

[Menu](#) / [Search](#)



THE LIBERATION OF BERGEN- BELSEN

Tuesday 23 January 2018

British forces liberated Bergen-Belsen on 15 April 1945. Thousands of bodies lay unburied around the camp and some 60,000 starving and mortally ill people were packed together without food, water or basic

sanitation. Many were suffering from typhus, dysentery and starvation.

Bergen-Belsen was first established in 1940 as a prisoner of war camp. From 1943, Jewish civilians with foreign passports were held as 'leverage' in possible exchanges for Germans interned in Allied countries or for money. It later became a and was used as a collection centre for survivors of the death marches. The camp became exceptionally overcrowded and, as a result of the Germans' neglect, conditions were allowed to deteriorate further in the last months of the war, causing many more deaths.

The British Army immediately began to organise the relief effort. Their first priorities were to bury the dead, contain the spread of

disease, restore the water supply and arrange the distribution of food that was suitable for starving prisoners in various stages of malnutrition. Additional military and civilian medical personnel were brought in to support the relief effort. The British faced serious challenges in stabilising conditions in the camp and implementing a medical response to the crisis. Nearly 14,000 prisoners would die after liberation.

For many survivors, the and repatriation would continue long after the end of the .

In the audio clips below, British servicemen and relief workers talk about and reflect on their experiences during and immediately after the liberation of Bergen-Belsen.

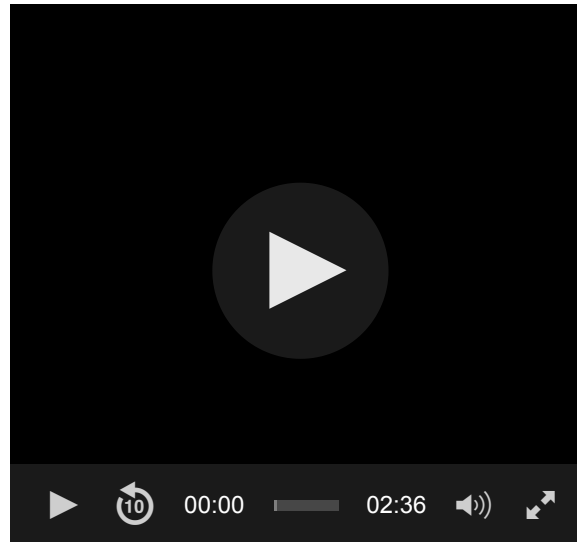


THE CAMERAME

Harry Oakes and Bill Lawrie both served with the Army Film and Photographic Unit (AFPU), which was set up in 1941 to produce an official record of the British Army's role during the Second World War. Both men arrived at Bergen-Belsen to record conditions in the camp. Here they explain how British forces gained access to the camp.

**'But the force
we wanted to
send in was**

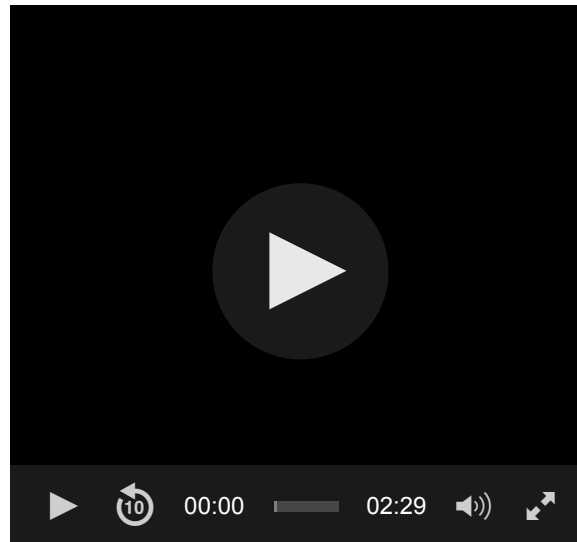
... too much'



Major Dick Williams was one of the first British soldiers to enter Bergen-Belsen. In April 1945, he was a staff

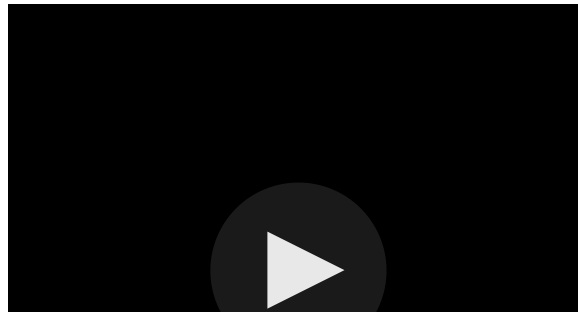
captain in the Supplies and Transport branch of VIII Corps Headquarters and was part of a small force sent forward to assess conditions in the camp. Here he describes his first impressions of the camp and its atmosphere of death.

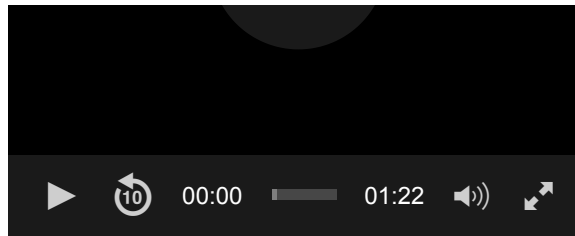
'The stench coming out of them was fearsome'



Gilbert King was a gunner attached to 249 (Oxfordshire Yeomanry) Battery of the 63rd Anti-Tank Regiment, Royal Artillery, which was the first British military unit to go into Bergen-Belsen on 15 April. Here he remembers the moment he entered the camp.

**'It nearly
brought tears
to me eyes'**



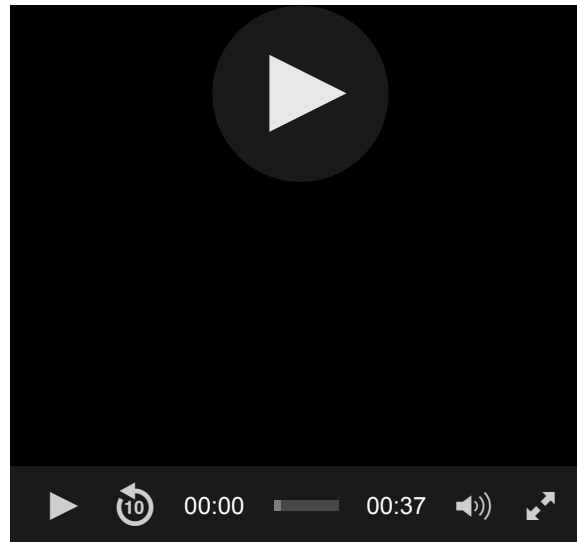


MEDICAL TREATMENT

32nd Casualty Clearing Station (CCS) and 11th Light Field Ambulance were among the first medical units to arrive at Bergen-Belsen after its liberation. William Arthur Wood, a medical assistant with 32nd CCS, describes the appalling conditions in the barracks and the process of separating the dead from the living.

'Outside the

huts were
piles and piles
of dead
bodies'

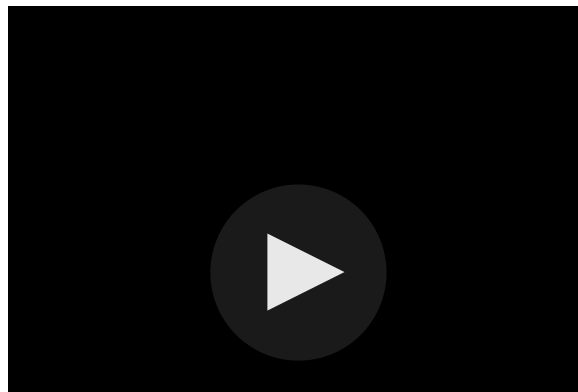


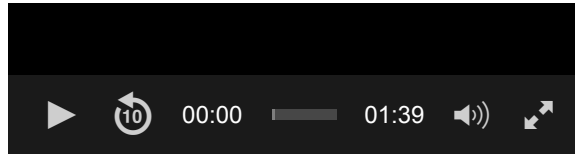
Many of the soldiers who first entered the camp were desperate to try and alleviate the prisoners' starvation by giving them army rations. This first intake of food was fatal for many prisoners, who were

too weak to digest it. One of the British Army's most important tasks, as Major Dick Williams explains, was to find a safer and more appropriate way of providing food for the starving prisoners.

**'We would take
a dixie of this
broth and**

**leave it at the
door'**

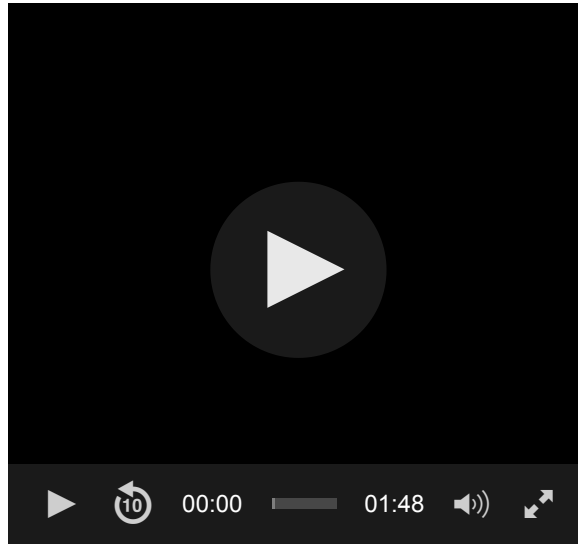




Nearly 100 British medical students arrived at Bergen-Belsen in May 1945 to assist with the relief effort. They worked directly in the huts to supervise the distribution of food and provide whatever medical care possible. Dr Roger Dixey, one of the students who volunteered at the camp, describes his work and the condition of the prisoners in the barracks.

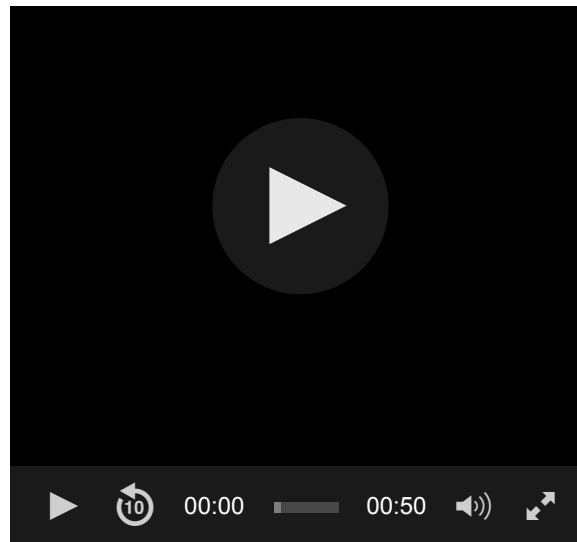
**'We were
dealing with
the killer, the
main killer**

...man killed,
which was
typhus.'



Medical assistant William Arthur Wood reflects on the shock felt by British troops and medical personnel in response to the vast scale of death and suffering they encountered during the liberation of Bergen-Belsen.

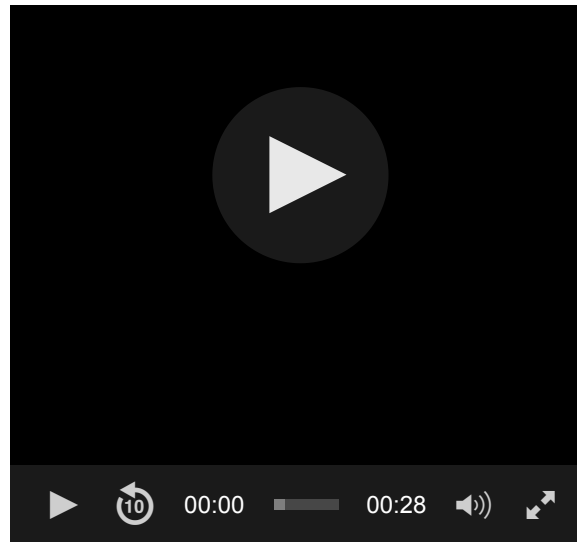
**'We hadn't
been trained
for this, and it
was so, so
different to,
well to
anything'**



AFPU cameraman and

photographer Harry Oakes
describes how the SS guards were
put to work burying the dead.

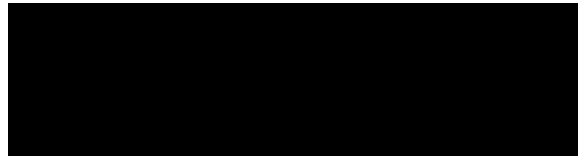
**'Soon they had
to dig more
graves, huge
graves'**

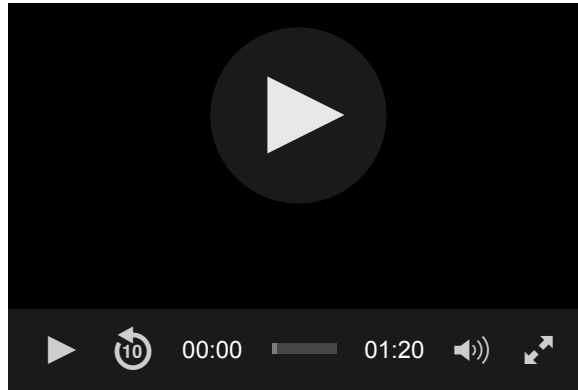


Much of the initial medical relief

work was done with limited manpower and supplies, which was still needed in the war effort against Germany. Dr Laurence Wand, one of the medical students who volunteered as part of the relief effort at Bergen-Belsen, explains how medical personnel coped with the shortages.

**'If a person
could stand he
was 'well', if he
couldn't stand
he was 'ill'**

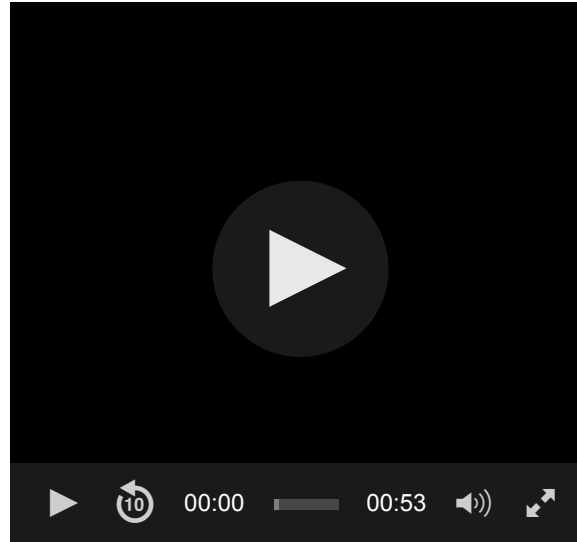




Dr Wand describes the 'human laundry', which was a critical part of the evacuation process and helped contain the typhus epidemic. It was a stable block that had been converted into a decontamination centre where former prisoners would be washed, deloused and given clean clothing before being transferred to hospital.

'The primary task of course was to save

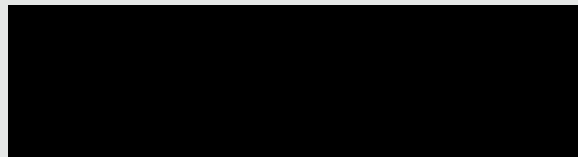
life and to get
people fed'

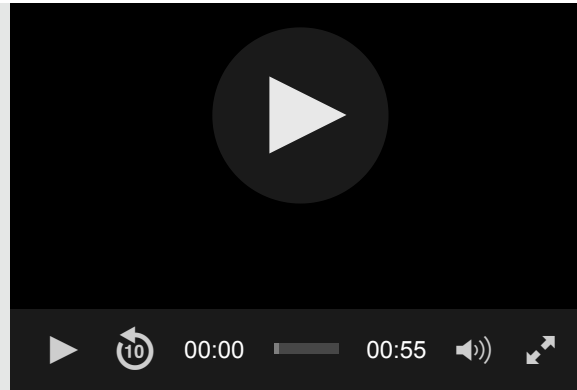


As their health improved, survivors
were sent to pick out new clothes

from a supply store nicknamed 'Harrods'. This 'shop' was stocked with clothing provided by relief organisations or taken from German towns nearby. Norna Alexander was a nurse with 29th British General Hospital, which arrived at Bergen-Belsen just over a month after its liberation. Here she describes 'Harrods' and the effect new clothes had on the survivors' morale.

'But the joy they got out of, it really boosted their spirits'



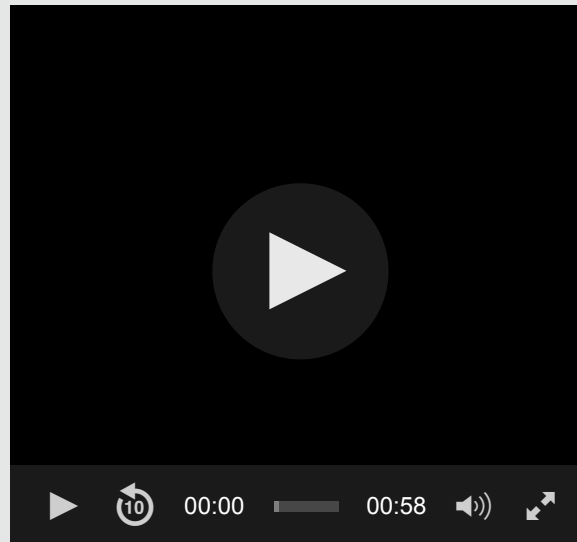


REACTIONS TO CAMP CONDITIO

The AFPU recruited from the ranks of the British Army. Many of the photographers and cameramen present at the liberation of Bergen-Belsen were tough, hardened by their own experiences of combat. Yet they were deeply shocked by what they witnessed at

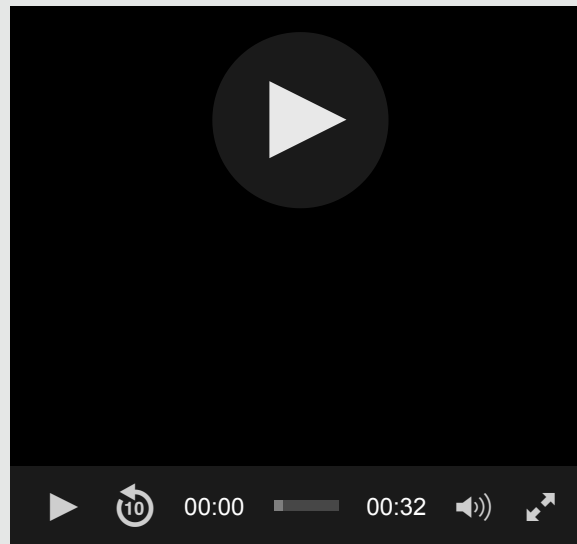
the camp. AFPU cameraman and photographer Sergeant Mike Lewis came from a Jewish family and describes how witnessing the camp's liberation made real for him the stories of persecution he had been told by his parents. He also reflects on his own reaction to what he had witnessed.

'It was a sort of death by administration'



Dr Laurence Wand reflects on the
Germans' systematic
dehumanisation of their victims.

**'It was a
systematic
depersonalisation,
degradingness'**



Reverend Leslie Hardman served with VIII Corps of the British Second Army. He was the first Jewish chaplain to enter Bergen-Belsen in April 1945 and worked very closely with Jewish prisoners after their liberation. Here he reflects on the importance of talking about what he saw and of survivors sharing their experiences.

**'Those who
can talk and
will survive
they must
represent all
our suffering
to the world'**