



Photo courtesy Valdosta Daily Times

Why would someone wait 60 years to tell about their experiences in World War II and the Holocaust?

GEORGE AIGEN

George Aigen was born on May 9, 1925 in Brooklyn, New York. As a young man, George and his friends carefully followed World War II events unfold and anticipated being drafted. The attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, occurred during George's first term at New York University. In 1943, at the age of 18, George was inducted into the army and began basic training at Fort Dix, New Jersey. George felt it was his duty to be part of the war effort. After additional training George was assigned to the 1269th Combat Engineer Battalion.

George was shipped overseas in the summer of 1944 and landed in Marseille, France. George described his first 180 days of combat duty, living out of his helmet to cook, wash and shave. As his battalion went on the move, they crossed the border from France to Germany.

By April 1945 George and his battalion reached Munich, Germany. None of the men had any idea of the horrors they were about to encounter. When George and his troops entered Munich they found the city deserted. Their next stop, a few miles outside of Munich, was the Dachau concentration camp.

As George approached the outside gate he saw the words *ARBEIT MACHT FREI*, "WORK WILL MAKE YOU FREE." Inside he saw death, the emaciated skeletons of people in striped, torn uniforms lying, sitting, and stumbling everywhere. At the time of liberation, there were over 32,000 survivors in the camp. The horrifying scene worsened as George saw an open boxcar on the nearby railroad track filled with the dead bodies of Jewish prisoners.



Photo courtesy Georgia Public Broadcasting

"When we made it through the gate, it was like walking into another world."

As George and his battalion moved through the camp, they found abandoned prisoners starved and dying. George and the troops brought comfort, medical assistance, food and water to the

remaining survivors. The savagery continued as George saw the ovens, corpses and ashes. He described the scenes as "hell on earth" and always remembered what human beings can do to others.

After the war George returned to the United States and completed his military service. He returned to Brooklyn and to college on the GI Bill and completed his degree. He met and married his wife Joyce, raised a family of three children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. He and Joyce eventually moved to Valdosta, Georgia.

After the war, George gained a sense of appreciation and expressed his faith in all that America offers and stands for. After decades of silence, George began to speak in public about his war experiences. Sixty years after viewing the horrors of war and the Holocaust, George came to believe that it was crucial that he share his story as often as possible, to make sure that a Holocaust would never happen again.

Shortly before he passed away in 2019, George Aigen was awarded the National Order of the Legion of Honor, France's highest, most prestigious award. France still honors veterans who saved Europe "from a time of darkness."



US soldiers discovered these boxcars loaded with dead prisoners outside the Dachau camp. Dachau, Germany, April 30, 1945.

Photo courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD



Map courtesy of US Holocaust Memorial Museum

