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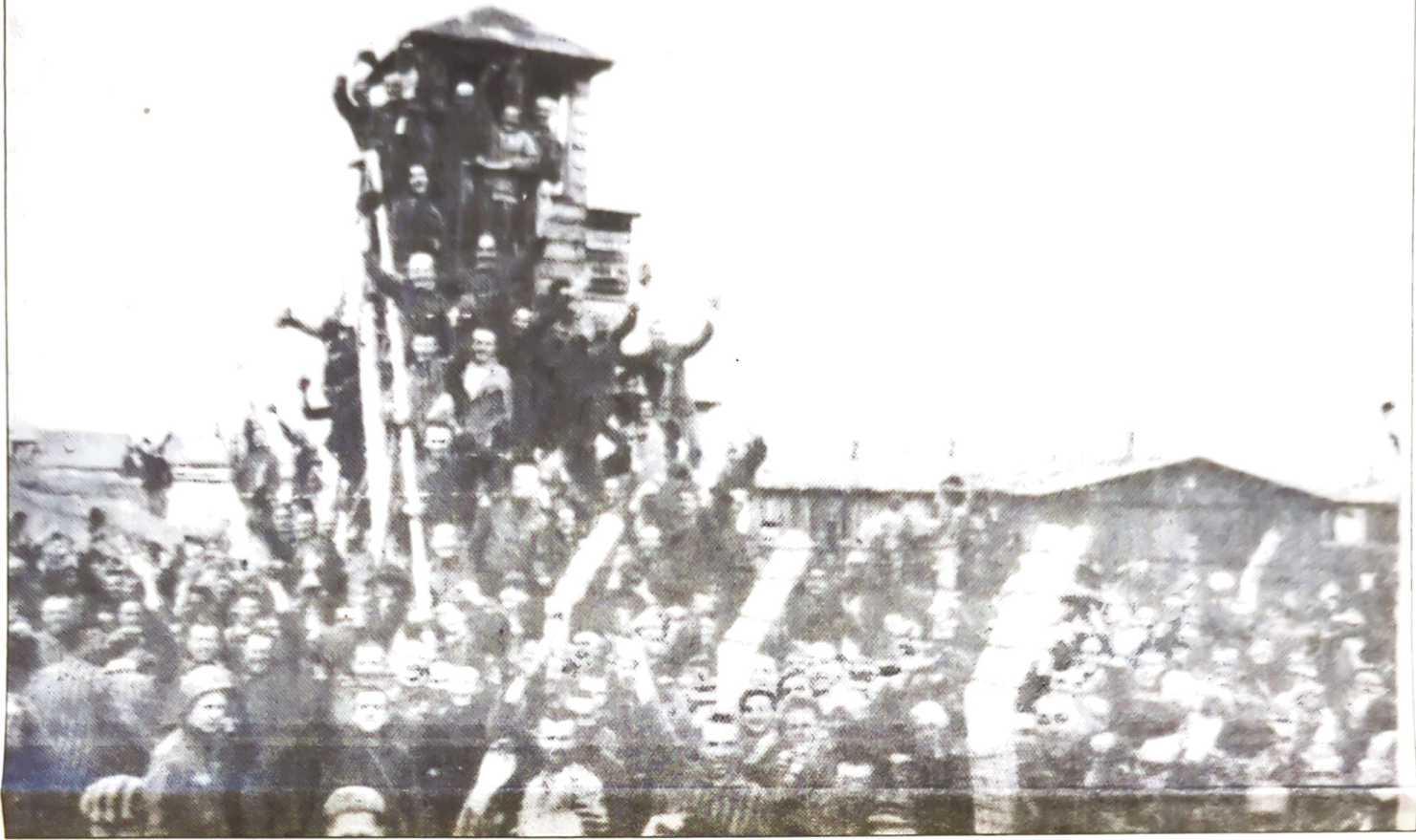


Last Days at Dachau



By Lee Olson

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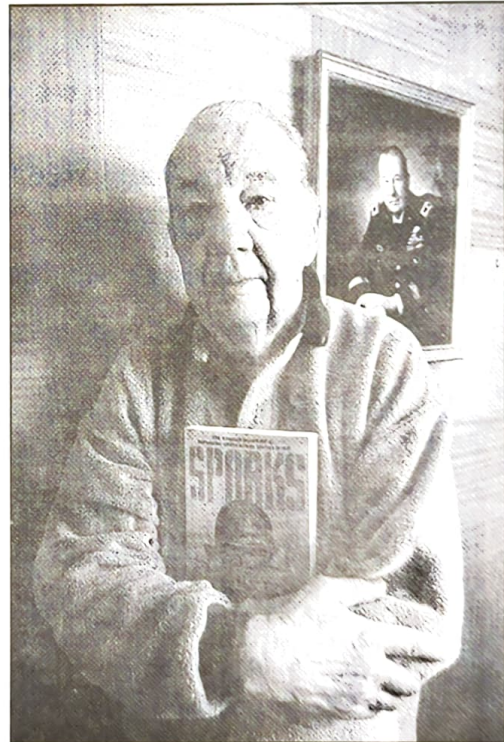


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On April 29, 1945, the American Army rolled into the concentration camp outside Munich to liberate thousands of prisoners. To this day, disagreement and acrimony remain over the events of that Sunday 50 years ago.

Last Day at DACHAU

Story by **Lee Olson**



The Denver Post / Lyn Alweis

Felix Sparks, left, commanded a contingent of soldiers who liberated the Dachau concentration camp. Above, camp inmates rejoice over the arrival of Allied troops.



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Four years after it was liberated, the barbed wire and crematory ovens at Dachau, left, remained as a memorial to the dead and a reminder of the horror. Below, some of the dead found by soldiers who entered the camp April 29, 1945.

It was a day no one who was there could ever forget. Certainly not Felix Sparks, and certainly not the men under his command.

Fifty years ago yesterday, Sparks, then a 27-year-old lieutenant colonel, led the liberation of the main camp at Dachau, one of Hitler's infamous concentration camps, outside Munich. His soldiers, inflamed by the sight of the skeletal like, naked bodies of Nazi victims, killed 21 unarmed German soldiers who had just surrendered. The event triggered a long-secret investigation that now is becoming public.

Sparks also got into a shouting match at the gates of Dachau with Marguerite Higgins, a well-known war correspondent, and — incredibly — was cited for pulling his .45 automatic pistol on an American general.

"When the general tried to relieve me of my command I ran him off," said Sparks, who retired from the Army as a brigadier general and now lives in Lakewood. He confirmed both the killings and his run-in with the general on that memorable day in Germany.

Sparks' home is filled with military and civilian memorabilia. In his postwar career, he served as a Colorado district attorney, a Colorado Supreme Court justice, natural resources director for Colorado and as commanding general of the Colorado National Guard.

But it is World War II that absorbs his attention. He is secretary of the 157th Infantry Association, which preserves the memories of this famous Colorado regiment rooted in the Plains Indian wars of the 1800s. He keeps in touch with his wartime pals who, a friend said, "regard him as God."

SPARKS needs friends. As the anniversary approached, he was besieged by telephone calls and probing journalists. A recent story in U.S. News and World Report recounted



Denver Post file photo

the killing of German prisoners on the day Dachau was liberated. He has never shunned the public spotlight, but explaining why his troops made Dachau into a latter-day version of the shootout at the OK Corral isn't exactly his idea of an easy script.

Two American divisions rolled into the Dachau area that Sunday: the 42nd and 45th. Sparks commanded the 3rd Battalion of the 157th Regiment in the 45th. The 45th had fought from North Africa to Dachau. Sparks' 157th took losses so great in Italy that virtually none of the regiment's original GIs remained after the battle of Anzio.

Unflappable under fire, Sparks survived. He was promoted rapidly to lieutenant colonel, which meant heavy responsibility as the U.S. 7th Army drove into Germany in early 1945. Sparks thought he had seen the worst at Anzio, but Reipertswiller was at hand. In defending this small German village, Sparks' 3rd Battalion was again wiped out. Nearly everyone was killed, wounded or captured.

This was the cynical and battle-weary officer who led his bloodied battalion to

Dachau. By now he was carrying a double-barreled shotgun in his jeep, a confiscated weapon his troops had presented him in France. "It was handier than fumbling for my pistol," he said.

He lost the shotgun at Dachau when he and his soldiers scaled the walls of the installation's main camp. Unable to carry the buckshot-loaded scattergun that earned him the nickname of "Shotgun," he left it in his jeep and never saw it again.

THE 42nd Division, meanwhile, had penetrated the camp's main gate. That may have been earlier in the day, but Sparks' 45th Division Company I clearly occupied most of Dachau.

The exact events of that day are blurred. A tank unit and the 20th Armored Division claimed to be liberators even though they couldn't have bridged nearby streams until a day later. An artillery unit also claimed credit.

Robert Abzug, a University of Texas historian, called the accounts of Dachau's liberation "a hall of mirrors."

There are "several versions, all of them plausible. . . . Each is so human,

so full of impenetrable loyalties," he said, "that the truth may be unrecoverable."

A transcript of the investigation of brutality leveled against the Americans suggests that Sparks' explanation of events is accurate. Here's an account of the day's events based on that report and Sparks' recollections:

With the rest of his troops busy securing the town of Dachau, Sparks took his Company I into the camp with orders to secure and seal off its 33,000 inmates and check them for disease. The GIs' first discovery was 39 rail cars full of 2,000 Holocaust victims, nude and gaunt from starvation. Sparks says the GIs became visibly upset. When four German soldiers surrendered to Lt. William Walsh, company commander, he took them into a box car and personally executed them.

Moving into the main SS camp's streets, Sparks was unable to see more than a few of his men at one time and he regrets that. He caught up with them at a coal storage area where Company I had taken 50 captured Germans. Sparks watched horrified as one of his men sprayed the prisoners, each with his hands up, with a machine gun.

Sparks kicked the young GI away from the gun. A Signal Corps photo taken at that instant shows the young gunner lying on the ground at Sparks' feet (Sparks says the boy was sobbing that the Germans had tried to escape).

Seventeen prisoners were dead or dying. Most survivors lay on the ground at the wall, looking up at Sparks to see what fate they faced.

At about the same time, murderous emotions broke out at Dachau's main gate where the 42nd Division had arrived. Nine Germans came out of a nearby guard tower to surrender and were executed, according to Lt. Col.

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Joseph H. Whitaker, an assistant inspector general for the 7th Army.

Whitaker's report is specific. It names names and gives details. No doubt, a court-martial could have proceeded. But Lt. Gen. Wade Haislip, commander of the 7th Army, handled the report with bureaucratic finesse. While not dismissing the investigation, he ordered a rewrite. The bulky file emerged only in 1991 when a sharp-eyed investigator found it in Army archives. It had been misfiled for 45 years.

THIRTY Germans had been executed, and the war was over. But the day was not over and the final drama has bothered Sparks ever since: his run-in with Higgins and an officer of the 42nd Division, Brig. Gen. Henning Linden.

Linden was out of his territory, apparently to escort a jeep full of war correspondents to Dachau. Among them was the glamorous Higgins of the *New York Herald Tribune*. She had a tip that the famous German opponent to Hitler, Martin Niemöller, was in Dachau along with Josef Stalin's son, who had been captured by the Nazis. Her information was wrong. But she caused havoc. Demanding access to the prisoners

— many thousands of whom were surging against the fence — she got the gate open. One of Sparks' men grappled with Higgins, who shouted, "God-damn it, I've had my typhus shots." Sparks ordered his men to fire over the inmates' heads to drive them back. They retreated and so did Higgins.

But Linden came to Higgins' defense and tried to override Sparks' orders to keep the camp gates closed. In the confusion that followed, Linden struck one of Sparks' men on the side of his helmet with a cane or swagger stick. This enraged Sparks, and when Linden tried to relieve Sparks of his command — stepping across division lines to do so — Sparks pulled his pistol and forced the Linden party to leave.

Linden immediately filed charges with 7th Army headquarters. Sparks was sent to the United States on early leave, but MPs caught up with him at Le Havre and ordered him back to Germany. Gen. George S. Patton finally buried the charges.

Sparks believes Linden encouraged the brutality charges against Sparks' men to promote his own accusations against Sparks.

"I embarrassed him," said Sparks. "He was out of his area,

'The American public would never have permitted a court-martial. The GIs were sent there to kill Germans and the American people would have thought that was just fine.'

— Historian Emajejan Buechner

and he was escorting Maggie . . . into an area where he had no reason to be. Besides, it was his men who did the killing at the guard tower. I think the whole thing blew up in his face."

Bitterness over the incident remains. Linden and Higgins are dead but witnesses survive.

"Sparks should have been court-martialed," said Dr. Harry Shaffer, who was sergeant and driver for Linden. "The situation I've described is where he killed those two dozen Germans over there (in the camp) who were unarmed. He should have gone out of the Army for what happened that day."

Shaffer reacted bitterly to criticism that Linden went to Dachau solely as a high-powered escort for Higgins. "That's a lie, and I'd tell Sparks that to his face. We had as much right

to be there as anyone."

He said Linden was sent forward to locate the camp and "freeze it in place." Approaching the camp, Linden met a Swiss Red Cross representative and two German officers who surrendered the camp to him. Linden decided to call for reinforcements from the 42nd because the Germans told him he'd need 50 men to take over guard duty. Among the troops who were sent at Linden's request were the soldiers who killed the unarmed Germans at the camp's gate, according to the inspector general's report.

Hugh Foster, an Army historian who lives in Carlyle, Pa., says friction still exists from rivalry between the two divisions as to which liberated Dachau.

"What set both factions off are these spurious accounts of Dachau's liberation. Any GI

who entered one of 240 sub-camps of Dachau claims in his memoirs that he liberated Dachau."

But the 45th is still mad. A plaque at Dachau claims that the 42nd liberated Dachau. Actually, they both did.

Asked about the executions, Foster said:

"The GIs who came to Dachau were not prepared for what they saw. I'm not surprised. . . . I guess I'd be more surprised if they hadn't reacted violently."

In 1991, Foster, who was doing research, discovered the long-missing court-martial files from 1945 that make such grim reading.

"The American public would never have permitted a court-martial," said another historian, Emajejan Buechner of New Orleans. "The GIs were sent there to kill Germans, and the American people would have thought that was just fine."

Sparks has pondered the events of that day for 50 years. He sums up his GIs' conduct this way:

"It happened. I regret it, but that's the way it happened. It's over." ♦

Lee Olson is the author of "Marmalade & Whiskey: British Remittance Men in the West" and a former *Denver Post* staff writer.

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Researched by Benjamin Efaw

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