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## David Pardoe oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, June 30, 2008

David Pardoe (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:** First of all, your name is David P-a-r-d-o-e?

**David Pardoe:** Yes.

MH: And you're at....

DP: And I changed my name after the war.

MH: Your name during the war was?

DP: David A. Nichols, N-i-c-h-o-l-s.

MH: Where did you grow up?

DP: In Buffalo, New York.

MH: And what were you doing what when you went into the army, or just before you went into the army?

DP: I didn't hear the last, Michael.

MH: Just before you went into the service, what were you doing?

DP: Well, immediately before that, I was testing aircraft engines at Chevrolet Gear & Axle Plant number two, in Tonawanda, New York. And before that, I was office manager for a couple of years.

MH: I forgot to ask you. What's your date of birth?

DP: You know, when you get to be our age, it's a way of ticking off your memory; if you can remember your birth date, and it's the same as on their documents, you're okay.

MH: I see.

DP: It's 11-24-17 [November 24, 1917].

MH: Which makes you—?

DP: Ninety plus six [months].

MH: I'm flabbergasted. So, how old were you when you went into the service?

DP: I think I was twenty-five or twenty-six.

MH: Were you drafted, or did you volunteer?

DP: I volunteered.

MH: You went in at what point? Where were you inducted?

DP: I was inducted in Buffalo.

MH: And sent to—?

DP: Sent to—hmm, I've forgotten where I was.

MH: That's okay.

DP: That's what?

MH: When did you first go overseas?

DP: In November of 1944.

MH: And where did they send you?

DP: Marseille: that was our port of disembarking. And we were sent to the southern part of the Western Front, and we entered combat shortly after Christmas.

MH: And the combat was where?

DP: Along the Southern Front: it started along the Saar Valley and we chased the Germans for, oh, maybe 100 miles, and we helped break through the Siegfried Line and so on.

MH: What was your unit at that point?

DP: The anti-tank company of the 255<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of the 63<sup>rd</sup> [Infantry] Division of the 7<sup>th</sup> Army.

MH: And in an anti-tank unit, what is your basic weapon, what's your mission? I mean it sounds like a—

DP: (laughs) Oh, boy. If the Germans had counter-attacked with their big Panzers, their Tiger Panzers, I think we would have been skunked and sunk. We went in combat with a 57mm gun; they're tiny, tiny guns.

MH: 57mm is—I'm familiar with a 60mm mortar, so a 57mm is nothing.

DP: Yeah. And they finally gave us, I think, a 75[mm] or something or other larger than that. And they were bigger and more deadly. And thank goodness we were never attacked by those Tiger tanks; they had 87mm guns, and they were devilish because they could fire into the sky at airplanes and lower their guns and sweep everything before them. They were just devilish, and I don't think our tanks would have been any match for them.

MH: How long did it take for you to figure out that you were severely under-gunned? Or over-matched?

DP: I can't answer that question now.

MH: So, tell me about—had you been told at all about concentration camps or slave labor camps?

DP: You know, Michael, I was radical before I was in the war. And I read the *Daily Worker*, and I knew all about concentration camps, about anti-Semitism, and about what happened to communist comrades in Germany, and socialist people and how the Germans moved up and down the scale and finally got to everybody that had a single thought in their head. I was ghastly afraid of a fascist victory in Europe, and it isn't that I was exactly happy to be in the war, but I knew I had to be.

MH: Once you got—go ahead.

DP: In other words, I was very conscious as a soldier; as a matter of fact, I got to be what was called an "orientation director." They called the education of American soldiers "orientation," and I got to be active in that. And that's where I found out I wanted to be a teacher.

MH: Is teaching what you did after the war?

DP: Yes.

MH: I'll have to come back to that in a bit. So—I've been interviewing many, many people and been surprised. You're really one of the few who said, "Yes, I knew about concentration camps. Yes, I knew what the Nazis were doing." Most of the GIs I've spoken with said they hadn't been told about the concentration camps or the slave labor camps, and finding them was a real surprise.

DP: I expected to find them.

MH: Tell me about your experience when you did find one.

DP: Well, you know, I'm not at all sure why we were there. Heidelberg was declared an open city, if you recall, and there was to be no fighting. Apparently, from some stuff I've read in *Blood and Fire*, there was some fighting on the outskirts. The Landsberg prison was somewhere very close to Heidelberg. Haven't looked it up on the map or anything, but I assume it was a suburb or something or other. And I was the radio operator at that point, and we went into kind of a courtyard, you know, an empty space out in front of the prison. My impression was, and I was told, that this was not really a concentration camp. This was a prison for run-of-the-mill German offenders. But here were these guys tottering around in the uniforms we kind of expected them to have—you know, it was the grey kind of felt uniform with bars, and they were walking skeletons. I really wasn't there more than fifteen or twenty minutes. It was enough to see the actuality of all this.

MH: When you describe it—or said they described it as a prison, not a concentration camp—when I think of a prison, I think of something, you know, with buildings with bars on windows. That's what this was?

DP: My memory says that it was a big stone kind of building, and that there were bars on the windows. And that there were, you know, what you would expect of a prison that was built maybe in the 1880s or something or other like that. Some time like that. It was not a thing that was surrounded by miles of barbed wire or open space and towers where the guards could keep an eye on every square inch.

MH: Was there a fenced yard around it?

DP: I don't remember.

MH: Where did you see these people walking, these inmates walking?

DP: Oh, they were in the—you know, I think they had been liberated by another unit, possibly the day before or the morning and afternoon. They were walking around as if they were kind of lost, and here suddenly they had their freedom and they didn't know what to do. Where were they going to go? Where was their family? What happened, and you know, how do we get there? We have no money, no anything.

MH: Did they try to talk with you?

DP: Yes.

MH: In what language?

DP: German.

MH: Do you speak German, or did you?

DP: I learned German on the way over, in the ship; we had class in German. And I already had French from high school, and Latin, so I was able to put a lot of that together. You know, if you have one or two languages, the third ain't so hard.

MH: Were you ever able to carry on a real conversation with one of them?

DP: Not really. And I wish I had.

MH: Were these men or women, or both?

DP: Repeat your question.

MH: Were these men or women?

DP: Men. I didn't see any women at all.

MH: And were there still Americans from the other units there? According to the information I have, the 63<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division was there around the twenty-eighth and twenty-ninth of April. And then on the twenty-seventh of April, the 103<sup>rd</sup> Infantry, the 10<sup>th</sup> Armored and the 12<sup>th</sup> Armored had gone through there.

DP: Yeah.

MH: So, that comports with what you just said.

DP: I don't know what other—you say the 10<sup>th</sup> Armored went through?

MH: What I have is the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 12<sup>th</sup> Armored went through there.

DP: Oh. I would accept that, but I'm no military expert. I was a private.

MH: You're clearly a well-read and thoughtful person. What goes through your mind when you see this? I mean, intellectually you knew it was there, but now you're faced with it.

DP: You know, that's why we were there, was to get rid of this kind of thing. And I guess [it was] one of the big success stories of the twentieth century, which has very few success stories. I expected to liberate people. And it's funny because I—later on, when we were pursuing the Germans, we encountered long lines of people who had been freed from—they were what do you call them, slave workers, and they were walking home across Germany to Poland or to Latvia, Estonia or—anyway, wherever they were going and they were working at walking.

I don't have any idea how many there were, but I wrote home about it and I wrote to my wife then and said, "Our Allied government, Allied military government, is making a mistake. Instead of putting former Nazis in charge of a lot of these things, they ought to

put some of these ex-slave workers in charge.” And I thought that was a pretty great solution to a problem. And I had this super patriotic lieutenant who censored all my letters that I sent home. My wife began to complain that they looked like paper cut-outs when they got there. So, I tackled him about it and he said, “My God, man, you disagree with Allied policy.” And that’s one of my great recollections, and when he told me, I just screamed, “Allied policy, and that’s why my letters got censored?” Not because I said I was here or we were there, or identified what kind of battles were in, just because I disagreed with policy.

MH: You were thinking, and in the army that’s a bad thing.

DP: (laughs) Anyway.

MH: How did what you saw there at Landsberg or with all the refugees, how did that affect you later in life?

DP: Go back over your question; you know, I’m quite deaf at this point.

MH: Okay, how did what you saw there at Landsberg or with the refugees—how did that affect you once you came home?

DP: How did that affect me?

MH: You mentioned that you became a teacher. I assume there’s a connection.

DP: Well, this is one of the experiences of the war was the liberation of Landsberg. But, you know, I really can’t answer your question as to how that changed or influenced me. It was important, but the war was to be a big anti-fascist experience and it was. And Landsberg was part of it.

MH: When you came home, how soon did you—did you go to work immediately as a teacher?

DP: I went to—I used the Bill of Rights, the GI Bill, for a couple of years until I ran out of benefits, and then I won a New York State scholarship, and I got my master’s degree—yeah, a master’s degree plus a lot of other things.

MH: What was your master's degree in?

DP: American history.

MH: From what university?

DP: New York University.

MH: And after getting that degree, what did you do?

DP: Oh, first I went—in order to keep some food on the table, I went and sold houses in the real estate business. I had some experience in building materials and building generally, so I went into an interracial real estate office in St. Albans in Queens County, New York. I never went back to Buffalo, by the way. My ex-wife, my first wife, was an attorney and she didn't want any more of Buffalo, and she had New York connections. So, we went to live in Jamaica, Long Island. I assume you're not a New Yorker.

MH: No, I'm actually a Chicagoan, but I spent nineteen years in Los Angeles and now in Florida. But I know where Jamaica is. And then after the real estate business?

DP: I can't hear.

MH: After the real estate business?

DP: Yes, I found a job as a history teacher at Andrew Jackson High School in Queens there, a big high school that was built in the heyday of the WPA [Works Project Administration]. I don't think the WPA built it, but it was built during the [Franklin D.] Roosevelt administration. It was built for something like 2,500 kids, which is a big school; at one time we had 4,200.

MH: How long did you teach?

DP: About twenty-seven or twenty-eight years altogether.

MH: At any time, teaching, did you tell your students what you had seen in Germany during the war?

DP: Sure.

MH: Do you remember, you know, reactions to that?

DP: I organized a course at Syosset High School called Eirenology.

MH: “Eirenology”?

DP: The Greek goddess of peace was Eirene, so the course was called Eirenology. And it was supposed to deal with how to avoid war and how to avoid conflict and conflict resolution and so on. I was better at the anti-war stuff than I was at the methodology of how you get people to refrain from killing each other.

MH: The—yes.

DP: Most of my career was spent in a wonderful way of teaching; I was put in charge of developing a course called Problems of Democracy. And what fun I had with that. Just a—it was a lark. I had an administration that said, whenever I had a plan on the table, “I’d like to do this or I’d like to do that—I’d like to invite so and so, do you mind?” They always said yes. And I had all kinds of support and did all kinds of strange and wonderful things.

MH: What were your classes like during the Vietnam years?

DP: Repeat your question.

MH: What were your classes like during the Vietnam years?

DP: Oh, you know, one thing I had during the Vietnam years was when Bobby Kennedy was running for president, I invited him to come to Syosset High School and talk. I knew

the chairman of our local Democratic Party, and Bobby showed up with a troop behind him, and he was late.

But our kids, we had assembled the whole high school in the gym, and that was close to 1,500 kids or 1,600, and they were patient. They waited. Bobby Kennedy was going to come. And he finally did, and one of the things he said, he said, “I’m going to ask you a question. I’m going to tell you what the question is before I’m going to ask you for your answer. I want you to understand the question, and then I want you to answer it.” And he talked about the Vietnam War and he said, “Now, first of all, what should we do—should we continue going as we are and just keep on the level that we are? Or should we pull out? Or should we cut loose with the Air Force and bomb them?” Then he went down the list, and when he got to the third question, “Should we bomb them?” this big ugly growl came out of our student body. And they said, “Bomb them.”

Every social studies teacher I met knew exactly what we had to do from then on; and half a year later, the same kids dropped the school and marched through the center of town. And the superintendent, in a marvelous speech—he was a great guy—said he wanted to appreciate the effectiveness of teaching of the social studies teachers had done, and it was a demonstration of how effective education can be. So, that’s where we were.

MH: That’s where you were in Vietnam. Any other thoughts that you may have about what you saw in World War II?

DP: You’re asking a very, very big question. We all saw so much. And a lot of it was just tattered and torn and big things.

MH: Any one particular memory that comes back to you?

DP: A little louder, please.

MH: I said, is there any one particular memory that comes back to you that we haven’t talked about?

DP: Well, I developed a friendship with a man who was a treasure in my life, Mordecai Bauman. Mordecai was a musician and a baritone at that point, and a New Yorker, and he later became a—well, he was a singer and a marvelous person, a musicologist. And he later became a professor at Brooklyn College, and he founded a school for children, performing arts, and ran it for twenty-five years or so. And that was one of the great

experiences of World War II for me. You know, I just want to tell you one thing. I had one of the luckiest wars. Everywhere our company was sent, it seemed that the battle was just over. And somebody else had done the dirty work, and we got sent in for relief. And this may not be at all what happened, but it seemed that way to me; because I think we lost two men out of our company, and one of my friends who'd been through the infantry—and was in for four years—was one of the five people left of the original company at the end of the war.

MH: A friend who was in a different unit, you mean?

DP: Yes, a unit that got sent in first, to clear the way for our unit.

MH: You were in the group of divisions that we were sent over at the very end of the war just to make sure that the Germans understood that we weren't out of people?

DP: Well, it's not quite that way. They didn't know how long the war was going to last; and you know, we got sent into action by—let me see, it was June forty-four [1944], was it not, that the invasion came from the west, the Normandy Invasion. And I was sent over in November forty-four [1944], so that was pretty late in the war. But the unit was pretty well trained by then. And we disembarked at Marseille, took railroads north to Strasbourg and jumped off from there.

MH: What had they told you expect to anticipate as far as the war was concerned?

DP: I can't hear.

MH: What did they tell you to anticipate as far as the war was concerned?

DP: (laughs) Like [Winston] Churchill said, blood, sweat, toil, and tears.

MH: Okay, and three out of four ain't bad.

DP: I'm sorry.

MH: And three out of four ain't bad. I'm just kidding you.

DP: I'm not reading you.

MH: That's okay. Any other thoughts?

DP: You know, it wasn't so long before we—you know, we were in action about three or four months. And most of it was chasing along behind the Germans, who were running at that point. And we weren't bloodied, really. We didn't lose a lot of men in the 63<sup>rd</sup> Division; casualties were not heavy. Like my company, with two guys lost. And I've got war stories about guys that couldn't stand it and shot themselves in the foot and so on, but that's not what you're looking for.

MH: No. It was one of the worst winters on record that you went through.

DP: Yes, it was. It really wasn't bad for us, because we got to Strasbourg or someplace or other, and we occupied an old French army camp. And we spent Christmas in this big old barracks, and they were wonderful. Had little stoves all over the place and stuff to burn, kept warm. It was great. And that's not really what you're looking for, either.

MH: Well, every little bit helps. Do you remember V-E Day?

DP: Do I remember what?

MH: V-E Day.

DP: V-E Day?

MH: Yes, the day the war was over.

DP: I sure do.

MH: Tell me about that.

DP: Well, the war in Europe was over in June.

MH: May 8.

DP: And we were in a town called Schwäbisch Hall, S-c-h-a-w-v-i-s-c-h-e [*sic*], Schwäbisch Hall, H-a-l-l-e [*sic*] and they had a big community center there. And I went down into the center of town on V-E Day and French soldiers from General Jacques Leclerc's division, I've forgotten the number of the division, but it was a tank division, were there and they were celebrating. And there were all these French guys who all seemed to know how to sing, and one guy after another would get up: one guy would give an imitation of Hitler, another would sing "Marlene," and it was just a beautiful time. And I had—one of the happiest memories of World War II was that afternoon with the French soldiers of General Leclerc's division, and I could speak enough high school French to make myself understood and to listen to what I was hearing, understand what I was hearing.

MH: The celebration went on into the night, I assume.

DP: Yes, I've forgotten how long I was there—it was a good part of the day, part of the evening.

MH: It would be strange, I think, to people who've never been in the war to understand that there can be good memories from being in a war.

DP: You know, I've thought about why it is that all the veterans' organizations support the government and support the wars that the government undertakes. None of them, the veterans' organizations, like ours, ever oppose the kind of thing. Never opposed Vietnam or anything like that.

MH: Not the [American] Legion or the VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars], no.

DP: And one of the essential reasons is that veterans' organizations are made up of, first of all, the survivors; and the memory system—our minds—tend to bury the unpleasant, the ugly, the things that are best forgotten, and to remember the good times, the happy times, the comradeship, the loyalty. And that's why so many veterans still support the war, because they survived and the memory plays this terrible trick. It suppresses the ugly and the real brutality. I'm sure you've heard this before from other people; it's true.

MH: Actually, nobody has ever brought it up before this.

DP: What?

MH: Nobody has brought this up before you.

DP: Oh.

MH: So I thank you for that.

DP: But this is true in our personal lives too, you know; it's much easier to remember the happy times than the hard times.

MH: Well, they say that women who have given birth don't remember the pain of the birthing process.

DP: That's a good example.

MH: Otherwise, they'd never have another baby.

DP: Yeah. Incidentally, I have written a couple of plays—one about the relationship between Mark Twain and Rudyard Kipling, and the other about a series of trials that a courts martial occurred in London and in Germany after the war. And the title of the play is *Before Abu Ghraib, There was the Litchfield Barracks*. Lichfield is a smallish city out to the northwest of London: lovely city, by the way. And Lichfield was an old English thing that the United States rented during World War II, and it was there to prepare soldiers to go to the western front. And also it had a penal aspect; it was a place for soldiers who had gone AWOL [absent without leave] or gotten into one kind of a trouble or another. And somewhere, the orders came down from the highest headquarters that they didn't want those guys that were there; they were cowards, skunks, malingerers, and bastards of one kind or another, and they had to be treated that way so that they would never again go AWOL and avoid military service on the Western Front, when real men were out there dying every day. And so the guards were told, "Make it hell for them." And the guards did.

MH: And you wrote a play about those courts-martial?

DP: Yeah.

MH: Has it been produced?

DP: Well, it hasn't been produced. A friend of mine sent it in to the British Broadcasting system, and I had this lovely rejection notice from some person who has read the play and said, "You know, this certainly gives us a different viewpoint on what was happening there. While we do this, we don't think this is quite the time to do it." Well, I think it's just the time to do it, you know. The torture of prisoners is not, you know, something new. There's something about having power over other people—bad people—that makes it okay to treat them badly, to torture. We shouldn't be so surprised about Abu Ghraib, because long before this we had the Lichfield Barracks, and before that there was Andersonville.<sup>1</sup>

MH: I just don't know that it's been done in the past with the encouragement of the President of the United States.

DP: Yeah. Yes, I think that's a significant comment. You know, the whole question of torture was examined so minutely that they came to a definition that said as long as you don't break any bones or as long as you don't damage vital organs—

MH: Right. You can do it to the point of organ failure.

DP: Yeah! That's frantic. Who says that's not torture? You know, you can pull fingernails and you haven't damaged any bones, but it's torture just the same.

MH: The notion that we would lock people up without charges for five or six years.

DP: Yeah.

MH: That's a whole different subject, as they say.

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<sup>1</sup> The Andersonville Prison in Andersonville, Georgia, a.k.a. Camp Sumter, which was a Confederate prisoner of war camp during the Civil War. Conditions were particularly brutal: nearly 13,000 of the 45,000 Union prisoners held there died.

DP: Yes it is. Can I send you a copy of my play?

MH: I was about to ask you if you have it, if you could send me a copy to read.

DP: I'll put one in the mail for you.

MH: I'll e-mail you my address; I'm not sure if you have it. But your e-mail address is ... your email address is...?

DP: Michael in the usual way? M-i-c-h-a-e-l?

MH: Yes.

DP: H-e-r-s—

MH: H-i-r-s-h.

DP: H-i-r-s-h. Okay, go.

MH: And the address is....

DP: And I think I have your telephone number, but give it to me.

MH: My telephone number is....

DP: And your email?

MH: My email is.... I'll send you an e-mail that has that information in it.

DP: I didn't hear the last part.

MH: I said I'll send you an e-mail with that information in it. Do you have a photo of yourself from your time in the service?

DP: I may have, but I—if I come across one, I'll—

MH: If you have a photo from your time in the service and a current one, I would really like a copy and permission to use it in the book.

DP: Yes. And I'm sorry to hear that so many guys were surprised by the fact that there really were concentration (inaudible) and that Jews really were being slaughtered by the thousands and communists and rebels of one kind or other, and Catholic dissidents.

MH: I've interviewed—are you Jewish, by the way?

DP: No.

MH: I've interviewed former Jewish soldiers who were aware of Nazi persecution of Jews, but hadn't been told by anybody in the chain of command that they were going to come across these camps themselves. And when they did, it was a complete shock. Well, I thank you very, very much for your time, and I look forward to reading your play. Nice to talk to you, sir. Thank you very much.

DP: Right. Bye-bye.

*End of interview*