with my feet up in the air where the guard could see them. We traveled only at night. In Halle I was kept in some kind of engineering school where the SS interrogated me for about a week. They put a few knots on my head to go with my broken shoulder. This one bastard had a leaded riding crop. It must have been twenty-five years before the scars from that disappeared off my back. If I get a sunburn, you can still see the outlines of those scars. I kept up my pathological stories as long as I could. I didn't think I was going to get out alive, so I decided to keep confusing the issue.

I was then sent to Stalag 11-A at Altengrabow just southwest of Berlin. The first thumping I got there was by this real nice German fellow. He called a bunch of us in and pointed to a map and said he was going to update us on what was going on in the war. He pointed to the map and said that such and such a division was here while others were over there. Well, some of our guys started saying, "No, no, we're over here." About the third time that happened, I told them, "If you bastards keep telling him what he wants to know, I'm going to have you all shot as traitors. And if the Russians get here first, I'll see to it that they shoot you." See, I understood what he was trying to do. Well, he got powerfully unhappy about this.

They tried to make me work at Stalag 11-A, and I got the hell beat out of me because I refused. Bombs had destroyed the railroad yards, and they wanted us to go out and repair them. I told them, "Some of my buddies probably lost their lives making those holes, and I'll be damned if I'm going out there and fill them up for you." They threatened not to feed me, but, hell, I went from 187 to 93 pounds anyway so how much more weight could I lose?

I was put in solitary confinement several times, and it was mostly for baiting the guards. In fact, that's what finally got me sent to Dachau. A few of the guys in camp had chocolate bars like those that came in Red Cross packages. A guy gave me one. I was willing to kill for it, but I still cut off little bits of it and threw them at the guard dogs. When a dog would lunge for that piece of chocolate, he would give the guard holding his chain a terrible jerk. That was just one of the things that got me in trouble with the guards. Then one of the guards got to talking about what was going to happen when the war was over and the Germans were in New York. I told him, "Boy, you better get your head out of your ass because when Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin get through partitioning Germany, there's not going to be enough left for you to piss on." Well, he ran off to tell the *Kommandant*. He called me in, and accused me of causing unrest among the guards. He thumped me around a bit, and I got what they call a slight cerebral atrophy--which causes a little catch in my speech. I'm not sure what he hit me with--probably a rifle butt. I just know I was unconscious.

A few days later I was on my way to Dachau. They stuck me again in a motorcycle sidecar. In fact, my German rides were all half upside down in that damned sidecar. I didn't know where I was going, but the *Kommandant* had told me I had lost my military status and was

now considered a political prisoner for having caused unrest among the guards.

The first thing I saw at Dachau was a bunch of walking skeletons. I was put in a building very close to the cooking facilities for the SS troops. There weren't very many of us in that building, but we were the *Sonderkommandos*. I figured they were not going to leave any witnesses, so I was making my plans for when I had to go over this little bridge to the crematorium. I figured I would try to take one of the guards with me down into the creek to see if we could drown each other.

Every day was about the same for the *Sonderkommandos*. We got up before day break for roll call. If there was anything on earth you could count on, it was one of those damned roll calls about six times a day. Then we had to go over to this shed and get our hand carts on which we piled the bodies. About ten o'clock we got a liter of what we called Skilly, which was boiled rutabaga without any salt or pepper. That had to last us until dark. For supper we got about a half liter of the same and a little square of *Knäckebröt*, which was a very crisp, dry cracker. That was it for the day.

I never saw another American in Dachau. The guards had already killed off most of the Jews. We had Gypsies, homosexuals, some people from the Balkans, lots of their own political prisoners whom they kept isolated, and a few Jews. I talked a little with some of these people. A lot of them could speak English. I never learned enough German to do more than get something to eat and get slapped. Most of the guards could speak English, although there was not a single one of them in Dachau who ever exhibited any basic decency.

I was in Dachau about a month before it was liberated. I never came in contact with those who were gassed, but I knew what was going on. Most of the bodies I picked up were those the guards had beaten to death or the dogs had killed or had simply starved to death. The last days we were simply unloading freight cars filled with bodies that had come from other camps that evidently didn't have big enough crematoriums to keep up with the dead. There was an outbreak of Typhus and Spotted Fever that was killing them by the hundreds so these other camps were shipping them to Dachau. The bodies would arrive, some 200 to a boxcar, and then we would unload them, put them on wagons, and take them over to the crematorium. I didn't put any bodies in the crematorium, but I piled them up so other workers could put them in.

There were two groups that we had to pick up that still haunt me. One was a group of young Balkan officers--I don't know from which country. Somehow, they had displeased the SS guards. I don't think they were Serbians because they, like the Jews, had pretty much already been killed. The guards took them into a little yard, maybe 50 by 50 yards, and turned the dogs loose. Afterwards, we literally picked up pieces of flesh everywhere. This one guard said, "We should have used kids to train the dogs; the adults don't put up enough fight."

The second time had to do with another group of those junior officers. The guards put them into that same yard, and they decided to put on a show. They didn't use dogs this time; instead, they used burp guns, and literally chopped them into hamburger meat. And, again, we had to clean up the mess. For years after, I had nightmare after nightmare about all this.

There's another incident that I've never been able to erase from my mind, although I know I did the right thing. There was this little Frenchman who worked with me on one of those carts. One of the dogs had torn the muscles out of his leg. One morning, when we were supposed to go get our cart, he couldn't even get out of bed--his leg was swollen so badly. His

name was Etienne--but I called him Tiny. He begged me to kill him. He said he didn't want to go out there and let the dogs tear him apart which is what happened if you could no longer work. I told him, "Never mind, I'll help you get out there." I got behind him and pulled him up on his feet; then, while he was kind of relaxed, I snapped his windpipe. He knew immediately what had happened, and he kind of turned and put his hand on my face and patted me a couple of times. That got me--and it still does [*Coulson begins sobbing*]. I've never told this story before to anyone.

So when Reagan went to Bitburg and talked about the honor of soldiers on both sides at that cemetery where the SS were buried, well, I hated that bastard from that moment on. Every SS soldier was an ideologue. Not a one knew anything about humanity. There were two kinds of SS officers: the one kind wanted to kill you right away while the other insisted on first torturing you.