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Bernard Diamond oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, May 12, 2008

Bernard Diamond (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: Before we start, why don't you give me your full name?

Bernard Diamond: My full name is Bernard Diamond.

MH: D-i-a-m-o-n-d?

BD: D-i-a-m-o-n-d.

MH: And your address, please?

BD: My address is...

MH: And your phone number?

BD: My phone number is...

MH: And your date of birth?

BD: My date of birth is June 6, 1925.

MH: Which makes you?

BD: Over thirty-nine. (laughs)

MH: Over thirty-nine, okay.

BD: What's your background? I sent you an e-mail—I thought I sent you an e-mail. Mel gave me what I thought was your e-mail address, and I said I looked you up in Google, and there was a—

MH: There's two Michael Hirshs that write books.

BD: Yeah, okay.

MH: There's me, and there's the guy who's the senior editor for *Newsweek*.

BD: Oh, okay.

MH: I've actually given speeches where the person introducing me has listed my books and his books, and I had to stand up and say, "I'm sorry, I'm not the Renaissance man you seem to think I am." My background—I spend most of my years in broadcasting, as a journalist. I was with public television for years, produced documentaries. I was an investigative reporter; eventually hit a point where I had to write my way out of television. I grew up in Chicago. We moved to Los Angeles in 1983, and then moved to Florida six years ago.

BD: Oh, I see.

MH: Our kids—we want to be closer to the kids, but they live in New Jersey and work in the city. My son-in-law and my daughter-in-law and son work in the city. And we didn't want to move to New Jersey. You know, we can come visit. So, I began writing books

full-time just before—well, about a year before we moved. I was an Army combat correspondent in Vietnam, with the 25th Infantry Division. In 2002, I was embedded with Air Force pararescue guys in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan to write a book called *None Braver*, about the pararescue guys and combat search and rescue. Since then, I've written one Vietnam book, I've written—I wrote Michael Schiavo's book, about the Terri Schiavo case; that was a *New York Times* bestseller.¹ And now, I'm writing about the liberators.

BD: I see.

MH: So, that's my story in a nutshell. I have three grandchildren until tomorrow, when, if all things go on schedule, I will have four grandchildren.

BD: I see. Well, my youngest daughter just gave birth nine weeks ago, and she's coming up Friday with her new baby.

MH: From where?

BD: From Atlanta, Georgia. So, I'm going to see her.

MH: Is that your first grandchild?

BD: No, that's my third. I have a bunch of cousins and so on.

MH: So, where'd you grow up?

BD: I grew up in the Bronx—in New York, essentially.

MH: What got you into the Army? An invitation or you volunteered?

BD: No, I was drafted. I was drafted—well, my birthday, as I said, was June 6, and I was drafted—I was in the Army by September of that year.

¹ *A Sniper's Journey: The Truth About the Man Behind the Rifle*, written with Gary D. Mitchell and published in 2006; *Terri: The Truth*, written with Michael Schiavo and published in 2006.

MH: What year did you go in?

BD: Nineteen forty-three.

MH: Forty-three [1943], okay.

BD: Well, I'm younger than Mel. I took the exam, and I went to the ASTP [Army Specialized Training Program]. I was at North Carolina University, and then they closed the program. I went to Fort Jackson, the 87th Division, and I trained there and went overseas with the 87th Division. So, I was always with the 87th Division, part of the 3rd Army.

MH: When did you go overseas?

BD: Probably about October, I would say.

MH: Of?

BD: Forty-three [1943].

MH: Forty-three [1943]. They moved you very—

BD: No, it can't be forty-three [1943].

MH: Had to be forty-four [1944]. No?

BD: Got to be forty-four [1944], I would say. Yeah. My head is not too great. (laughs)

MH: That's okay. And you were what, a rifleman?

BD: No, I was in the weapons platoon. I was with the mortars and machine guns.

MH: You weren't married before you went in.

BD: No.

MH: You went over to where?

BD: We went over to—we were on the *Queen Mary*. We went to the Firth of Clyde—
(laughs)

MH: Yes. How elegant. (laughs)

BD: —and debarked and went down into England. We went to Leek, England.

MH: Leek?

BD: Leek. That's where the company was. Then we went to, uh—I don't remember where we went. Anyway, we went across to France, to Le Havre, I would say; then they shipped us down toward Metz.

MH: To where?

BD: Metz.

MH: Metz? Okay.

BD: Yeah.

MH: How long did it take before you were in combat?

BD: I would say very soon, very soon. In Metz, we were in combat, because the Germans held out in Metz. I don't know the exact details, but I know when the Bulge broke out,

we were put on trucks, drove to Belgium, essentially, got off the trucks (laughs) and there we were.

Mrs. Diamond: Hello.

MH: Hello.

BD: That's my wife.

MH: Hi, I'm Mike Hirsh.

BD: Mike Hirsh.

MH: I'd get up, but I'm wired in place.

BD: Well, [George S.] Patton writes about it. He calls it—the general asked if we can reconnoiter or do anything, and he said, “No, just get off.” So, we got off, and we collided with the Germans coming towards Bastogne, and we were going into the—so, it was immediate combat right there, again. (laughs)

MH: Terrified?

(Phone rings)

BD: Well—excuse me. Terrified. You know, I was eighteen years old. Was I terrified? I think I was just stupid, that's all. (laughs)

MH: Were you wounded?

BD: I was wounded, but not then. I was wounded in April.

MH: Of?

BD: Forty-five [1945].

MH: Forty-five [1945], so, near the end.

BD: Yeah.

MH: Did you know anything at all about the concentration camps?

BD: No.

MH: Before you hit it? Nothing?

BD: No, nothing. In fact, when you called me, I started looking through some notes I had made years and years ago, because my wife wanted me to write some details of my life for my kids, so I wrote something down. But I didn't know anything about the concentration camp. In fact, when I got to Ohrdruf, I'm walking into, like, a courtyard, and I see piles of shirts and piles of suitcases, and what I thought were baskets of pebbles. But when I looked closer, they weren't pebbles; they were teeth with gold in them. And I said, "What the hell is this?" You know, I didn't know anything about them. But when I saw some prisoners there—the first thing they wanted was my weapon, because the Germans were still running out and escaping.

MH: Let's back up. Tell me about the approach to Ohrdruf. How did you find it? How did you know it was there?

BD: We didn't find it. I mean, I'm saying, we're on tanks. The tanks were there, and I don't even know if they knew it was there. I mean, it was there. So, they stopped, we got off the tanks, and we were waiting around.

MH: And they had knocked the gates down already?

BD: Oh, I didn't see any gates. I didn't see any gates. But the only thing I saw—as I say, Mel got in there and saw the gates and saw the barbed wire.

MH: Right, but he was there the next day.

BD: He was not there.

MH: He was in Buchenwald.

BD: Right. But I didn't see anything that he saw. I just saw the evidence, you might say, the piles of suitcases and stuff like that.

MH: The prisoners were—the former prisoners—

BD: The former prisoners, the ones that were able to move, wanted weapons. They wanted to kill these Germans, that's what they wanted to do.

MH: They came up to you and asked for your gun?

BD: They were right there. I wouldn't do it. And they were picking up pieces of lumber and stuff like that to hit these guys, if they could catch them. That's what I remember.

MH: Did you see any of them catch Germans?

BD: No.

MH: Did you see any Germans around there?

BD: Oh, sure.

MH: Where'd you see the Germans?

BD: The Germans were running away. They wanted to get out of the way.

MH: Were you shooting?

BD: No.

MH: Because?

BD: Because I didn't know what was going on. I was just there. I happened to be there. First of all, my weapon—as a weapons man, I had a pistol. I didn't have a rifle or anything like that, so I'm not going to shoot.

MH: (laughs) Yeah, a .45 at somebody—yes. I trained with a .45. I couldn't hit anything ten feet away.

BD: Well, I could hit with a .45; in fact, I'm an expert. Well, that's something else. I had the highest score with a rifle of my regiment—this was before, back in the States. And I had an expert with a rifle; I was an expert with a pistol. But I wasn't shooting at that time, I was just there. I didn't know what the hell was going on. It was only later that I realized what was there.

MH: How much later?

BD: Months later, I would say, because then the whole concept of concentration camps and the prison compounds and stuff like that became apparent. But before that, I wasn't aware of that. And I was in the weapons; I was a gunner. I had an assistant gunner, and he wasn't aware of that either, my friend Harvey. So, I can't really tell you that much about my experience. That was it.

MH: What did the people look like?

BD: The people looked very—coats. The dead, I don't even know what they looked like. Ragged clothes is all I can say. But—

MH: Were you able to communicate with them?

BD: In gestures. I could communicate with gestures, because I only knew a little bit of Yiddish. I knew some little bit of German, but that's about it. And the prisoners were

gesturing, and you can—I could get an idea of what they were trying to communicate. As I said, they wanted my weapon, and I said no, couldn't do that.

MH: Did they ask you for food?

BD: No.

MH: Really?

BD: No. The only thing they wanted—from me—was a way of getting back: a revenge of some kind, some kind of retaliation of them against the Germans, that's all. They didn't ask for food or anything like that. They may have done that later, but I don't know.

MH: How long did you stay in the camp?

BD: We didn't stay, because—how long did we stay? I had to go—when I went into this courtyard, I had to go back to where I was, so that if the tanks left—I mean, I wasn't going to stay there. I was going to be (laughs) abandoned. I was going to be with my company; if they were gonna go, I was gonna go. So, I doubt if I was there more than an hour or so. And then I went back, and that was it.

MH: Do you remember talking about it with your buddies?

BD: I remember talking to my buddy Harvey, but that's about it. I don't know.

MH: Can you remember what the conversation was about?

BD: No.

MH: When did you finally come home from the war?

BD: Well, I was wounded in April.

MH: Right after Ohrdruf?

BD: Oh, yeah, this was after. Again, we were fighting on tanks, and we went to a place—this is past Ohrdruf; it was a place called Tombach. I don't know if you know that; anyway, it's a larger town. The Germans would knock down trees to stop the tanks, so we were going to have to get off the tanks and clear out the Germans and get the trees out of the way and get going. And that was—so, that happened near Tombach. There was a bunch of Hitler Youth there, and some SS troops behind this barricade of trees. So, we got off the tanks. I heard my platoon sergeant was hit, and I went to see if I could help him—with another sergeant—and that's when I was hit.

MH: Rifle? Bullet?

BD: Bullet.

MH: Where?

BD: (indicates) Here. This is a reconstructed nose and an artificial eye.

MH: They did a good job.

BD: Well, they did a good job, yeah. Anyway, that bullet hit me, knocked me down, and I said, "Sergeant, Tony, I can't see," and I couldn't see. So, he helped me up, and he helped me back to a jeep that was taking the wounded back to an aid station. I got back to an aid station, and they took me to—I think that's where they removed the bullet. But the bullet had fragmented and part of it was in my eye, so they decided—they did as much as they could do, and they flew me back to France, to a hospital in France. When I got there, they also said they couldn't do anything, so they decided to fly me back to the States. So, that's what happened. And I got back to the States.

MH: That must've been a long flight. I don't know how they—they're hopping back?

BD: I don't know. All I know is, when I got back to the States, I called my uncle, because my parents didn't have a phone. So, I called my uncle, and I said, "Uncle Ben, this is Bernie," and we started talking. And then, I realized he didn't realize it was me. He thought it was another Bernie. So, I said, "No, this is Bernie Diamond," and he said, "What're you doin'?" and then I told him. So, I was back in the States before my parents

knew I was wounded, because they had no way of knowing. I told him what happened, and he was the one who contacted my parents. And they visited me while I was still in New York, I guess. Then, I was flown to Tuscaloosa, Alabama—they had another hospital there—to try to save the eye, and they couldn't do it. I was in the hospital for about a couple of months, and then I was finally discharged in January of 1946. That's my story.

MH: That's your story, and you're sticking to it.

BD: Yeah.

MH: Did memories of Ohrdruf ever crop up later in life?

BD: Memories of my whole experience cropped up, yes.

MH: When did that start?

BD: I have a country home in Connecticut, and when I go up there, sometimes—I tell my wife, you know, sometimes the smell or the idea comes back. Yes. I mean, every once in a while, I think of what happened during the war and what I experienced, yes.

MH: Do you have nightmares?

BD: No, I don't have nightmares. But I have memories of that, yes.

MH: You find it helpful or not helpful to talk to other guys who were there?

BD: I don't talk to other guys who were there. Mel is the only guy I talk to about that. I don't find it helpful because unless—I feel unless you're there yourself, you can't imagine anything, you can't visualize what happened. I tell people what I feel shelling is like, for example. I can't explain that. I mean, the shells come down: I know how I experienced it, and sometimes I know what happened. But I can't describe it so that they understand that. That's my feeling. I remember thoughts and incidents that happened to me, and I could tell my wife about it, I can tell people about it, but I don't know if it makes any sense.

I remember, for example, during the Bulge, being dead tired and falling asleep in the snow, just in the snow, my buddy Harvey and I. And then we'd wake up, and we could see tanks running right by the treads of the tanks, going right by us. I didn't hear a thing. I didn't hear it. And yet, there it was. And if that tank was one foot this way, I wouldn't be here, you know.

MH: You wouldn't be talking, right.

BD: And I also remember, also during the Bulge, it was very cold there, extremely cold, and very heavy snow. I'm walking through this heavy snow, maybe waist high with snow, tripping a wire. But the wire was frozen in the snow. Now, if it wasn't frozen, there would be a booby trap going off. And I can't tell people that. I can tell people about it, but they don't have the same concept, I don't think.

MH: Right. Having talked, now, to a lot of World War II vets who went through the shelling that you went through, and strafing from airplanes and that sort of thing—I mean, what we experienced—what most of us in Vietnam experienced was nothing even close to that. I came under incoming mortar fire, but we never had constant barrages of enemy artillery fire. We never had planes coming over strafing us. I nearly got hit by a 500-pound bomb dropped by our allies, friendly fire, but that's different.

BD: Yeah. I remember the first time we were in combat; we were going through a town. We were coming out of the woods, going down into a valley and then a stream, and then going up an incline, maybe a 1,000, 1,500-foot incline up to the top of a hill, and then the other side of the hill was a town. And we were supposed to go up this incline and the 11th Armored Division was supposed to be on our right—on our left, I should say.

Anyway, we were going up, and we found out later they weren't. And the artillery was coming in heavy artillery. And all of a sudden, the company dropped their stuff and ran back down the hill, and I'm there with Harvey. There were dead and wounded all over the place. And my company commander and his runner and his—and a forward observer for the artillery—were on the other side of the hill. All of a sudden, the shelling stops. And as I say, I'm out here with a pistol and my friend Harvey's got a pistol. So, he and I pick up a BAR [Browning Automatic Rifle], if you know what that is—

MH: Yes.

BD: —and we're waiting for the German counterattack. And meantime, he and I had brought a couple of wounded into one place so they could be together and whatever. All

of a sudden, I see someone coming over the hill, and I get ready with my BAR [rifle]. It turns out my friend Paul Cutler, who's the runner, and then my captain—my company commander—he says, “Diamond, what happened?” and I tell him what happened on the other side. So, we finally got out of there.

But that was very—that was traumatic, because you could finally see—or, I could finally see—what artillery could do to a body. I was looking at dead bodies with pieces of—my friend Harvey's glasses flew off. So—

MH: That's the sort of thing you never forget.

BD: No, never forget.

MH: Do you ever tell your kids about the war?

BD: No.

MH: They didn't ask, or you didn't want to tell them?

BD: Both. They never asked me, and I just didn't think it was a worthwhile thing to talk about it. I tell my wife about it, but that's about it. I tell my wife, because when we're up in Connecticut sometimes, I get these images back, and I say, “See, I got this image now.”

MH: Go back to Ohrdruf a second. Do you remember the smell at Ohrdruf?

BD: No.

MH: That's what a lot of the guys remember most. They said they could smell the camps before they saw the camps.

BD: What I know about Ohrdruf—and this is afterwards—is that when the word went back to headquarters about this, they didn't believe it. There was no concept. They didn't believe it. They didn't come to look at Ohrdruf, actually physically visit it, until maybe a week later, and we were far gone.

MH: [Dwight D.] Eisenhower came to Ohrdruf, I think, the day Buchenwald was liberated.

BD: Really? Okay.

MH: Yeah.

BD: Yeah. I'm saying, nobody believed it, and they couldn't imagine this happening.

MH: I keep asking you questions, 'cause I keep thinking I'm going to trigger something and you'll remember something you haven't said.

BD: I have to be honest. Ohrdruf, to me, was not significant, because I didn't know it was Ohrdruf. I didn't know what it was. Only later did I know it was Ohrdruf. So, I didn't have any idea that I have to remember this.

MH: Right I understand.

BD: The only significant thing I remember, as I say, was the piles of clothes, the suitcases, and the pebbles—or, the teeth.

MH: How big was that—you said this basket of pebbles?

BD: Yes, like a peach basket, you know. So, it's about—

MH: Yeah, I understand.

BD: Not too big, but it was there. I don't know if that helps you.

MH: Every little bit helps. It's like a jigsaw puzzle, and you keep talking to people and keep piecing it together from their memories. The point of the book is to talk to the liberators, because you're the last guys around, the last Americans, to have seen the Holocaust. When you're all gone, all that's left is paper and tape and pictures. You're the

last people. So, it's an important thing to do. Anything else you want to tell me? No?
Okay.

BD: No.

End of interview