

# LIBERATING



Leon Tulper, a Jewish American soldier in the 65th Infantry Division, recalls the harrowing final days of the war in Europe and the liberation of the Ohrdruf and Mauthausen concentration camps.

**BY CHRISTOPHER MISKIMON**

# *the* CAMPS



**BACKSTORY:** *The final months of World War II in the European Theater were a harrowing and desperate time for the soldiers who fought there. No one wanted to die when the war was so close to its end. This called for caution in the minds of many, yet the fighting was not over. The forces of Hitler's Third Reich—still actively resisting the advancing Allies—simply had to be beaten. Further, they had to be made to understand they were beaten, lest there be another war for the next generation to fight. In the event, the Nazi leadership gave the Allies no choice but to prove that point.*

Courtesy of Leon Tulper



**ABOVE:** Leon Tulper in uniform. **LEFT:** Civilians move their belongings in a cart while 65th Infantry Division soldiers march through Linz, Austria, on May 7, 1945, the day before the war in Europe ended. Hungarian Jews in striped uniforms, liberated from the nearby Mauthausen concentration camp, keep step with the soldiers. Sergeant Leon Tulper was one of the American soldiers present at the liberation of Mauthausen.

*At the same time, American troops were learning why they had to fight this war firsthand. With only weeks left before the surrender, GIs were unexpectedly coming across the concentration camps. These centers of evil and depravity, scattered across Nazi-held territory for all the Allies to discover, explained the need for the war far better than mere words ever could. It gave American soldiers clear reason as to why this war had to be taken to its full and dreadful conclusion.*

*Leon Tulper of Denver, Colorado, lived through these desperate days. As a young radioman in the 65th Infantry Division, he was at the forefront of the division's 55*

Courtesy of Leon Tulper



*days in combat, from early March 1945 until the war ended. He served as the radioman for the battalion's executive officer in Headquarters Company, 3rd Battalion, 260th Infantry Regiment.*

*From this position he witnessed not only combat operations but was also present at the liberation of two separate concentration camps. The first was Ohrdruf, a sub-camp of Buchenwald, some 100 miles southwest of Berlin. Later he would be present at Mauthausen in northern Austria. This gave Leon an exceptional perspective on the war. In July 2015, at the age of 90 yet still spry and sharp (he had only retired from work*

*the year before!), Mr. Tulper sat down to tell of his own experiences.*

**CM: Tell me about your early life, where you're from, how you grew up.**

LT: I was born in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1925. My family lived there until 1939. My mother was tubercular and was at the National Jewish Hospital [in Denver]. When the hospital said she was able to leave, she couldn't go back to the climate in Missouri. So my dad packed up the whole family and we moved; I was in Denver in 1939. I went to North High School, graduated, and started attending Denver University. I had about three-quarters of a year before I got drafted in April 1943. It was a surprise but they let me finish the year. I only had about eight weeks left to go.

**How did you wind up in the Army?**

I was drafted and I go to Fort Logan in Denver. After a couple of weeks there we get dressed in nice winter uniforms and all the guys think we're going to Alaska. We get on a train, and they bolt the doors. Nobody knew why. We're on the train for four days and when they unlock the doors and say, "Come on out now," it's 104 degrees in Tyler, Texas!

We were marching toward the camp, and one of the guys says, "Take a look up there, it's raining." We look up and see the rain coming down but it stopped above our heads—it never got to the ground! Never saw anything like that before.

**What was your training like?**

We get into Camp Fannin [near Tyler, Texas], took 13 weeks of basic there, and then took three weeks of jungle training. We all thought we were going to the South Pacific. We lived there for three weeks in conditions that were not for a nice Jewish kid from the West Side—not for anybody, really! One day I went into Tyler, and there was a big sign there that said, "Join the Air Force." So I think, "Okay, I'll go in there."

I asked the guy in there, "How do you get into the air force?" He told me I had to take a test. "If you have over 200, you're in," he

said. I asked him when I could take it, and he told me to sit down. So I sit down, do the whole thing, turn it in, and they told me, "Sit still, we'll tell you where you're at." Ten, 15 minutes later he comes out and says, "How's it feel to be in the air force? You had 249 on your test. You're way over the top." He told me I was going to preflight school, where I would learn to be a pilot, bombardier, or navigator.

**So now you think you're going to be an aviator. How did that go?**

He asked where I would like to go to school. They gave us our choice. Since I was from Kansas City, I told them I'd like to go to Rockhurst College there; they have a good reputation. Or, if I get to Denver, I'd like to go to the University of Denver. They said I had a pretty good chance.

We waited a couple of weeks down at Keesler Army Air Field in Mississippi, which was pretty nice. Then one day I got my orders, Mississippi State! So there I went; we did about five months there, but got credit for two years' worth of college. We went to classes all day long. When it was over I got orders to go to some other airfield in Texas.



**ABOVE:** A 65th Division soldier inspects the ruins of a shattered German bunker near Saarlautern, Germany, south-east of Luxembourg on the Saar River, where Tulper briefly set up his radio. **OPPOSITE:** Leon Tulper (left) stands with his driver outside their radio jeep somewhere in Germany.

By then I already had six or eight hours of solo flying.

But then suddenly the orders are changed: “Sit where you are.” Roosevelt says we got too many pilots, navigators, and bombardiers so you’re going back to the infantry. So here comes the 65th Division; they were just putting it together with a cadre from Guadalcanal and places like that.

We started training with other units like the 442nd [Regimental Combat Team made up of Japanese American soldiers], which meant fights every weekend. You had guys from Guadalcanal and Japanese American guys with something to prove; they were Americans, after all. That was very interesting!

*During the war, a large number of young Americans were enrolled in various technical courses at colleges and universities around the country in the expectation the war would last long enough for these men to become future ground forces officers and aviators. As the war progressed, the government began to revise its estimates of how long the war would last and also realized the Army was short of infantrymen. This was due to both an initial underestimation of how many infantry troops the Army would need and the high casualties in that branch.*

*To fill the depleted ranks of the infantry, many of these prospective future officers and pilots were withdrawn from their educational assignments and used to flesh out infantry divisions still forming in the United States. Leon was caught up in this movement and was soon in the 65th Infantry Division. This unit was formed in Camp Shelby, Mississippi, in July 1943, and spent the next year and a half in training. On January 10, 1945, the division embarked for Europe, arriving at Le Havre, France, on January 21.*

### **How was the journey to Europe?**

We got our orders to go overseas. They put us in a converted Swedish luxury liner. We were all down in the hold, bunks five deep, and we got across in five days. The ship was always listing because guys were hanging out over the sides [seasick]. We landed at Le Havre and went to a depot called Camp Lucky Strike. I gained some bad feelings toward the French

when we drove over to the French town of Rouen and we heard pinging on our steel helmets. People were throwing rocks at us! I said, “What the hell are we doing over here?” [See *WWII Quarterly*, “Bombing Our Friends,” Summer 2015.]

*Now in France, the division spent a month preparing itself to enter combat. On March 4, 1945, the bulk of the division arrived in Borsch, Germany. On March 9, they relieved the 26th Infantry Division in its bridgehead over the Saar River. During this time, Leon’s 260th Regiment was sent to capture Saarlautern.*

### **Can you tell us about your experiences once your unit entered combat?**

We got orders to go into the Siegfried Line. It was a tough kind of deal, but in certain areas it wasn’t so bad. We crossed the Saar River; we had an outpost on the far side. I was a radio operator, and we had a radio net in a little enclave right across the bridge there. But in order to get to it, you had to start about two or three blocks back and put the pedal to the floor as fast as it would go because the Germans had it zeroed in. We used to go there once a day to change operators. Never had a loss there; we were lucky.

We went right through Saarlautern. It was a tough deal because all the cities had pillboxes in the center of each four-way intersection. We’d send a group to blow it up, but in an hour the Germans would have another crew there; the whole city was tunneled under. It was unbelievable. We lost a number of men there, mostly wounded.

Finally, we got out of there and started moving. The division had orders for doing maybe 15 miles a day, but we were hotter than hell and were doing maybe 40 miles a day. We didn’t even know where we were. We were hitting towns that weren’t even on the maps.

### **What were some of your other experiences in Germany?**

We used to pick up German radio and we had a couple kids who could speak German. The Germans were calling us “the SS

Division of the 3rd Army” because we went through everything—nothing stopped us. I don’t know why nothing stopped us; I guess if you look back at it we were lucky. The people in my unit were mostly East Coast people—New York, New Jersey. You wanted to get a word in edgewise, you learned to speak New York language!

It’s hard to say you were terrified every day; you weren’t. Some days were just strange as hell. Once we were driving along and we saw a German soldier propped against a tree, dead. As you drove by, you’d hear “pop, pop” as the guys were just shooting at him. The guy must have had 100 pounds of lead inside of him! He’d been dead for God knows how long. At the time everybody thought that was funny. I guess at 18, 19 years old, everything was so different from anything we grew up with.

The first time you [shoot and] see a guy fall and you know that you got him, you don’t know what you’ll feel like inside. I felt like vomiting.

### **What other war experiences do you find are memorable?**

One day we had a convoy going to Essen, Germany; we were going to capture the city. We got close to the city and saw a sign that said “Buy Bayer Aspirin.” Another one said “Drink Coca-Cola!” Here we were in the middle of Germany!

Here’s a story about the first time I ever heard a jet engine. One day I’m sitting on the back of a jeep with this SCR-284 radio, which is a vehicle-mounted radio. I’m taking a message from headquarters, and all of a sudden I see everybody is jumping into the ditches. I couldn’t get out—I was taking this message. Here comes this jet: Whoosh! I thought, “What the hell was that?”

This guy comes around and flies past me again and smiles as he goes over me. I about crapped out right there. I didn’t know what that was. By the time I finished taking the message and jumped in the ditch, he was long gone. Why didn’t the guy shoot? He had us dead to rights. We found out later there was no ammunition at the airport when he took off. That was

the scariest time in my whole life. You couldn’t hear it coming.

Another time we captured a M-A-N Diesel, a big truck. We couldn’t get it started. One of our guys was a farmer; he got four horses, tied them to the front of the truck, and off we went. Guys were laughing at us, but we were riding and they were walking.

One of the greatest things was the mixture of people in the Army. Most of us lived in a small area, maybe a couple of square blocks; those were the Depression days. You got in the Army, and you have people of all backgrounds mixed in together. You start to realize you’re not alone in this crazy world. My two best friends in the Army were a very devout Catholic and a Mexican. I’m still friends with him. After all these years, he lives in the same town as I do. We’re literally brothers.

The Catholic guy and I used to talk religion, and one day he said, “You’re a Jew and I’m Catholic, and we’re doing the same damn thing you guys are doing!” I said, “You gotta understand, you get four or five Jewish people together, they form their own religion! Technically, you’re a reformed Jew!” His name, of all things, was Joseph McCarthy. These were nice people; we had such camaraderie.

### **You also experienced firsthand how chaotic a battlefield can be. You mentioned an engagement near Mulhausen.**

In Mulhausen we had a French unit on our outside perimeter, and the Germans came at us with three of those damn Tiger tanks. You could see them coming with infantry behind them. Soon the guns started going off. We were told to let them go through our lines and close in behind them. The French disappeared.

About a mile behind the Germans we saw a group of trucks coming. They were Americans; it was our own supply column trying to catch up to us! The Germans saw that and broke off the attack; they must have thought it was some sort of counterattack. It was actually our food and ammunition. There was a lieutenant running the show, and our captain was yelling at them, asking them how they were coming from that direction. The lieutenant told him, “We took a wrong turn. We didn’t have a map.”

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**ABOVE:** Generals Eisenhower, Bradley, and Patton view a pyre where corpses were burned at the Ohrdruf concentration camp, April 12, 1945. **OPPOSITE:** A lieutenant from Patton's Third Army with the mangled body of a German girl accidentally killed when an Me-109 attacked American troops in the town of Muhlhausen.

We went as far as a town called Mulhausen; I don't remember the name of the river it was on, but we were maybe 100 miles south [west] of Berlin. We heard that [Lt. Gen. George S.] Patton said we had orders to go to Berlin and we should take it in two days, but Eisenhower stopped it. Then they told us, "You're going south—Berlin is for the Russians." So we go south, and we run into the concentration camps.

*Ohrdruf was a subcamp of the sprawling Buchenwald complex, where prisoners were worked to death producing various things for the Nazi war machine. At Ohrdruf the prisoners were used as slave laborers for railroad construction. In March 1945, as American units were closing in, most of the inmates were moved to Buchenwald itself. Many died along the route in these death marches. The remaining prisoners were subjected to mass executions, and many of the bodies were burned. The few survivors were in horrible condition when the U.S. troops arrived.*

*It should be noted that at this stage of the war many units were coming across concentration camps they had not been told existed. The United States Holocaust Museum recognizes the 4th Armored and 89th Infantry Divisions, also Third Army units, as being the first to arrive at Ohrdruf on April 4, 1945. Other units went or were sent there as well, some days later. It was a chaotic period, and even official records cannot always be relied upon.*

*Leon recalls his experiences at the camp, but dates and times are uncertain. This is a common experience among infantrymen, who usually knew little about their exact locations on any given date. They went where they were told, when they were told. His recollections of Ohrdruf follow.*

### **What happened when you arrived at Ohrdruf?**

When we got there, there were very few guards left. We were met by a platoon of Australian soldiers, who had been captured in North Africa. We went through this archway

and it had a nice big sign in German which said, "Work Makes Life Sweet," or something like that. We thought it was a work camp. We drove in there, didn't see anything at first, and these Australians come marching down. I was in the second jeep because I was the XO's radio operator, and he followed the colonel in the first jeep. And we see these guys marching down and the major says, "What the hell is this?"

These guys stopped in front of us, and this guy, a lieutenant or a captain, comes up and salutes. We asked who they were, and he said they were Australian prisoners of war and they were happy to see us. They never mentioned that other units had come in, though we knew other units, or parts of another unit, had shown up earlier. We had so many troops there, nobody knew who was what.

The colonel was a hell of a nice guy named Walker. He saw some buildings in the back and asked the Australian officer, "What's all that back there?" The Aussie replied, "It's probably a work camp. We don't know what's going on back there." He knew, but for some reason didn't want to say.

So the CO says to the major, "Why don't we go back there? If that guy says we shouldn't go, maybe we should." So we

went, three or four jeeps and a tank. We had a tank from the 3rd Armored, I think. We went down a little road heading toward the back, and we passed these ovens.

One of the guys from Kentucky yells out, “Man, these guys ate good, look at all these ovens.” That’s what we thought. We went a little farther, we saw a bin of clothing; didn’t mean anything. We go a little farther, we saw a bunch of bones. No skulls, just bones. The guy said, “My God, how much meat could they eat in a place like this?” Everybody thought it was for food.

So we get about 50-75 yards away from what we thought was a barracks, and one guy walks out and he’s a skeleton in a prison uniform. Everybody’s looking at this guy thinking, “What the hell is this?” Guy never says a word, walks up to the first jeep and looks at the bumper and I guess he saw the initials “U.S.” or something like that. He says to the CO, “American?”

The CO says, “Yeah,” and the guy turns around and walks back to the barracks. About five minutes later, boy, they start coming out.

I was the one that radioed headquarters and told them, “This place is unbelievable; you can’t even begin to describe it.” And they said, “Well, what the hell are you looking at?” I said, “I’m looking at skin and bones in a prison uniform.” And the guy says, “You’re out of your f—ing mind! I’m gonna call division headquarters and see what they say.” From what I was told, two days later here comes Eisenhower and [Omar] Bradley and Patton and everyone else to see it.

### **What was it like dealing with the prisoners? Did you see very many of them?**

All kinds of people, mostly in prison uniforms. Skinny! You can’t begin to describe skinny; it was like a class in biology. They were like one of those statues, where they have a person broken down to just bones. Their faces—nothing there hardly. Their hands were out: “We need food.” Shit! In Third Army, food never caught up to the advance units that fast. We had to wait until we stopped, and then the food arrived. How do you tell these people it’s

going to be eight hours until we get any food? All we had were the remains of C-rations. What the hell’s in C-rations? Four cigarettes! If you were lucky you got spaghetti.

There was one of the fellows in the tank—this gets me. He had a Hershey bar; he gave it to a guy who took two bites and fell over dead. We didn’t know what the hell happened. A medic comes running up, checked him, and he was dead. We found out because he was so emaciated whatever was in the chocolate just tore up his insides.

The one thing that broke me was a little kid, maybe five, six years old. Tugging at my leg, he wanted anything to eat. What could I do? But this little kid, he just hung around me most of the time I was there. I would have given anything for a piece of chewing gum, anything!

After about eight hours, we got orders; we had to go farther south. We packed up, but they didn’t want us to leave. That made us think we were the first guys in the camp, but later you hear other guys from other divisions were there, too. I guess they didn’t stay as long as we did, or they didn’t do as much as we did.

National Archives



Some magazines said we were the first ones [at Ohrdruf], yet I know damn well we weren’t. At that time we thought we were, but subsequently when you start reading about it you find out those guys saw some things we didn’t see. The experience left me damn near becoming an atheist.

### **Did you see any guards at the camp?**

We only saw two; the Australian said all the others had left. The Australians all looked pregnant; they’d only had potatoes and water for about 30 days. The SS had taken off about three days before; they had killed a bunch of people—they shot them and just left the bodies lying there. Nobody knew what that was all about. They supposedly left a couple of guards to keep things “stabilized,” but I only saw one

guard. I was told there were at least four or five, I don’t know.

### **Do you know what happened to them?**

They captured them, took them as POWs. They were regular army, not SS. All the SS left.

### **You said you were there about eight hours. What else did you do during that time?**

Well, the first part was talking with the Australians. Then we took that trip back to the camp, and all the prisoners came out. We were in a state like shell shock. There could have been hundreds or more, or maybe just a hundred. We had never seen anything like it. We didn’t even talk amongst each other.

Every once in a while you heard, “Hey, anybody got a candy bar?” “Anybody got anything to eat?” An orange, an apple, something. A few guys had something to give them, but there was no real food.

These people were just begging, begging, begging, and you didn’t know how to push them off. They came out like a mob. The barracks were lousy, though; I didn’t go into them. I don’t think anybody got far away from the jeep and the tank. Nobody wanted to look around too much. We did see the area where the bodies were. They tried to burn some of them. They had crematoriums, and none of us realized what they were for.



ABOVE: Mauthausen survivors cheer the soldiers of the 11th Armored Division of the U.S. Third Army one day after their actual liberation. The banner, written by Spanish inmates, reads, "The Spanish Anti-Fascists Salute the Liberating Forces." OPPOSITE: Leon Tulper saw firsthand the living skeletons at the Ebensee concentration camp, a sub-camp of Mauthausen.

They were still hot. There were tons of clothing.

### Were there any civilians around?

No, we were not the ones that brought the townspeople in. That happened the next day, I think. They were brought in to see it. A day or two later is when Eisenhower showed up with Bradley and Patton. I heard this was one of the few camps people could walk out of. God only knows what the others were like.

*Colonel Hayden Sears of the 4th Armored Division issued an order that the civilians of Ohrdruf were required to tour the camp; Patton later did the same at Weimar after the liberation of Buchenwald.*

### Not long after that you were present at the Mauthausen concentration camp. What are your recollections about it?

Farther south we cross the Danube; we get to Regensburg and push into Austria. We went as far as Enns. Down near there was another concentration camp, which was much bigger than Ohrdruf, called Mauthausen. That was another nasty one.

We were there just a day. I don't remember much. I do remember a kid saying to one of the people there, "That was the one that killed my father," pointing out a guard. They let him push the guy over the side of a quarry. They let him kill him right there.

There were so many people there, my God, and so many different units all converged there. There were so many division insignias, nobody knew who was who. There were

a lot who got there before we did, units came and went. The people we saw there were not as bad off; they didn't look as bad, but we heard other parts of the camp were really bad.

*As the war wound down, more and more German troops began to surrender, and many Allied units had to divert considerable resources to deal with the rapid influx. The 65th Division was no different. During this time, many captured SS soldiers were treated very harshly.*

### You mentioned dealing with surrendering enemy troops.

I was an "armpit smeller" for about three weeks. An armpit smeller was for when we used to capture the German soldiers. If they came in with their hands up, if they had the SS tattoo, they took them out in the back. You know what happened to them. That's what we did. We eliminated a lot of SS guys, and they deserved it. I remember when we heard about the Malmedy massacre, oh, my God, and the



orders came down: “Take no prisoners.” There were a lot of Germans who lost their lives because of it, all because of that stupid German general [SS-Standartenführer Joachim Peiper]. For a lousy 85 guys [Americans killed at Malmedy], he lost hundreds because we took no SS prisoners.

### Where were you when the war ended?

Linz, Austria. Funny thing, it was just like any other day. Didn’t mean a damn thing. We were meeting the Russians right then on the other side of Linz. We went up into the mountains to a little town called Leonfelden, which was half occupied by the Russians, and we occupied the other half. On our side were a lady and a young kid that were from Brooklyn, New York. She’d married this German officer, and she was waiting to get shipped back to the States. The boy was about four or five; he didn’t speak any English. You would’ve thought she’d have taught him English.

We were there about three weeks with the Russians. Once a week they ate with us, once a week we ate with them. I never saw a meal. The reason was vodka. You would be with your exact opposite. At that time I was a radio chief, so I met with this Russian radio chief. Nice young kid from Siberia. Wasn’t educated, but a real nice kid.

The officers would be around a table, and we’re in the back. They had a commissar; if one of them talked and got out of line, he’d say, “Out!” We’d toast Stalin and Roosevelt and Churchill and Truman, and by the time we were done I couldn’t even see what I was doing.

Some of our officers found out what the Russians couldn’t drink, and all of a sudden we got a shipment of scotch. They couldn’t handle scotch. So when they came to our side, it was scotch. The commissar, he wouldn’t drink; he watched everybody else. At least on our side, I got to have a meal.

On the Russian side of town, they treated the Germans like slaves. On our side we had one or two Germans helping out; it wasn’t the same at all. When you find out the Russians lost 28 million people during the war, you could understand.

Then we got orders to go back to Linz,

and when we get there we find out the division is broken up. The rumor was when Patton came in to meet the Russians he couldn’t get any salutes from anyone. Nobody liked him. He was not our hero. Even though as a tactician he was smart, but when he said, “You give me a truckload of dog tags and I’ll give you Berlin,” that meant how many GIs would die to do it. So there was no love for Patton.

### So now you’re on occupation duty. What was that like?

One day at HQ, they said, “Tulper, you’re being shipped out.” I asked where I was going, and they told me I was being transferred over to the 9th Division. They told me I was going to be relocating people [displaced persons] back to their home countries. Occupation service. I got into a jeep, and after a hundred miles or so on the autobahn, speeding and slowing, we got to the 9th Division.

If I could have stayed there the rest of my life, I might have. It was like being on an island in the Caribbean. I was in Garmisch, Germany [in the mountains of southern Bavaria]. I worked in the post office building, which was also the telephone exchange. We had 140 girls working there even though there were no phones yet. I became radio chief again, and it was a combination of wire patrol and radio, and we started putting in telephone lines.

We put in the first line to Munich. Not a public line, just HQ to HQ. Then we started putting in lines to the smaller towns—Oberammergau and other places. So we had these telephone operators all over the place, all of them young girls.

There were seven of us enlisted men, and we each had our own room. I had a jeep with a driver. Then down the block from us moves in a WAC unit. Like I said; if I could have stayed there I would have. We ate at a beautiful hotel right by the WAC detachment. We felt like kings!

### But it wasn’t all easy, was it?

Some of that occupation duty was difficult. When you had to put people on trains to go back to Bulgaria or Romania, you had to go armed. We had pistols and carbines. We would have to load them into cattle cars, just like they had arrived in. Some of them

National Archives



A convoy of surrendering SS troops near Enns, Austria. The 65th Division soldiers showed little compassion for the SS, infamous for committing atrocities. Tulper recalled that the division ordered, “Take no prisoners.”