

Paul Armstrong

Belsen

To this day I find it hard to believe that I saw such a thing. When you talk about being sorry for the Germans that had been dealt with as they were in Hamburg and various other towns, when you think about this, the way the people were treated, they weren't human. And at that time another Engineer unit were working with masks over their faces digging deep trenches and actually bulldozing the bodies into it. The bodies weren't the colour of people, the bodies were a kind of coppery colour, I suppose fawny. They weren't pink, they were just a fawny colour. Their teeth showed very clearly but their bodies were just like matchsticks. It was hard to tell what sex they were, it was almost impossible. They were just heaps, and these heaps were six feet deep and they were having to bulldoze them. And there was no blood flowing, the bodies were just possibly desiccated by that time, the Germans hadn't had time to get rid of them. The British troops in charge, who were making the German guards, the German soldiers, whatever, those that hadn't been killed, and some were shot presumably by the troops liberating it with horror. They must have shot them with the, the shock of what they'd seen. They were making them carry the bodies out of the buildings. The buildings themselves defy description. I saw them for a long time afterwards. If you can picture the sort of thing that battery chickens are kept in only bigger, and the bedding was three planks long ways on and those in the top were lucky because the excreta dropped down on to those below. But they weren't lucky in that at the end of the day they had to climb back into them and they hadn't obviously the strength. And I learned that when they died they didn't tell the guards because they drew the food for them until the bodies had to be dragged out. I saw the ovens. I saw where they hanged them. I saw the place where they gathered the false teeth, where they'd stored the hair that they cut off them. I can't, I can't describe further what it was like. But the horrifying thing was there's a village nearby where the trains carrying these people had to pass through to get to the camp, and these people pretended they had no idea. And the officer that took over forced them at gunpoint, all the villagers, to go and walk round the camp to see what German soldiers had done, because they were pretending they knew nothing about it. He made sure that they did. They won't forget it.