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The Rev. Canon George I. Chassey, Jr., lives in West Columbia, SC. He will turn 93 years old and will celebrate the 55th anniversary of his ordination in September. In the course of his ordained ministry, he served in parishes in South Carolina and on diocesan staffs in the dioceses of Los Angeles, South Carolina, and Upper South Carolina.

About Vintage Voice

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VINTAGE VOICE

D-Day Remembered: The Age That Shaped a Ministry

By the Rev. Canon George I. Chassey, Jr.

Recently, I was invited to speak, in my role as a retired Episcopal priest, at a local Holocaust Remembrance Service. That, as well as the celebration this past June 6 of the 70th anniversary of D-Day, brought to mind memories and experiences from my service in World War II that have shaped my 54 years of ministry, and continue to affect me profoundly even 26 years into my retirement.

I went into France by way of Omaha Beach on D+8 as part of a contingent to establish the first airfield that allowed our fighter aircraft to operate from French soil. In six military campaigns, we fought across France, entering Germany in March 1945. In April 1945, I, along with other enlisted men and officers, was ordered to repair two aircraft that had been forced down on an airfield in the vicinity of Ohrdruf, Germany.

Preparing to return to our home base, and having heard of a concentration camp near the village of Ohrdruf, we went there to see if what we had been hearing about these death camps across Europe was a fact. We arrived shortly after the American infantry.

The writer of the Book of Exodus speaks of the “wilderness of Sin.” Albert Speer, a member of Hitler’s hierarchy and Hitler’s most trusted confidant, put the “wilderness of Sin” in perspective in his book, *Inside the Third Reich*: “We sold our soul to the Devil.”

Millions of souls across Europe suffered under the hands of evil in that wilderness. I walked in their path in that wilderness, and it left a mark on my soul that has never left me. This is what I saw and experienced.

The camp was enclosed by a large fence with strategically placed gun towers. The buildings were crude one-story barrack style, of wood construction. On entering one such structure I saw a single pathway down the center, about two yards wide. On either side of this passageway, the length of the building, were bodies, stacked

like cordwood. Between the layers of these bodies were layers of lime to kill the odor. In this one building, I saw hundreds of bodies in various stages of decay.

At the end of the center walkway was a gallows. Going out the door at the end of the walkway and a few yards from the building were the ashes of the burial pyre. It was the custom of the German camp leadership to herd the able-bodied into the neighboring wooded area, force them to cut firewood, and carry it into camp. Those who were ill, elderly, or disabled, those for whom there was no use, were executed by hanging or gunfire, cast aside like so much trash. The able-bodied were made to stack the dead, layered with firewood, creating a large funeral pyre about 20 by 20 feet. What I saw was a large pile of ashes.

In the open area adjacent to the gate through which we had entered the camp, civilians from the village of Ohrdruf, on orders from the general in command of the American troops, were carrying out emaciated bodies, wrapping them in sheets, in preparation for burial. Those scenes will never leave my mind and soul. I will take them to the grave.

I walked in the presence of evil. It was an experience that, although I did not realize at the time, would change my life. It was a strong contributing factor that led me to minister for the last 50-plus years as a priest of The Episcopal Church.

What I experienced is of another era, another century. But let us remember that even in this day and age, evil does not fade away. It lurks in many shadows. It takes many forms that can enslave the human soul. Even as retired priests in God's church, we are called to speak to and take part in the public debates that affect the general welfare and common good of the populace so that evil cannot find the light of day in our day, place, and time or in the lives of those who follow us in the journey of humanity.



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