

GERMANY (NAZI) - CONCENTRATION CAMP (BUCHENWALD)

1993

BLAUSTEIN  
LIBRARY

FEB 24 1993

American Jewish  
Committee

# LIBERATORS

## A Background Report

Kenneth S. Stern

Program Specialist on Anti-Semitism and Extremism

# THE LIBERATORS

## A Background Report

The LIBERATORS, a film documenting the role of black soldiers in liberating concentration camps,<sup>1</sup> has become the subject of controversy. Editorials in the *New York Post*, and articles in the *New York Guardian*, the *Village Voice*, the *New Republic*, the *Forward* and elsewhere challenge the claim of the film — that black soldiers were among the liberators of Buchenwald and Dachau concentration camps.

The film has become a tool for building bridges between blacks and Jews, reinforcing the common interest of both groups in fighting prejudice and discrimination. Some leaders of both communities, including Jesse Jackson, David Dinkins, and Elie Wiesel, have been associated with the film, and there is discussion about using it in classrooms.

After three weeks of talking with survivors, archival experts, and members of the black units in question, and meeting with the film's producers and executives of WNET, it is clear to me that the message of the film — that black soldiers were among the liberators of concentration camps — is absolutely true. It is also unquestionably true that the black units depicted had a glorious, and generally unappreciated, role in World War II, despite the bigotry they faced.

---

<sup>1</sup> LIBERATORS is also the name of the accompanying book by the producers of the film. Unless otherwise noted, I use the term to refer to the film, although the book suffers from similar problems.

The tragedy of the LIBERATORS, however, is that the film has serious factual flaws, well beyond what can be written off as "artistic license." Most importantly, the film claims, despite convincing evidence to the contrary, that the all-black 761st Tank Battalion liberated concentration camps at Buchenwald and Dachau. This serious factual error is doubly troubling, not only because blacks did take part in the rescuing of Jews from Dachau and Buchenwald, but also because the 761st was involved in the liberation of Günskirchen, a subcamp of Mauthausen, something not treated in the film.<sup>2</sup> There was, tragically, a *real* story that could have been told to make the same point as the factually erroneous one.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the historical accuracy of the film. It should also be understood that there is no claim here that either the survivors or the veterans of the 761st have lied about their recollections, nor that their recollections are unreliable. As will be clear below, the problems are more complex.

### WHO IS A LIBERATOR?

A minor problem with the film is that it never defines what a "liberator" is. There are three different ways to look at that term.

According to the military, a "liberator" is a division (and units attached thereto) that set foot in a camp within the first 48 hours. By this definition, the 761st Tank Battalion is a liberator of Günskirchen, a subcamp of Mauthausen in Austria, as it was attached to the 71st Infantry Division that entered that camp.

The 183rd Battalion of Combat Engineers (the other all-black unit treated in the film) may or may not have been in Buchenwald within the first 48 hours. (Some recollections and documents suggest it was, some suggest it was not — and the battalion's records for April and May, 1945 are missing from National Archives Records Group 407.) Leon Bass, the veteran of the 183rd depicted in the film speaking at a synagogue, may have come in during that time as he was an "S-2" intelligence officer, capable of traveling independently. And certainly, there are pictures of him and other members of the 183rd at the camp.

It must be recalled that no one — especially the inmates — was running a stopwatch,

---

<sup>2</sup> The narration near the beginning of the film states: ". . . members of the all-black 761st Tank Battalion and the 183rd Combat Engineers . . . helped free thousands of Jews from the death camps at Buchenwald, Lambach and Dachau." There was no concentration camp named "Lambach." Dr. Robert Kesting of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum determined that the filmmakers meant Günskirchen, a concentration camp near the town of Lambach. The camp had once held 17,000 people, and had been a "destination for transports of Hungarian Jews," according to Robert Abzug, *Inside the Vicious Heart: Americans and the Liberation of Nazi Concentration Camps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 118. At the time of liberation, only 5,000 were alive, 2,600 of whom were in one barracks. A doctor reported that there was "filth all over," and that there was "no water, no heating, no light, no food. About 500 bodies lying in the area. The living bodies were skin and bones." *Ibid.*

and those who challenge whether the 183rd was a "liberating" unit miss the point. The unit was there when it counted, in the first few days, helping helpless souls — true liberators in the second, less technical but equally humane meaning of the term.

It should also be remembered that all the black units depicted in the film were in the parts of Germany and Austria that held Jews and others in concentration camps. It was the combined Allied soldiers, the sound of their artillery in the distance, the rumbling of tanks, and the knowledge that their presence was imminent that "liberated" many of the camps: the guards, for the most part, fled.

### DOCUDRAMA, NOT HISTORY

It is indisputable that blacks saw Jews, and Jews blacks, in both Buchenwald and Dachau. Survivors accurately testify that they saw blacks within the first few days, and blacks accurately testify that they saw the "walking skeletons" of Jews. There is no question that Leon Bass was in Buchenwald while the dead bodies were still in piles: there is a picture.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, there is no question that Paul Parks (another engineer) was in Dachau.<sup>4</sup> Nor is there question that other black soldiers were in these camps — there are photographs.<sup>5</sup>

### DACHAU AND THE 761ST

Charles Gates and Paul Bates, respectively the commander of "C" Company (to which 761st members William McBurney and Leonard Smith ["Smitty"] were attached), and the Lt. colonel in charge of the entire 761st, assert that there is no way any of the tanks could have been involved in the liberation of either Buchenwald or Dachau. They point to the great distance from the rest of the unit (60 to 100 miles), and the facts that the tanks were gas guzzlers and that gas was hard to come by. What's more, Gates insists, with conviction, that he knew where each of his tanks was. Asked if some tanks were ever "borrowed" by other infantry units, or if the soldiers could have liberated another camp, closer to the path of the battalion, that they mistook for Dachau, he insists "no" and calls those who claim to have liberated the camps "liars."

Gates, Bates, and 761st veterans E.G. McConnell, David J. Williams, and Philip W.

---

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the book (p. 206) and the film show only this one picture, taken by William Scott, depicting black soldiers in a camp while there were still bodies of dead inmates stacked like cordwood.

<sup>4</sup> See Jonathan Kaufman, *Broken Alliance* (New York: Charles Scribner's Son, 1988), pp. 51-62. The film incorrectly identified Mr. Parks as a member of the 183rd Battalion of Combat Engineers. He was a member of the 365th Regiment.

<sup>5</sup> See Anthony Penrose, ed., *Lee Miller's War* (Boston: Bulfinch, 1992), p. 163.

Latimer all say that the story of any part of the 761st helping in the liberation of Dachau or Buchenwald is simply not so. Having spent half a day with McConnell, having listened to and read statements by Williams and Latimer, and having interviewed Bates and Gates, I believe that these five 761st veterans speak with the same conviction and passion as do Smith, McBurney, Johnny Stevens, Preston McNeil, and Walter Woodson, who recall that they *were* at concentration camps (although, as will be clear below, from phone interviews with each, they do not necessarily claim they were at Buchenwald or Dachau).

An outside observer has a hard time trying to mesh these inconsistent memories. (Gates says he saw Smith regularly, Smith says he saw Gates maybe twice; Gates says they had no capacity for extra gas, Smith says they had extra gas with them.) Talk to enough people on both sides, and there is some motive for fabrication on each: on one side, trying to make themselves heroes or make money from a "good story"; on the other, downplaying enlisted men's accomplishments, rumors of alternative stories to be sold,<sup>6</sup> or simply commanders who, nearly half a century later, believe they knew where all their men were at any given moment.

These mutually inconsistent recollections (I was there vs. it was impossible) need not be decided to have serious problems with the film and the accompanying book. Even if we assume, *arguendo*, that the nay-sayers were in no position to know, or are merely mistaken, serious historical errors abound.

Dr. Robert Kesting, an archivist at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum,<sup>7</sup> is an expert in military history who has a special interest in black history during World War II.<sup>8</sup> He has certified the liberator status of 16 different military groups — including the 761st at Günskirchen. Dr. Kesting disputes the claim that the 761st liberated Dachau or Buchenwald, noting that the type of records that would have been generated, and were generated in the 16 other investigations (including that of the 761st at Günskirchen), simply do not exist.

Dr. Kesting explains that the records for the 761st, called the "Organization of Battle, outlined just about every place they were. You can see that they were assigned to the 71st Infantry Division from 28 March to 10 May 1945. There were no breaks, no platoons lent out, no nothing."

---

<sup>6</sup> E.G. McConnell is now being represented by an attorney, Robert Ungar. Mr. Ungar clearly has a political agenda. Aside from being associated with the right-wing *New York Guardian*, and airing a program on the 761st on his WMCA radio show, Mr. Ungar told me that he had been on the board of the ADL, but had "quit" because the ADL had "honored an anti-Semite." Who? "The *Los Angeles Times*, which ran cartoons that were no better than those in *Der Stürmer*," he said.

<sup>7</sup> The Museum itself, on Nov. 6, 1992, issued a carefully worded press release, saying that it could neither confirm nor deny the presence of members of the 761st at Buchenwald or Dachau.

<sup>8</sup> Dr. Kesting has written articles on "Forgotten Victims: Blacks in the Holocaust," *Journal of Negro History*, vol. LXXVII (1, Winter 1992, pp. 33-34) and "Blacks in Nazi Camps and Prisons: An Overview."

These records — of the division to which the 761st was attached — were dated December 1945. I intensely examined Dr. Kesting about them. He explained that documents relating to a battalion would be found in the records of the division to which they were attached.

Is it possible that tanks could be lent out to a different division without records? (The 71st Infantry Division was neither involved with nor close enough to either Dachau or Buchenwald.) "That's difficult to believe," Dr. Kesting said. "Normally, they keep tank units intact because they're usually supporting regiments, infantry, or they were in direct fire missions. Normally they stay intact. They would maybe break down into companies,<sup>9</sup> but the companies may follow a particular combat team. But all of it would be operating within the divisional area of operation."

Questioning how to reconcile the memories of some 761st vets that the companies were largely intact with other recollections that tanks were lent out regularly to other units (and wondering whether some of the tanks had been lent to different units within the 71st Division), I asked Dr. Kesting what paperwork would have been generated about the location of individual tanks.

"The best thing to do to confirm what they're saying about being detached," he said, "is to look at the morning reports for the units. Morning reports are head-count accountability.<sup>10</sup> Each day each commander had to file a head-count."<sup>11</sup>

I asked if it were possible for a tank or two from one of the four 761st companies to be lent to a passing officer, and then for the tanks to meet up with the rest of the company a day or two later (such an occurrence would explain why the four of the five 761st members who say they were at concentration camps put themselves there one or two tanks at a time).

Dr. Kesting says that would be "highly unlikely, because they had a battle plan. They had to follow the operational order as was brought down by higher headquarters. They were given segments of that operation order. They had certain areas that they could move in in

---

<sup>9</sup> As the 761st was — into four companies, three with "medium" tanks, one with "light" tanks. (The "medium" tanks had more powerful guns; the lighter ones were faster.)

<sup>10</sup> The morning reports would be housed in a St. Louis archive, assuming they were not destroyed in a fire that occurred there.

<sup>11</sup> In interviewing members of the 761st, it became evident that there was some friction between officers and enlisted men — the former, for the most part, comprising the nay-sayer group. The filmmakers chose to discount the statements of the officers — including Gates and Bates — and in a contest of credibility between those in charge and those in front, my initial predilection was the same. But Dr. Kesting, among others, stresses how critical the officers' information was, not because they were of higher rank, but because the officers had fuller knowledge of intelligence and battle plans than enlisted men, who, frequently, were told nothing more than bare coordinates or other fragmented information.

that operation order. And anything that would deter from that, they had to report back to higher headquarters. That's the way those things worked. Now, there's a certain amount of flexibility, not everything's cut and dry. But normally they try to stick with plans as best they can, because otherwise you have chaos. And these orders came down from division level. And everything centered around the division. That's why I say if you can't find anything in division records about this sort of thing, and then you look down at battalion records, of course — in this case we did — but the problem is, my indications were that no one checked anything. I checked with just about every archivist there, and that's exactly what they told me [with the exception of the motion pictures branch of the National Archives]."

I asked what reports, if any, would have been generated if a tank came across a concentration camp. Dr. Kesting explained that tanks generally were in front of the infantry, the "lead element," and one of their main jobs was to report anything odd they saw. "Once they contacted something," he said, "they had to report it back immediately to the S-2 of that division. That was a direct order to do every minute, every second they were on the road. Inmates, anything that was intelligence-worthy, had to be reported. The only one the 761st recorded was Günskirchen. Nothing said about Buchenwald, nothing said about Dachau. They would have had 25,000 people they ran across. You best believe they would have said something about it."

When I met on February 3, 1993 with the producers of the film, Nina Rosenblum and Bill Miles, I repeatedly asked about the morning reports, the S-2 reports, the battalion reports, and the divisional reports that Dr. Kesting stressed. The producers said they had seen "some documents," but would not or could not specifically say which ones. They admitted not checking the morning reports. And they were unprepared to defend their film's claim based on information in any of these essential military documents.<sup>12</sup>

In a prior conversation I had with Nina Rosenblum, she indicated that military records frequently downplayed the achievements of black troops. I asked Dr. Kesting about that claim, and he was adamant that that was not so. Reporters during the war, and historians after the war, have certainly underreported or distorted the achievement of black units. But it strains credibility to believe that intelligence reports of dangers lurking in unconquered terrain, or the need to be aware of 25,000 people around the next bend, would not be logged in the contemporaneous records because a black tanker was the source of that information — military records that were of immediate life-and-death importance, and not history, were being written.

Furthermore, if the military records were too poor or otherwise deficient as to discredit the liberation of a concentration camp (Dachau) by the 761st in the last week of

---

<sup>12</sup> In a phone conversation with the producers on the afternoon of February 5, 1993, I asked again about these documents. I was told again that they had seen "some documents" that were sent to them, but could not cite any specifically, or say what they contained. I again invited the producers to fax me copies of any such documents pertaining to the relevant dates. I have received none.

April 1945, how could they have been so precise as to credit the same unit with the liberation of another camp (Günskirchen) the first week of May 1945?

Finally, if there was some great conspiracy to erase black history, why would the 761st's own book, *Come Out Fighting*, mention nothing about either Dachau or Buchenwald?<sup>13</sup>

761st veterans McBurney, McNeil, Smith, and Woodson all claim in the film to have liberated Dachau. In conversations with me, they each spoke with conviction and detail. Although their stories are not all consistent (no two people recall the same event in exactly the same way), they have enough overlapping detail to provide credibility that each of them saw a concentration camp. They all say that the commanders would not have necessarily known where they were at any given time.

Asked how they know that the camp they went into was Dachau, both Smith and McBurney are quick to point out that they don't know what camp they entered. Smith says that someone told him a week or two after the event something to the effect of "Hey, you know the place where you were? That was Dachau." McBurney, asked how he heard he was in Dachau, says that Smith told him about his conversation with this other, unnamed, soldier. Apparently, the producers accepted this as sufficient proof that the camp Smith and McBurney entered was Dachau, rather than investigate military documents to see if they supported, or belied, the locus that some third party ascribed to Smith's recollections.

Smith and McBurney describe their tanks rolling over a gate that does not match the description of the main gate at Dachau. Furthermore, the liberation of Dachau is well documented: it was opened when soldiers of the 45th and 42nd divisions entered the

---

<sup>13</sup> Trezzvant W. Anderson's *Come Out Fighting* (Long Island: 761st Tank Battalion & Allied Veterans Association, 1979 [originally published by Anderson in Germany in 1945]) doesn't mention Günskirchen either, and this is possibly explained by the fact that few, if any, members of the 761st went into this camp, although the 71st Infantry Division did open the camp. As one member of the 761st said, "What use was a tank inside a concentration camp? It was for the infantry to help out."

*Come Out Fighting*, however, does put the 761st in the area of Günskirchen; it also puts the battalion far away from both Dachau and Buchenwald. (For Apr. 10 through 12, [Buchenwald was liberated on the 11th] the book puts the 761st and all four of its companies with the 71st Infantry Division, and details the taking of the town of Coburg and the heroics of B company in taking out fifteen machine gun nests between the towns of Meningen and Bayreuth. [See pp. 83-84.] On Apr. 28 [Dachau was liberated on Apr. 29], the book puts the 761st Battalion in Straubing, and the next day approaching the Austrian border. [See pp. 88-89.]



camps.<sup>14</sup> (While the film interviews survivors of Buchenwald, it does not interview survivors of Dachau.<sup>15</sup>)

Both Smith and McBurney say their tanks were inside the camp for a relatively short period of time, after they came in shooting and took out the last resistance. Their descriptions are vivid, and despite the lack of a document to either confirm or deny their stories, there is little reason to disbelieve their memory of having liberated some camp — especially as the line of march of the 761st puts it closer to some of the Dachau subcamps, and directly into the area of the Flossenburg camps and subcamps of Mauthausen.

The remembrances of both McNeil and Woodson are more complex. There is little doubt that they saw concentration camps — perhaps even Dachau. But that could have been at a later date.

McNeil says he knew it was Dachau because someone inside told him. He says he drove in because he was "curious and nosy." He did not see either Smith's or McBurney's tank there, although Woodson was there in a jeep, he says. McNeil does not assert that he broke down any gates; he recalls that the camp was already liberated when he went in, and says he might not have been there on the first day. In the camp for a total of fifteen to twenty minutes, he says that he parked his "tank in the middle of the compound, and got

---

<sup>14</sup> For a detailed description of the liberation of Dachau, see Robert Abzug, *Inside the Vicious Heart*, pp. 87-103. See also: Barbara Distel, "29 April 1945: The Liberation of the Concentration Camp at Dachau — Vol 1," in Wolfgang Benz et al., ed., *Dachau Review: History of Nazi Concentration Camps — Studies, Reports, Documents* (Brussels: Comité International De Dachau, 1985), vol. 1, pp. 3-11. ("Colonel Felix Sparks of the Third Battalion of the 157th Infantry Association of the 45th Infantry Division reported that he and his soldiers . . . were ordered by radio to . . . liberate the concentration camp at Dachau. . . . Whether Colonel Sparks and his men were the first to climb over the walls of and arrive at the camp to liberate it, or General Linden, who came driving through the entrance with a vanguard of the 42nd Rainbow Division, among whom was also an American war correspondent, will be impossible now to prove with ultimate certainty.")

<sup>15</sup> Survivor Samuel Pizar describes a death march from a subcamp to Dachau, in April 1945. He was rescued by a black tanker. The producers cite Pizar to prove that the 761st was near Dachau, stating in a press release that "after the war Mr. Pizar was able to positively identify that specific member of the 761st." In the LIBERATORS book, the producers wrote that "In 1982, Pizar . . . received a letter from a Los Angeles woman, Mrs. Valerie Crowley, who had been watching as he recounted history in a television interview. It resembled, she wrote, stories that her brother used to tell about how, on a German battlefield, he had saved the life of an emaciated kid with a shaven head. Mrs. Crowley and Pizar corresponded, and he ascertained that her brother, the late Bill Ellington of the 761st Tank Battalion, was indeed his rescuer." (p.236).

In a conversation with me, Mr. Pizar said he recalls a black tanker, but never identified the soldier he saw as from the 761st — and told the producers that he had no way to know who that soldier was. The producers also state that Mr. Pizar's death march was "only 25 kilometers from Dachau." Mr. Pizar says the march was "day and night, through winding secondary roads. My liberation took place at least 25 miles from Dachau, by main roads." Records show that the route of the 761st was nowhere near Dachau.

According to Dr. Kesting, records also indicate that the 761st came across a death march heading to Dachau of inmates who were being dispersed from the Flossenburg camps at that time, near the area of Straubing. It is possible that Pizar was in this march.

out, and I entered a building on my right, and that's where the furnaces were, and when I walked through the door, the smell of burnt bodies, I had to catch my breath, and then I went in. And there were people lying on the floor to my left, moaning and groaning and dying from malnutrition and starvation. So I said, let me open one of these furnaces, and I opened the furnace and inside were burnt bodies and around in front of the furnace they had burnt bodies and had raked them out and hadn't taken them away, and so I closed it up and said I can't believe this and then I went to the second one. It was the same thing. So I said let me go in the back. And as I walked in the back they had this little room back there that they said Hitler was supposed to have given them showers but they gassed them. And it had a little peep hole from the outside that you can peep in. So I looked in there, and I came out, and just, it took my breath away. Took everything. I just couldn't believe it. So when I came out my driver said, Sarge, why don't you go in this building, so I went in the other building, and that's where the mad scientist and doctor had every part of a human being's body preserved in a jar. He also had a freezer in there, where he would put human beings and see how much cold they could take before death."

According to Dr. Kesting, the main camps at Dachau, Buchenwald and Mauthausen all had labs similar to the one McNeil described; and of all the concentration camps on German soil, only the main camp at Dachau had a gas chamber. (Although historians assert that this gas chamber, [unlike the ones in the death camps outside Germany] was not used, soldiers who were given tours of Dachau [many came from great distances on R&R to see it in the following weeks, when the war in that area ended] were told, incorrectly, that the gas chamber had been used.)

The perplexing thing about McNeil's statement that the producers apparently did not investigate is how could a soldier, in the minutes if not hours or days (McNeil says it could have been the second or third day) after liberation, with dying people all around, "moaning and groaning," wander around the camp on such an extensive tour, in a matter of minutes, and know the significance of everything he saw?

The story gets more complex when Woodson's recollections are thrown in.

Woodson says that his was the third tank into Dachau: two medium tanks were ahead (he later mentions McBurney and Smith), his light tank and McNeil's followed.<sup>16</sup> Inside, Woodson described chaos, how they were throwing crackers out of the tank, and then, after a short time, they left. He says the camp was opened before he drove his tank in, but makes no mention of McBurney and Smith's shooting to end resistance in the camp, nor of a burning building they both describe.

Woodson says he went back the next day, with his tank, and saw Dachau (an inmate also told him this was "Dachau," but Woodson said he did not know if this was the main

---

<sup>16</sup> McBurney and Smith say there were no light tanks with them.

camp, or one of the subcamps). He saw the barracks, the lab, the gas chamber, the crematoria. "There were dogs they had there," he explained to me, "that they used to take their uniforms off of them, and let the dog smell them, then put them back on to the person, turn them loose, and let the dogs loose on them." Asked how he learned his, Woodson said, "they had a guy there; he'd been there."

These four 761st veterans all have vivid memories of seeing a concentration camp, two of shooting as they entered. But the differences in the stories raise questions, among them: could two different camps have been involved?

The producers, rather than trying to reconcile the differences in the story to find out which camps these four veterans went into, and when, merely presented parts of their individual stories on film, all to suggest that "the 761st" liberated Dachau.

## BUCHENWALD

The film's, and the book's, most glaring historical errors regard Buchenwald and the 761st Tank Battalion.

The film's narration begins: "In April 1945, American army units broke into the concentration camps at Dachau, Lambach and Buchenwald. Nearly 50 years later, two veterans of the 761st Tank Battalion returned to Buchenwald with Ben Bender, who had been imprisoned there as a boy." In fact, as the producers acknowledged to me, neither E.G. McConnell nor Leonard Smith (the two "returning" veterans depicted in the movie) were ever in Buchenwald before the filming of this scene. McConnell says he told the producers this, on film, but that it was edited out. Another person connected with the film said that the scene was intended only to show Ben Bender giving a tour of the camp to two "representative" members of the 761st. No one associated with the film can explain how the word "return" cannot of necessity imply having been there before.

The film shows Bender taking McConnell and Smith around Buchenwald. Bender, addressing the two 761st vets, says "when you entered the camp," and later says "you came in the gate like a wave, like a rushing river." The clear implication for the viewers is that the 761st Tank Battalion, including these two veterans, liberated Buchenwald with tanks, although that is not necessarily what Bender says ("you" could mean generic Americans).

A review of the film and the book<sup>17</sup> shows that only one veteran of the 761st claims

---

<sup>17</sup> The weakness of this claim is evidenced by the map on page 213 of the book, which depicts the line of march of the 761st for March and April 1945 (but not for the first week of May, when Günskirchen was liberated). The map clearly shows the great distance the "path of the 761st Battalion" was from both Dachau and Buchenwald. A small note in the corner of the map reads: "While this map indicates the path of the main units of the 761st, it does not show the paths of the numerous so-called bastard units that moved through the

to be a liberator of Buchenwald: Johnny Stevens, who was attached to A Company. The film has a shot of Stevens saying, "We did, you know, one concentration camp. It was near the end of the war. And you just can't describe what I saw." The narration then says: "When his tank battalion entered a Nazi concentration camp, Johnny Stevens was only 20 years old."

During a phone interview on January 29, 1993, Stevens said his tank was attached to another infantry unit at that time, either the 103rd or 104th. No other tank of the 761st was with him. He remembers being outside the gate of the camp after it was opened, and soldiers rushing in. His tank was outside the gate the entire time, never entering the camp. He was there for "a few minutes," then left. He recalls seeing people in camp uniforms, and a lot of people near the gate. Asked if he was sure it was Buchenwald, he said he was pretty sure. Asked how he learned it was Buchenwald, did he see any signs, etc., he said that he didn't read German, and someone (he doesn't recall who) told him later that it was Buchenwald — he had no independent way to know. He also said that the tankers were never really sure where they were at any given time.

I read Stevens this quote attributed to him on pages 216-217 of the book:

We were only there a little while, because as tankers we didn't stay anywhere long, we'd keep on moving. We shot up the place and chased the guards out of there. It was a sight I never want to see again, I'll tell you that. I jumped out of the tank, and there were people all over the place . . . They could barely walk, and they're coming at you with their hands held halfway out, their eyes all sunk in their heads . . .

He said, "I haven't read the book. That's not what I said. I was just there, by myself, outside the gate." (The statement attributed to Stevens sounds like it was something McBurney or Smith might have said about the camp they entered.)

Stevens, obviously, saw a concentration camp. It may or may not have been Buchenwald.

To support the film's and book's claim about the 761st at Buchenwald, the filmmakers have written that: "the most convincing testimony regarding the 761st presence at Buchenwald and Dachau comes from the survivors who saw with their own eyes. These include Ben Bender, Alex Gross, Samuel Pizar, and Elie Wiesel, to name only a few. To dismiss their clear recollections of events they lived through would be presumptuous, at best" (Allentuck letter to *New York Post*, Jan. 21, 1993). The filmmakers have also circulated a letter by Alex Gross, in which he recalls a black emerging from a tank at Buchenwald.

The producers have twisted what both survivors and liberators have said. None of the

---

Munich-Dachau area." No similar notation is included about Buchenwald. (Also, by admitting there were "main units" of the 761st — enough to draw a single line in a map — the producers refute an essential element in support of their claim that Buchenwald and Dachau could have been liberated; namely, that the 761st as a Battalion was widely scattered.)

survivors are certain that they remember the 761st at Buchenwald — they all remember blacks, and indeed there were blacks there, including Leon Bass and others from the 183rd, the engineering unit that helped deal with the dead bodies and the needs of those left clinging to life.

Alex Gross says he remembers a black soldier emerging from a tank, and the producers claim this proves the 761st entered the camp. In an interview, Mr. Gross said he could not remember when the tank was in the camp, but it was could have been on the first, second, or possibly third day. Mr. Gross notes that he can't recall exactly because he was "so weak" that he went into a coma on the fifth day. Asked what the tank was doing in the camp, Gross said he doesn't recall. Asked if it might have had a plow blade attached, he said it might have. In a subsequent conversation, after seeing a draft of this paper, Mr. Gross said that what he saw was an "armored vehicle" that "could have been a tank." He also said that the vehicle was "not near the gate."

A probable explanation is that Gross saw the 183rd's heavy equipment being operated by a black soldier (there is footage of the 183rd's tank-like vehicle [tall, with tracks, but lacking a turret] shown in another part of the film). Gross makes no claim to be a witness to what the film and the book allege: the tank battalion entering the camp, "shooting up the place."<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> In my meeting with the producers on February 3, 1993, I related what Johnny Stevens had told me, that his tank was the only one from the 761st at Buchenwald, and that he was there on the first day, for only a few minutes, and did not enter the camp. Thus, I stressed, if Stevens's recollections were correct, Alex Gross could not have seen the one tank from the 761st that might have been near Buchenwald, because Gross remembered a tank inside.

On Feb. 5, 1993, Nina Rosenblum asked that I speak with her and John Simmons, a 761st veteran (not mentioned in the book or movie), because she had spoken with him that morning, and he remembered being part of the liberation of Buchenwald. During our call Mr. Simmons related how he and four other tanks of B Company entered the camp, "knocked the doors down," and saw a "massive pile of bodies." Mr. Simmons said that the camp was liberated "late in April . . . after Dachau," and that he was certain it was Buchenwald because he remembered a sign that said "Buchenwald." He said he also saw members of the 183rd there, but did not see Johnny Stevens, whom the film and the book assert was at Buchenwald. Asked if the tanks came in shooting, Simmons said "somebody fired a round."

Mr. Simmons's description of the terrible condition of the inmates was compelling. But his recollections as to time or place were not self-authenticating, and were contradictory. He said he remembered a sign, but not until the Nuremberg trials, years later, brought the memory back. He remembered the 183rd at Buchenwald, but no one puts it there at or near the moment of liberation. Buchenwald was liberated on April 11th, not in late April. Buchenwald was liberated before, not after, Dachau. (And, of course, the 761st's own book puts B Company heading between Meningen and Bayreuth, through the area of Coburg on the 11th, i.e., far away from, and heading further away from, Buchenwald. See fn. 14, *supra*.) Another problem is that Buchenwald was not liberated by tanks knocking down doors and firing a round, but was taken over by the inmates themselves. An hour after they had gained control of the camp (most of the guards had fled), four soldiers associated with Combat Team 9 of the 9th Armored Infantry Battalion, Sixth Armored Division, along with a few Russians, came upon the camp and cut a hole in the fence. Later, members of the Fourth Armored Division and the 80th Infantry entered. (See: Abzug, *Inside the Vicious Heart*, pp. 45-59.)

Mr. Simmons may have been involved in the liberation of some camp. To determine which camp, his

## MEANING OF THE HISTORICAL PROBLEMS

Even if we assume that members of the 761st went into some camps, the film and book make claims that are, at the most generous, negligently sloppy. Aside from the clear message that "the 761st," as opposed to two or four tanks out of 54 (some say 71) entered Dachau, the filmmakers ignored clear signs that the members who are warranted as going into that camp may have gone elsewhere. Worse, the film tells the audience that (1) the 761st Battalion entered Buchenwald whereas the veteran depicted in the film says his tank was alone and did not enter the camp (which, in all probability, was not Buchenwald anyway)<sup>19</sup> and (2) that McConnell and Smith "returned" to Buchenwald, when they had never been there before the filming of *LIBERATORS*.

In all her conversations with me, and in quotes in various articles, Ms. Rosenblum has deflected criticism of the film by charging prejudice. In a conference call with me and two members of the 761st, she continually encouraged the veterans to blame any challenge of the film's veracity on bigotry (despite the fact that some of the loudest critics are black veterans of the 761st). Ms. Rosenblum, when told that the commander of the 761st said that he had not even "heard of the names Dachau and Buchenwald until after the war," asked whether the questioner was "willing to believe a white commander and [not the black] soldiers." Ms. Rosenblum has said that "most Jewish people think . . . that black people are less,"<sup>20</sup> and that those who challenge the film's accuracy "are of the same mentality that says the Holocaust didn't happen."<sup>21</sup> But the question is not whether societal prejudice diminished the recognition of the accomplishments of blacks in the military (it did), but of historical accuracy. Prejudice does not explain why essential documents were not examined,<sup>22</sup> nor why inconsistencies about the locus of heroic acts were ignored.

The fact is, there *are* Holocaust deniers working today with an agenda harmful for

---

compelling and credible description of the physical attributes of the camp, aided by reference to the documents that show his Company's activities, should provide historians better clues than his recollection years later that he saw a sign that said "Buchenwald."

<sup>19</sup> Stevens, remember, said he had no way to know what the name of the camp was, although he heard it was Buchenwald; all the records of the unit place the 761st no where near Buchenwald.

<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Exaggerators," *New Republic*, Feb. 8, 1993, pp. 13-14.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> In fact, military documents of World War II help *prove* the scope of discrimination against black soldiers. For example, military data show that fifty-five of the seventy soldiers executed after courts-martials in Europe during World War II were black. (See Francis X. Clines, "When Black Soldiers were Hanged: a War's Footnote," *New York Times*, Feb. 7, 1993, p. 20.)

both blacks and Jews.<sup>23</sup> It is the deniers who wait to pounce on any inconsistency in historical memory, and then repaint what occurred without care for detail. To both Jews and blacks, the history of oppression and genocide is too important to be misrepresented. In all the interviews about the LIBERATORS, none were more emphatic about the need for history to be recorded correctly than the veterans of the 761st. Having struggled for the better part of a half-century to have their remarkable story acknowledged, many 761st vets are consumed by the specter of the 761st being remembered for something it did not do, instead of all the heroic things it did.

## CONCLUSION

The real shame of the LIBERATORS has nothing to do with its deficiencies. There are literally scores of Jewish and black agencies and groups that understand the historic links between the groups, their common agendas, and their interlocking fates<sup>24</sup> in an increasingly complex America. Yet none of these groups, despite all their good work, created a vehicle that, so powerfully and simplistically, grabbed people by the *kishkes* (guts) and forced them to confront this reality. It took two filmmakers, despite the problems with their project, to create a message that silenced the racists, the anti-Semites, the inward-looking of both communities, and spoke to the heart.

It is probable that before the controversy of the LIBERATORS dies down, Holocaust deniers, racists, anti-Semites, and conspiracy theorists will have their say. We will all have to counteract them, shout them down if necessary, and reaffirm that the message of the LIBERATORS remains true: blacks helped rescue Jews from the camps, including Dachau, Buchenwald, and Günskirchen.

---

<sup>23</sup> Holocaust denial is being promoted largely by groups with a political agenda of anti-Semitism, white supremacy, and neo-Nazism. See: Kenneth S. Stern, *Holocaust Denial* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1993).

<sup>24</sup> The film did not mention a number of other interesting connections between blacks and Jews during World War II. Aside from the obvious (there were some black inmates in the camps, and there were Jewish liberators), blacks (beyond Jesse Owens) were targeted by Nazi racial practices. Germany had African colonies until World War I, and there were some black offspring of German citizens from interracial marriages. It was not only Jews who suffered under the Nazi racial laws of 1933. As Dr. Kesting points out in his article "Blacks in Nazi Camps and Prisons: An Overview" (p. 3), "Rhineland mulattoes were among the first to suffer under the sterilization program of 1933. The sterilizations were not performed, because some German medical and legal personalities argued that the 'sterilizations of German colored children was illegal.' [But a]fter 1937, nearly 385 black children vanished."

Another important point not mentioned in the film was that black soldiers, like Jewish soldiers, had much more to fear than their Allied comrades. There are gruesome stories of black units that had the misfortune to encounter the SS.

In the aftermath of the LIBERATORS,<sup>25</sup> will all those who showed their courage and goodwill by adopting this project rededicate themselves to find new vehicles to educate each other and touch the heart? Will we search out other films to be made? Other forums to speak to each other? Why is there no publication that speaks of and to, by and for, blacks and Jews — a publication that treats the stories of individual people, so the humanness that spoke like a laser in the LIBERATORS can speak of our current concerns?

The tragedy of the LIBERATORS was the void it filled, and will leave again. To fill that void must be our challenge.

February 10, 1993

---

<sup>25</sup> Some suggestions have been offered for continued use of the film. One is the distribution of a "fact sheet." Another is that the film be recut, perhaps even refilmed in part to show the 761st's part in the liberation of Günskirchen. But many have questioned what a fact sheet would say that would not destroy the meaning of the film (here's what you are about to see that is true, and here's what isn't?); and even if the filmmakers were inclined to redo the project, isn't its credibility now beyond rehabilitation (woops, we got the history wrong last time, but believe us this time)?