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## Peter J. DeMarzo oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, June 3, 2008

Peter J. DeMarzo (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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[Transcriber's Note: The Interviewee's personal information has been removed, at the request of the Interviewer. This omission is indicated with ellipses.]

**Michael Hirsh:** You there?

**Peter DeMarzo:** Yeah.

MH: First of all, can you give me your name and spell it, please?

PD: My name is Peter, P-e-t-e-r, J. stands for Joseph, DeMarzo, capital D-e-capital M-a-r-z like in zebra-o. DeMarzo.

MH: And it's a capital M.

PD: Right.

MH: And your address, please?

PD: ...

MH: And your phone number.

PD: ...

MH: And your date of birth.

PD: May 29, 1921. I just turned eighty-seven.

MH: Congratulations.

PD: Thank you.

MH: Tell me a little bit about where you grew up and how you ended up going into the Army.

PD: I was born and raised on the East Side in New York, and I thank God for that, because we were a mix of a lot of people there, all different nationalities, different religions. You know, you grow up, you learn about the other people: they cry like you, they go through heck like you, and you learn a lot about them. I went into the Merchant Marine, and after I left the Merchant Marine, I went into the Army.

MH: How old were you when you went into the Merchant Marine?

PD: Oh, about twenty; nineteen or twenty.

MH: And, then, you stayed in the Merchant Marine for how long?

PD: Nineteen months, and then I went in the Army. I volunteered for the Navy, submarine service, and we had to go through the draft. So, about thirty of us that passed the test at the Navy, they put us all in the Army.

MH: (laughs) Of course. It makes perfect sense.

PD: Boy, I tell you, I'll never forget that, because when we went in to be sworn in, we thought there'd be a Navy man out there. An Army man, an Army major, came out, and he said, "Raise your right hand," and we did, and he said, "I now swear you into the Army of the United States. Take one step forward." Nobody moved. He said, "Fellows, take one step forward or go to jail," and that was it.

MH: Where was this?

PD: In New York, Grand Central Station.

MH: Oh, they had an induction center at Grand Central?

PD: Oh, yeah.

MH: I didn't know that.

PD: Yeah.

MH: Did anybody ever explain why they took Merchant Mariners and put them in the Army?

PD: No, they never said anything.

MH: Well, that's the way they operate, anyhow.

PD: Yeah.

MH: So, you get sworn in, and you go to basic training where?

PD: At Camp Wheeler, Georgia.

MH: Your specialty's gonna be what?

PD: Infantry.

MH: And how long do you stay at Camp Wheeler?

PD: Oh, I think we stayed there about four months, something like that. They cut our training in half. Well, they took a couple weeks off the training. They sent us right overseas.

MH: What year was this?

PD: Nineteen forty-four—let's see. The war ended in forty-six [1946].

MH: The war ended in May of forty-five [1945].

PD: Forty-five [1945], yeah. Forty-four [1944], I guess.

MH: Okay, so did they send you over as part of a whole division, or as a replacement?

PD: No, as a replacement. We were seven newlyweds that went in that group, and I was the only one that came back alive. The other six got killed within two, three weeks.

MH: When did you get married?

PD: In December of forty-four [1944].

MH: So, you got married just, like, minutes before you went over, it seems like.

PD: Yeah. In fact, I asked for a couple days off. They says, "You better show up or else."

MH: Who'd you marry?

PD: My wife; we've been married sixty-four years.

MH: Oh, congratulations. Is this somebody you'd gone to school with?

PD: Oh, we grew up together, you know.

MH: Yeah. What's her name?

PD: Clara.

MH: Clara. So, you showed up, and they put you on a ship and sent you over?

PD: They flew us over.

MH: They flew you over?

PD: Yeah, some of us were flown over; some of us went on a ship. Some went on the *Queen Mary*, I guess, but we all got there at the same time.

MH: Tell me about the flight.

PD: Well, they put us in this cargo ship, and away we went, you know. Nothing to say.

MH: But you must have made several stops.

PD: You know, it's vague. I really don't remember much. I think we went to Le Havre, I don't remember.

MH: You went to Le Havre?

PD: Yeah.

MH: Okay, and then what happens in Le Havre?

PD: From there, they sent us up to—let's see—somewhere in France. That's when the Battle of the Bulge was almost starting.

MH: And they sent you to the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division?

PD: Right.

MH: What unit in the 45<sup>th</sup>?

PD: 157<sup>th</sup> Infantry. You know, you could hit that website; you'd get a lot of information.

MH: Yeah, but I'm just trying to get your personal story out of it.

PD: Oh.

MH: So, you get up there just in time for the Battle of the Bulge, and that was your first combat experience?

PD: Right.

MH: Do you remember anything about the first days in combat?

PD: Well, I got hit once in the first couple of days. I got a gunshot wound to the head.

MH: To the head?

PD: It was mostly grazed, you know. In fact, the bullet came right through my helmet, and the helmet twisted. And if the helmet didn't twist, it would've gone right between the eyes.

MH: Oh. So, they pull you off the line, or basically said, “You’re okay”?

PD: No, they said I was okay. They just bandaged me up, and I wanted to get back to my company.

MH: Right. What company were you in, by the way?

PD: Company L.

MH: Company L. You get hit the first couple days you’re there, then what happens?

PD: I went back to my company. And then from there—let’s see. We went to a town of—I can’t think of the name. I’ve got it written down somewhere. I can’t think of the name of the place; somewhere in France. We recouped. I think the 157<sup>th</sup> Infantry lost a bunch of people at [Reipertswiller](#), and we replaced most of those guys. And from there on, we’re headed for Munich, Germany.

MH: When you’re on your way to Munich, you’re riding in what, a jeep, a deuce-and-a-half?

PD: Well, I stayed with the company commander, because I had my head bandaged, you know? And as we were going down—I’m trying to think. When we hit the gates of Dachau—you know, I was in L Company; we were leading the attack. And when we were attacking, some German kept firing at us with a submachine gun, so we had to stop and get after this guy. And then, we went the rear of the company, and I Company was already starting to go into this camp. Some of us went in with them.

When we went in there, you know, the place is dead silence. These poor guys, they were putting everybody in the crematorium. We were sort of shocked. And then all of a sudden, a couple shots were fired, and you could see a lot of the prisoners starting to come out. They started to yell. Then they realized the Americans came in, and they still didn’t know if we were for them or against them. You know, they were all confused, and we were confused, too. I never saw so many dead people in all my life. In the peripheral areas, there were all stacks of bodies.

MH: Did you come past the train that was parked there?

PD: Yeah, yeah.

MH: How'd you react to that?

PD: The guys that hit the train first, you know, some of them were throwing up, and we were wondering what the heck's going on. Then, when we opened up one of the boxcars, man, this poor guy dropped out. He had no teeth in his mouth. And the first thing that hit me in my face was that he was wearing a gold Star of David on his chest. And I was more shook up than the rest, you know. And then from there, we went into the camp.

MH: What goes through your head when you see something like that?

PD: You don't have time to think of that.

MH: Had anybody—

PD: Complete shock. I never saw so many dead people in my life.

MH: Had anybody warned you that you're going to be coming into a camp like this?

PD: No. They told us that we're gonna go to Munich, where the SS were gonna put up their last stand, and we were after the SS. I would never take an SS prisoner if I had to, you know. And as we were going toward Munich, we passed this camp, and that's when we went in. And then more confusion come in, because the 42<sup>nd</sup> was behind us, and that's where people get confused as to who went in there first.

MH: Were they behind you, or were they coming in from a different direction?

PD: I think they were behind us. I really couldn't say that, you know.

MH: When you first see the camp—I mean, you see the train, but when you first see the camp—I've talked to different guys, and they tell me different things. Was there a barbed wire enclosure with prisoners in it outside the main part of the camp?

PD: I never saw that. You know, where the railroad cars were, there's a big, big wall going all around the camp, a brick wall. Some of the guys went over the wall, the guys who had ladders with them. Some of us went in through the front.

MH: Which way did you go in?

PD: I went in the front.

MH: Had they already broken the gate open?

PD: Yeah.

MH: How many guys are actually going in with you?

PD: Oh, God.

MH: You're the first person I've talked to who went in through the gate, so the more details you can remember, the better it is for me.

PD: I Company was in there first, and I was in there because of my head wound. I was with my first sergeant. And when we went in there, all we saw were the bodies. We couldn't believe what the heck we were seeing. And the—let's see.

MH: Were you anywhere near Lt. Col. [Felix L.] Sparks?

PD: Oh, yeah. He just died, you know [in 2007].

MH: Yeah I know that. Were you close to him going in?

PD: Well, what happened was he was arguing with this general from the 42<sup>nd</sup> Division.

MH: Did you see that argument?

PD: Yeah. I ran away, because I didn't want to get involved in that, you know?

MH: Tell me what happened.

PD: This here guy comes in with—I think he was wearing boots, and one of those rider whips, you know?

MH: Yeah, riding crop.

PD: Yeah, a riding crop. And I think he was telling him, "Well, we're here now, we're going to take over." And already I Company had shot a bunch of guys down, you know? They lined them up and shot them. And there was so much confusion there, you know? So, I went back to my first sergeant, and we said, "Let's get the heck out of here and head for Munich."

MH: So, you didn't stay to see the argument.

PD: No, no, no.

MH: The guys—

PD: I was just a corporal at that time.

MH: The guys who you said they lined them up and shot them, that's SS that they found in the camp?

PD: Yeah.

MH: Were these SS still in uniform, do you know?

PD: The ones they shot were in uniform, but there was a lot of them that they were caught in prisoner's clothes.

MH: Yeah. I've been told that—

PD: You could tell them from the prisoners.

MH: Right, 'cause they had to look healthy and well fed, and the prisoners had to look like skeletons.

PD: Oh, my God. This poor guy come over and kissed me. He must've weighed about seventy pounds. Oh, God, it was terrible.

MH: He literally walked up and kissed you?

PD: Yeah.

MH: Were you able to talk to him?

PD: Yeah, I kissed him back. What could I do, you know? Well, no, he didn't understand me. I forgot what language he spoke.

MH: Were you there when the guys were lined up and shot?

PD: I just heard the shooting; I didn't see them.

MH: But when you're in a situation like that and you hear shooting, doesn't it tend to get your nerves on edge? Like, what's going on?

PD: Well, I was used to the shooting, you know. That didn't bother me.

MH: Yeah. Were the—I have been told that the prisoners were tracking down the SS.

PD: Yeah, they would point them out, you know, and somebody would walk over and shoot them.

MH: One of the Americans would walk over and shoot them.

PD: Yeah.

MH: Huh. I had heard stories that the prisoners actually tore some of these people apart.

PD: Yeah. Oh, yeah. In fact, at night—I remember at night, all the prisoners were in groups, and they were singing their national anthem. Although most of the people I saw only wore the Star of David, you know. I was only over there about a day and a half; our objective was to get Munich. And I remember they burned one guy at the stakes. They threw this guy—they had a fire going, and they threw this guy in there.

MH: Really? The prisoners threw him in.

PD: Yeah.

MH: Huh. So, you stayed overnight at the camp?

PD: Yeah.

MH: Inside or outside?

PD: Inside.

MH: Where'd you stay?

PD: It's a good question; I don't remember.

MH: I mean, you didn't go—you weren't in any of the barracks, were you?

PD: No, no, no.

MH: Did you see any of the buildings where they had been torturing the prisoners?

PD: Oh, yeah. They had one guy—if I remember correctly, his left testicle was the size of a Neanderthal bat, you know? I don't know what the heck they did to him. They injected—they were testing something on him. We saw a bunch of them that had all sores all over their body. And we were moving around so fast, it's hard to digest everything.

MH: This was, like, in the hospital area?

PD: Yeah, right.

MH: So, these guys were alive?

PD: Yeah, the ones I saw were alive.

MH: This is sort of graphic, but you said his left testicle was how large?

PD: Like a Neanderthal's bat [club].

MH: Baseball? Softball?

PD: Baseball.

MH: What do you do when you see stuff like that? Are you able to do anything to help them?

PD: There were so many of them. This one little boy was following me—you know, I look Jewish. He thought I was Jewish, and he was following me all over the camp. I would give them whatever food we had. We didn't have much. And then we were told not to feed them, because they could get sick from it, you know, from eating too fast.

MH: How old was the little boy that was following you, do you think?

PD: I think he was about—I would say about sixteen, seventeen.

MH: Did he try and talk to you?

PD: Yeah. He was hugging me, kissing my shoes.

MH: Did he say anything about where he was from, or what his name was?

PD: You know, I don't remember. I'm trying to put everything in place; I can't.

MH: Yeah, it's hard. It's also a long time ago. What did you see inside any of the buildings, besides the hospital building that you told me about?

PD: Just the dormitories that they were living in. The stench in there was terrible. You had to get out in the open all the time.

MH: And so, you slept overnight inside the walls.

PD: Right.

MH: And then, what happened in the morning?

PD: We were selected to go to Munich. That was our main goal. We headed towards Munich, and I remember going towards Munich, we passed another camp. I'll never forget the—this is—let's see.

MH: Was it Aachen?

PD: Polski, something about Polski. *Arbeiten macht frei*, something like that.

MH: Yeah, *Arbeit macht frei*.

PD: Polish Jews, I think it was. We passed that camp, because like I say, our objective was Munich.

MH: Do you know if that camp was Aachen?

PD: I don't know.

MH: Did you stop in that camp?

PD: No, we were going so fast. You know, we wanted to get Munich, because they said the SS were gonna be there.

MH: You'd mentioned the SS. When was your first run-in with the SS?

PD: I'm trying to think of the name of the town. It was in France. I don't remember what town it was.

MH: But what was the occasion?

PD: We were shooting at each other, you know.

MH: Yeah. But, I mean, you have a particular recollection of the SS?

PD: Oh, yeah. You know, when I heard that word "SS," I get shivers up my spine, for God's sake. I just—you know, I would never take an SS prisoner.

MH: There's a difference between the SS prisoners and the Wehrmacht?

PD: Oh, yeah, there was a big difference.

MH: Tell me about that.

PD: The Wehrmacht were more sociable. The SS, they thought they were like God's children or something, you know?

MH: Was the view of the American soldiers pretty much the same, not to take SS prisoners?

PD: I think everybody started to think that way. You know, how could you think otherwise when you saw all those dead bodies around there? And they were still throwing them in the crematorium.

MH: Did you see the crematorium in the camp?

PD: Oh, yeah, I was in there. In fact, if we'd had gotten there a day earlier, they had just gassed about—there were two big rooms if I remember correctly, and they gassed a couple hundred people in there. There must've been about 300 or 400 in there.

MH: And they were burning them when you got there?

PD: Yeah.

MH: So, the ovens were still hot.

PD: Yeah. They were still putting them in while we were there. Like I say, they were confused. They didn't know who we were.

MH: How do you even deal with a sight like that?

PD: I don't know. I guess you harden up. That's why I can't understand all these kids fighting today; these little atrocities they see is nothing compared to what we saw, you know.

MH: The war ended about a week after you were at Dachau.

PD: Yeah.

MH: How long did you stay in Europe?

PD: Then we were getting ready to go to Japan.

MH: And you would've gone from Europe to the U.S., and then across the country?

PD: Right. I understand that my division was supposed to be the third ones to land—you know, for the landing invasion. On the way going to Japan, you know, everybody recapitulated, and the war ended.

MH: How far did you get?

PD: We came toward the States, and then—I landed in New York, and from New York, we were supposed to go to California, and then we were supposed to go to Japan. But when we hit New York, that's when it ended in Japan.

MH: You heard they had dropped the bomb.

PD: Right. They should've dropped more.

MH: How long did you stay in the Army after that?

PD: Not too long. I mean, I was married.

MH: Where was your wife during the time you were overseas?

PD: In New York.

MH: In New York. You get out of the Army, and then what's life like?

PD: I worked in a private organization for about six months, and then I went to the National Security Agency.

MH: Doing what, if I can ask?

PD: I majored in printing, and after a few years, I was COMSEC custodian. I had several jobs; there's a branch chief, you know.

MH: This was where, in D.C.?

PD: I started out in Arlington, Virginia, and then from Arlington, they moved to Fort Meade [Maryland].

MH: How long did you stay with them?

PD: About twenty-eight years, thirty years.

MH: Until you retired from the government?

PD: Right.

MH: What'd you do after that?

PD: Just—not too much. Enjoying myself.

MH: That's a good thing. You have children?

PD: Yeah, two, a boy and a girl. They're both married; they have grown kids. My son works for the NSA [National Security Administration], and my daughter helps the mentally retarded.

MH: You have grandkids?

PD: She's director of one of the agencies.

MH: You have grandchildren?

PD: Yeah. I have great-grandchildren.

MH: Really? How many grandkids, how many great-grandkids?

PD: I got two great-grandchildren—no, three; we just got one a couple months ago.

MH: And how many grandchildren?

PD: Three. I get all choked up. Every time I talk about Dachau, I get all—

MH: You come back from the war, and you've seen things that people have never seen before and can't believe. How long does it take before those images go away from you, or don't they ever go away?

PD: I still have it. You know, I still get flashbacks. When I first came out, I remember I went for a haircut, and the barber was telling me—we happened to talk about the war, and I told them I was in Dachau. Oh, right away, they thought I was trying to brag about being in the war and all that. "No such thing ever happened." So, I went home and took some of the pictures I had and showed it to them. They still didn't believe me.

MH: So, what happens when you—I mean, you know what you saw, and there's people telling you you didn't see it.

PD: Well, what else could you do? You can't start a fight with them.

MH: Do you have nightmares about it?

PD: Occasionally I have nightmares of when we went into camp. In the peripheral areas, they had bodies stacked up like log wood, you know. You see people with half their eyes out. It was terrible.

MH: And that stuff doesn't go away.

PD: Yeah. I'm talking to you; I'm all shook up now.

MH: I'm sorry.

PD: That's all right.

MH: Is it bad enough that you ever saw a shrink about it?

PD: No, I never got that far.

MH: There's a lot of guys who were fine during their working lives, and then they retired, and it's like the pressure was off and all this stuff came back to them.

PD: Yeah. No, I think I survived that.

MH: Yeah. You said you had pictures; did you take pictures yourself?

PD: Well, there was Father [Joseph D.] Barry from the 157<sup>th</sup>; he had some pictures and gave some to all of us. And when we were in Munich, they sent us to Paris for a couple days rest, and when I went, I had all these pictures in my parka. We had just got these Eisenhower jackets, they just were distributed, and somebody stole my jacket and took all the pictures with them. I only had about two left.

MH: Oh. Okay. Do you have a picture of yourself from World War II days?

PD: Yeah. If you go to the website—go to [45thdivision.org](http://45thdivision.org). Go to 157 Infantry, scroll down, they got pictures of the men in it. Scroll down to Company L. I have a picture there of me and my wife then, and a picture now.

MH: Okay.

PD: Are you on the computer?

MH: I am. Well, I'll look for it later. If it's possible—if that doesn't work, can I call you back and see if I can get a print of that?

PD: Sure.

MH: Okay. I'll look for it. I'd like to really be able to use a good print of it, from back then and something now. Anything else that comes to mind?

PD: No, I try to forget the whole thing now.

MH: Well, I'm sorry you're going to lose some sleep tonight, probably.

PD: No, I'll be all right.

MH: Okay. I thank you very, very much for calling me. Do you have an e-mail address?

PD: Yeah.... When you go to [45thdivision.org](http://45thdivision.org), go to 157<sup>th</sup> Infantry and scroll down where they show the pictures of the people in it. I'll be in Company L.

MH: Okay. I'll look for it. Thank you very much, Peter. I really appreciate your time.

PD: I'm happy to help you out. You going to write a book, or what?

MH: Yeah, I'm writing a book. It'll be published by Bantam-Dell; it'll come out probably in early 2010. It takes that long with books. I just started about three and a half, four

months ago working on it. So, what I'm really trying to do is track down the liberators of as many different camps as I can find, and sort of trace the last six weeks of the war through the liberation of all those camps.

PD: I have a book called *The Day the Thunderbird Cried*.<sup>1</sup>

MH: I have that.

PD: By David—

MH: Yeah, I know David. Yeah, I've got that. As I said, I've talked to David Israel several times.<sup>2</sup> He's been—in fact, maybe he gave me your name. I'm not sure.

PD: I have his book right in front of me.

MH: Okay. Well, I thank you very, very much for your time, sir. I appreciate it.

PD: Okay, Michael.

MH: Bye-bye.

PD: Bye-bye.

***End of interview***

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<sup>1</sup> *The Day the Thunderbird Cried: Untold Stories of World War II*, written by David L. Israel and published in 2005.

<sup>2</sup> David Israel was also interviewed for the Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is C65-00063.