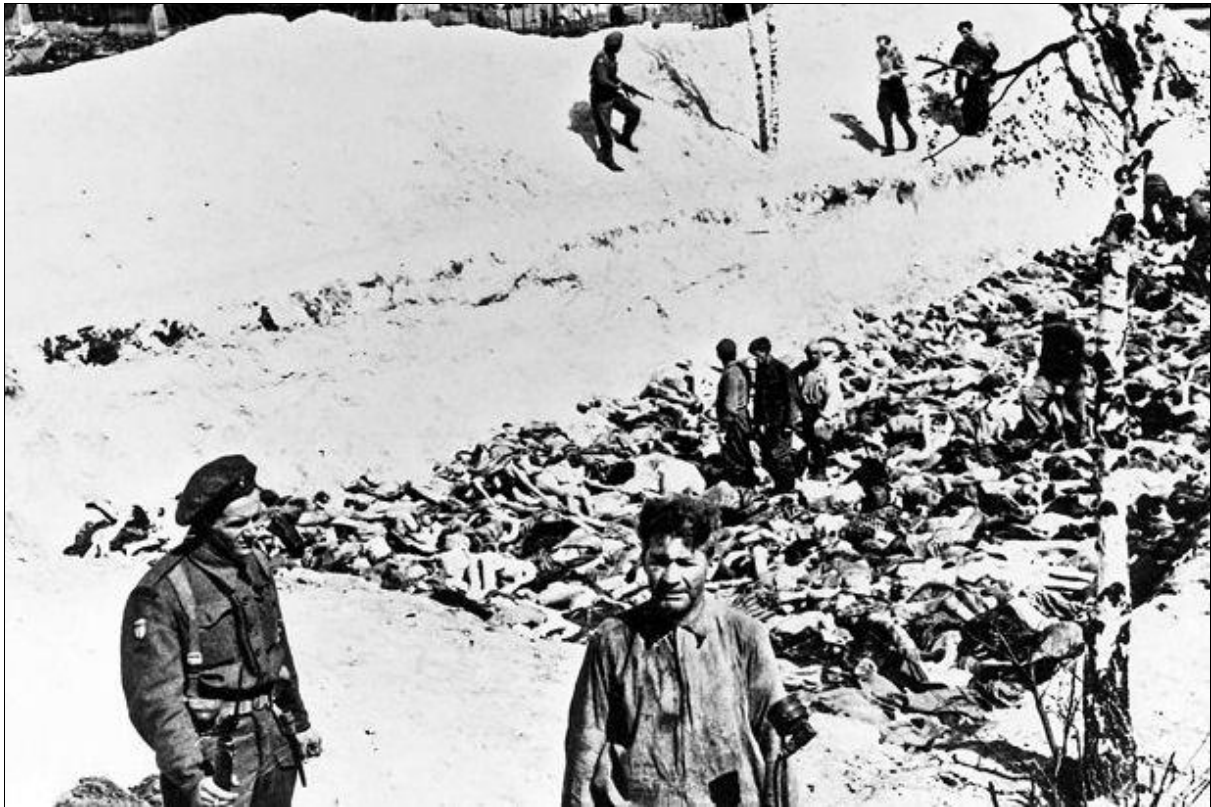


# John Webster



**Webster saw the body pits at Belsen such as the one here that shows the camp doctor making a statement into the microphone set up for Richard Dimbleby. Getty Images.**

One of the first British soldiers to witness the horrors of the Belsen concentration camp in 1945

Seven decades after the Nazi concentration camp was liberated by British troops, the name Belsen still conveys its aura of abomination. The soldiers sent there in April 1945 were prepared to deal with desperate circumstances, including rampant typhus, but they were horrified by what they saw.

Belsen was an extensive complex that held 60,000 prisoners when the British arrived, so it was possible for individuals to have reached the perimeter wire at different times. Others have claimed to have been the first to enter the camp, but John Webster's account was both detailed and clearly authentic.

Serving as a captain in the Royal Scots and a liaison officer of the 15th (Scottish) Division, he was attempting to make contact with a column of the 11th Armoured Division during the British advance into Germany north of Hanover. Noticing a group of white buildings through the trees that, as he put it "looked not quite right", he turned off down a track to investigate.

There appeared to be nothing sinister about the buildings, which proved to be a barracks for the SS, the infamous security organisation that ran the concentration camps. With apparently no guards about, Webster walked through the barracks until he came to the Bergen-Belsen camp behind.

In old age — after a career in which he had become a teacher, taught the future Beatles George Harrison and Paul McCartney, and played an influential role in the development of comprehensive schools — he would say that what he saw remained with him for the rest of his life.

He found an empty pit 25 yards long and nine feet deep, then another, a few yards farther on, filled with skeletal bodies. Beyond the pits were the first group of emaciated survivors, still and silent in their blue and white striped pyjamas or rags of civilian clothes, looking at him as if with unseeing eyes, many of them too traumatised to show any joy that their incarceration was over.

As he stood wondering what exactly he had stumbled upon, a column of British troops arrived to take over the camp. They were from the 11th Armoured Division serving in the British 8th Corps with his own 15th (Scottish) Division.

The previous day — April 12, 1945 — a German colonel had driven into 8th Corps HQ under a white flag to explain that, ahead of the British advance, lay a camp of political prisoners where typhus had broken out. He proposed that the German army should withdraw from an area of some 20 square miles, leaving a small number of SS guards in charge of the camp, to avoid the disease infecting troops on both sides.

The plan was agreed and the 11th Armoured Division was ordered to provide the relief force. On arrival, the British commander recognised that the situation was infinitely worse than the German colonel had described; the chief medical officer of the 8th Corps, Brigadier Llewellyn Glyn-Hughes, took over responsibility for dealing with the sick and starving inmates. Webster returned to duties, acutely conscious of what he had witnessed.

A few days later, the rest of Britain learnt of Belsen from a broadcast by the BBC's Richard Dimbleby, who broke down several times while delivering his report. At the BBC, senior staff hesitated to air the broadcast because they found it difficult to believe the horrors it described, but went ahead when Dimbleby threatened to resign.

For Webster, the war in Europe was still not quite over. In his book, *Normandy to the Baltic*, Field Marshal Montgomery describes the 15th (Scottish) Division's assault crossing of the Elbe. Although enemy resistance was not expected to be heavy, the bridging sites came under intensive shelling and attack by the Luftwaffe, which was operating from the last group of airfields held near by. Low cloud favoured the German airmen.

Taken from his liaison duties, Webster was put in charge of the disembarkation and dispersal of the division's vehicles on the far bank of the Elbe; it was dangerous work, with the enemy concentrating their fire on the very points of which he was in charge. A man of method and self-discipline, he refused to allow the enemy to distract him, moving about unconcernedly and organising the flow of traffic away from the most vulnerable points with all speed. The citation for the Military Cross awarded to him for his control of the bridgehead crossings stated: "It was due to a large extent to his efforts that the vehicles reached their units far earlier than was hoped and enabled the rapid expansion of the bridgehead over the river that was thus achieved."

John Webster was born in Prescott, Lancashire, the son of William and Ellen Webster, and attended Prescott Grammar School, from where he was awarded a scholarship to study English at Edinburgh university. Instead, after the outbreak of war, he enlisted and was

commissioned into the Royal Scots in 1940. At the end of hostilities in Europe, he was offered a regular commission, but also a place at Queens' College, Cambridge, to read English, which he accepted. After graduation in 1947, he taught English at Holt High School in Liverpool before becoming head of English at the Liverpool Institute, where his students included Harrison and McCartney.

In 1956, Webster was appointed head of Gillingham grammar school and charged with merging it with the adjacent secondary modern school to create the first comprehensive in North Dorset. This was achieved in 1959. It became known as the "Gillingham model", which was a blueprint for many such amalgamations across the country. He had a firm belief in equality of educational opportunity and Gillingham lent itself to the comprehensive system.

A conventional and strict headmaster, Webster clamped down hard on poor or distracting behaviour that diminished scholastic achievement. His daughter, Fiona, remembers being given 100 lines for some classroom misdemeanour in the first year that she attended Gillingham. She too became an English teacher before being appointed head of drama at King Edward VI Grammar School in Louth, and is now a professional watercolourist. Her elder brother, Professor Roger Webster, was until recently dean of faculty at Liverpool John Moore's university, while her younger brother, Neil, is a senior researcher at the Danish Institute for International Studies in Copenhagen.

Webster had married Lesley Airey, who served in the Wrens as a signals rating during the war, in 1948. She predeceased him.

He served as chairman of the Southern Region Examinations Board in the 1970s and 1980s and was a key figure in merging GCE O levels with CSEs to create the GCSE qualification. During the 1970s, he was seconded for six months to Exeter university to take part in a research project into sixth-form education. In sharp contrast to the stern and demanding personality he presented as a headmaster, he was a loving and amusing husband and father. The children's friends, responding to invitations to the house, would arrive scrubbed, tidy and in a state of trepidation, only to be amazed by the relaxed and entertaining father figure who kept them in fits of laughter during their visit. He enjoyed walking in the Lake District, playing badminton and tennis, a good malt whisky and Wadworth's 6X beer. He was fascinated by clocks and would always offer to mend one that had stopped.

He spoke to his family only seldom about his wartime experiences, but on New Year's Eve he would don his Royal Scots tunic, improvise a kilt with a tablecloth and march round the house with a kitchen chair representing the bagpipes as he hummed his personal rendering of a medley of tunes, including the quick march of the Royal Scots *Dumbarton's Drums*.

The week he died, he was appointed Chevalier of the Legion d'honneur by the French government in recognition of his wartime service.

Asked in old age about his reaction to entering Belsen in 1945, he replied: "To see human beings reduced to this state, and to think that other human beings had done this to them, well, I still try to make sense of it. What did it mean? You can't explain the inexplicable."

**John Webster, MC, soldier and headmaster, was born on September 23, 1922. He died on December 24, 2015, aged 93**