

December 2008

# William Dorman oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, December 29, 2008

William Dorman (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/hgstud\\_oh](http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/hgstud_oh)

 Part of the [African Languages and Societies Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures Commons](#), [Race, Ethnicity and post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

---

## Scholar Commons Citation

Dorman, William (Interviewee) and Hirsh, Michael (Interviewer), "William Dorman oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, December 29, 2008" (2008). *Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center Oral Histories*. Paper 152.  
[http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/hgstud\\_oh/152](http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/hgstud_oh/152)

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by the Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [scholarcommons@usf.edu](mailto:scholarcommons@usf.edu).

This interview was conducted for *The Liberators: America's Witnesses to the Holocaust* (New York: Bantam Books, 2010) and is ©2010 Michael Hirsh All Rights Reserved. Transcripts, excerpts, or any component of this interview may be used without the author's express written permission only for educational or research purposes. No portion of the interview audio or text may be broadcast, cablecast, webcast, or distributed without the author's express written permission. Published excerpts of an individual interview transcript are limited to 500 words unless express written permission is granted by the author. Required credit line: *The Liberators: America's Witnesses to the Holocaust* (New York: Bantam Books, 2010) and Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project, University of South Florida Libraries, ©2010 Michael Hirsh.

Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project  
Oral History Program  
Florida Studies Center  
University of South Florida, Tampa Library

Digital Object Identifier: C65-00147  
Interviewee: William Dorman (WD)  
Interviewer: Michael Hirsh (MH)  
Interview date: December 29, 2008  
Interview location: Conducted by telephone  
Transcribed by: Dorian L. Thomas  
Transcription date: May 24, 2010 to June 1, 2010  
Audit Edit by: Mary Beth Isaacson, MLS  
Audit Edit date: June 2, 2010  
Final Edit by: Michelle Joy  
Final Edit date: June 4, 2010

[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:** Okay, your name is—you go by Bill or William?

**William Dorman:** Bill.

MH: Bill Dorman, D-o-r-m-a-n.

WD: Right.

MH: And you're at ... and your phone number is...

WD: Right.

MH: What's your birth date?

WD: May 9, 1918.

MH: Okay. And you were in the 84<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division.

WD: Right.

MH: Which unit?

WD: I was a correspondent. I got into the division—I'd been trying to get overseas, because they had me on a newspaper up at Fort Devens. I didn't want to spend the war at Fort Devens giving out newspapers. My brother was a friend of this general, Bolling, Alexander Bolling. And I heard that, if you volunteered as a medic, they would take you overseas, so I did volunteer. I was out at Camp Grant, Illinois, which is the medic training center, and I appealed to my brother to pull some strings with Bolling to get into his division. And he was great. He was gracious, very gracious, and I had a lot of great experiences with him. I covered the Rhine—the Ruhr River crossing, which was quite an event.

MH: So, you were a combat correspondent to the division?

WD: Right.

MH: So, you didn't go over as a medic at all?

WD: No.

MH: Oh, okay. Just to tell you a strange coincidence, I was the editor of the newspaper at Fort Sheridan, Illinois, when I got pulled and went to Vietnam as a combat correspondent in the 25<sup>th</sup> [Infantry] Division.

WD: In the 25<sup>th</sup> Division, huh?

MH: Yeah. So, where had you grown up?

WD: Well, I grew up partially in (inaudible). After my father—my father died when I was fifteen or sixteen, I've forgotten which. And after he died, the war was coming on, and I enlisted, I volunteered, and that's when they sent me up to Devens. Now, they

outfoxed me, 'cause I never thought I was gonna go to Fort Devens. I never even gave it a thought. I thought I'd be in the army then, but I wasn't. But anyway—

MH: Yeah, so—

WD: I—go ahead.

MH: When did you go overseas?

WD: Uh, let me check with Ginny; she knows dates better than I do. Ginny? (no response) Well, I'll have to—

MH: That's okay. When she comes back, you can ask her. But you get overseas, and then where do you go?

WD: We were overseas. We landed in Greenock, Scotland: that's where the ship docked. The English took us by train, and we went down to Winchester. And the reason I—when I looked out the train window and saw that we were in Winchester, I thought, "Well, this is going to be easy, 'cause all I have to do is ask for my brother's address." They knew right away that I was in Winchester. And we stayed there, oh, I guess for about a month or so, and then we went over to Normandy and landed on Omaha Beach—not on D-Day. But when we landed on Omaha Beach, they gave us rations of ammunition. And we went from there up by truck convoy up to the Siegfried Line, which was right on the edge of—the city was Palenberg, Germany.

We went into combat at Palenberg, and we were teamed with the British 30<sup>th</sup> Corps. They took half the city and we took the other half; I guess that was the way it was set up. And our casualties were very heavy. Altogether, I think we lost about 4,000 men—not all in that one engagement, obviously, but 4,000 was, I think, was the figure. And I had tremendous experiences there. They sent me up to the front most every day. There was a guy named Harry Johnson. He never got near the front. I don't know why, but he never did.

MH: Were you just carrying a pencil and paper, or were you also shooting pictures?

WD: No, I had a photographer, Maurice Miller. I wanted to get in to see him, but he died, oh, a couple years ago. So, I'm one of the few left.

MH: Yeah. So—

WD: Go ahead.

MH: At that point, you're with the 84<sup>th</sup> Division?

WD: Right.

MH: Okay. What do you know, if anything, about concentration camps or the Holocaust at that point?

WD: Well, at that point our intelligence told us we were gonna come across the camp at Ahlem. So, at that point, I had to show some correspondence at the camp. It was not a death camp, except that it was a death camp in that there were a hell of a lot of guys that died there. But when we went up to the barbed wire surrounding the camp, I looked at these people—I thought they were children, but they weren't. They'd just shrunk so.

So, we got into the camp. I was supposed to take Bernie McQuade of the *Chicago Daily News*. He wanted to see it, but after he saw a couple of bodies on the ground, he said, "No, I can't do it. You'll have to go in and tell me about it." So, I went through the camp. They—I've forgotten how many we—I think they said it was close to 550 [people] in the camp, but there weren't 150, because there were only a few of them left alive. There was a white-haired gentleman with a girl, his daughter, outside the camp, and he was very hard on us. He said—he ordered this gal to help, 'cause they were gonna clean out the barracks. They were gonna set the barracks on fire. And to make a long story short, we—

MH: Don't make it short. Tell me as much detail as you remember.

WD: We talked to this guy, this civilian who was apparently the boss of the camp. He wanted to know what we were going to do with it. And the lieutenant, who was really ticked off at his attitude, said, "Well, I think we'll just turn 'em loose." And he [the civilian] said, "You can't do that." And he said, "Why?" He [the civilian] said, "Because they'll kill us." [The lieutenant said] "Oh, you killed a lot of people anyway." We got that all settled, and they were taking the guys out and putting them on stretchers. We

found probably—oh, there must have been about twenty or thirty left alive when we got there. But there weren't any guards, because they would have—the guards fled.

MH: The person who was standing outside was a local German civilian?

WD: Yeah. Yeah.

MH: And he was concerned that these people who were barely alive were gonna try and kill them?

WD: Right.

MH: Okay. How do you react like something to that?

WD: Well, they—I've forgotten how we reacted, because I had to take correspondence back to our headquarters. There was quite a bit of publicity on the camp. What I should do, I should give you the pictures that we took, that my photographer took. My photographer was great, a guy named Maurice Miller. And there was one guy that was—he didn't make it. He died, but he was eating out of a bowl of soup—it wasn't soup; it was just water. And he was—it was obvious he wasn't going to make it. So, what's his name from the *Chicago Daily News*, he said, "Bill, take me back. I can't stand seeing any more of this." And this was really a—it was a work camp; it wasn't a death camp as such.

MH: Right.

WD: So, the division took Hannover, and this camp was on the outskirts of Hannover. Then we got up to the Elbe River, and of course all our officers, everybody wanted to go for Berlin. We got a wire from our conversations with Eisenhower saying to stop on the banks of the Elbe River; we were allowed to send out patrols, and "strength" was the phraseology. But there was, for as far as you could see, the Germans were surrendering. God, there were thousands of them.

Maurice Miller, my photographer, and I got across the river on a boat, and we went around to the German troops, pointing at a bushel basket, telling them to put their pistols there. We all got a bunch of pistols. But then, when we got back to the other shore, all our guys grabbed the pistols, so we never got any. But the Germans were surrendering

and there were absolutely thousands of them. And also, there were some women that had taken all their clothes off and held their clothes over their heads and swam across the river, because they were terrified of falling into the Russian hands.

I'm trying to remember anything else.

MH: What—

WD: Go ahead.

MH: Let's just go back to Ahlem for a minute. How long do you think you spent at Ahlem?

WD: Oh, I spent probably—altogether, probably three or four hours.

MH: Yeah. Were you able to talk to any of the survivors?

WD: No, because they pulled all of—all of the ones that were that sick, they pulled them out of there right away.

MH: How long—

WD: I want to tell you—

MH: Yes?

WD: They—I can't remember now. I'm goddamn old myself.

MH: Yes.

WD: But it was 150: our intelligence said we were supposed to find 150 in the camp. But when we got there, there were only about fifty that were left alive.

MH: Okay.

WD: And they got them out of there as soon as they could.

MH: Were you there with the first bunch of guys who went in?

WD: No, I was in the—I would say probably the second, in the second wave.

MH: But they organized the evacuation, then, pretty quickly.

WD: Yes, they did.

MH: Do you know where they were taking them?

WD: I don't know where they were taking them. They were taking them to—well, yeah, they were taking them to one of the evacuation centers, which was a place where they got food because they issued a warning to us, all of us, that said, "Don't feed these people, because you'll kill them." And so, we just—

MH: Right. What were you thinking about when you're seeing this kind of thing? And you'd seen combat, but you'd never seen something like this.

WD: Yeah, I never saw anything like that. And your reaction was, "How the hell could a human being do this to another human being?" It was absolutely horrible that they treated these people with—they were literally skeletons, they were skin and bones. And this was not a death camp. This was a work camp.

MH: Right.

WD: They didn't—I think [there were] aviation parts on the ground, or something like that.

MH: Yeah. Well, I mean, it wasn't an extermination camp.

WD: No.

MH: But there was plenty of death.

WD: There was plenty of death, and they worked everybody until they were gonna die. No problem.

MH: Yeah. How did—after you saw that, did it change the way the soldiers treated German prisoners?

WD: We treated them—first, let me go back to the Malmédy massacre, which—

MH: Okay.

WD: The Malmédy massacre, they killed an awful lot of our guys. They herded them into a field. It was about 100, 150 or so of them, and then they turned a machine gun on them.

MH: Right.

WD: And they killed them. After that, you couldn't get a prisoner alive. They killed most of the—they killed an awful lot of the prisoners.

MH: Right. How did the word about the Malmédy massacre get around? Was it in *Stars and Stripes*?

WD: I can't remember whether it was *Stars and Stripes* that printed the story of the Malmédy massacre or not. But the word got around very quickly.

MH: Yeah.

WD: And after that, they didn't take any prisoners.

MH: Was there ever anybody—an officer—to step forward and say, “Well, wait, the Geneva Convention says this, that and the other thing, and you can’t do that”?

WD: No. No, there wasn’t.

MH: Okay. Did seeing what you saw at Ahlem have any long-term impact on you?

WD: On me? Yes, it did.

MH: Tell me about that.

WD: Well, I couldn’t—I had a hell of a hard time reconciling myself to the idea that we should take prisoners. And I was entirely sympathetic, ’cause the line company didn’t bother with it. For example, I remember one towards the—it was after we got up into Hannover. I pulled the jeep over on the side of the road. Some guy—this German, he must have been fifty, sixty years old—came up, put his hands up. But I had a driver who was a first class jerk, and he wanted to kill him. I said, “You’re not gonna kill him while I’m here, I’ll tell you that. This guy has never fired a shot. You take him back to the prison pool back in the lines, and if I hear that this guy was killed, you’re gonna get court-martialed.” I was furious at that, because this guy was pitiful. He obviously had never fired his rifle, and he was hiding in a cellar, and he came out when he saw us coming up from the rear.

Bolling was very proud of the division, because Hannover was Germany’s twelfth city, and for Bolling to capture that city was great. We had three objectives after they crossed the Rhine. There was Hannover—Münster, Hannover and Berlin. Well, Münster fell to an airborne division before we got there. We got up to the Elbe River, and we got the radio message from Eisenhower to stop there and not try to take Berlin.

MH: Yeah.

WD: We were allowed to send out patrols, but that was all.

MH: Were the Russians already on the other side of the Elbe when you got there?

WD: Not when we got there, but right after we got there, they were there. And it was funny because Bolling, I think, asked one of the Russians—only one Russian could speak English. I think Bolling asked him if he had any problem with rape, and he said, “No, we have no problem. We rape.”

MH: (laughs) Nice.

WD: And if you read [Cornelius] Ryan’s book on the fall of Berlin, there wasn’t a single female in Berlin that was not attacked.

MH: Hmm. It sort of explains why the Germans were running to get away from the Russians.

WD: Yeah, they were running hard.

MH: What was your rank at that point?

WD: My rank?

MH: Yes.

WD: Sergeant.

MH: You were a sergeant.

WD: Yeah.

MH: Three stripes?

WD: Yeah.

MH: Okay. When did—where were you when the war ended?

WD: Uh, we were in—first we were in Salzwedel, which was on the banks of the Rhine. Then they moved us down to Heidelberg—

MH: Salzwedel wasn't that far from Ahlem.

WD: No, it wasn't.

MH: Okay. Did you see the camp at Salzwedel?

WD: Oh, yeah.

MH: The women's camp?

WD: Not the women's camp, no. No, it was—they were all men in the camp that we freed.

MH: That was the camp at Ahlem.

WD: Yeah.

MH: Right, but there was another camp at Salzwedel. Did you see that one or not?

WD: I didn't see that one.

MH: You didn't see that one, okay.

WD: No.

MH: So the war ends, V-E Day happens, and where are you?

WD: In Heidelberg.

MH: In Heidelberg. Okay. And then how long before you come home?

WD: Well, I had so many points that they transferred me into the 30<sup>th</sup> [Infantry] Division, which was down in Nuremberg. And the 84<sup>th</sup> came down: they had to play them in football. I went over to see my old commanding general and he said, “So, would you like to come home with us?” and I said, “Yes, I would. That’d be great.” So he transferred me from the 30<sup>th</sup> Division into the 84<sup>th</sup> at the end.

MH: And you—how long before you were out of the army?

WD: Well, I had some friends who were politicians, and they—they said they heard my name broadcast on the PA system at Camp Kilmer. It turned out to be a guy that used to be on the Fort Devens paper. So, he said, “Bill, I can give you a tip. I can give you a delay en route, which means you can go home any time you want, and you can report for discharge. It’s the best deal, because otherwise you may hang around for a long time at Devens,” which was the discharge point. So, I took advantage of that and went home.

MH: Okay. What did you do in civilian life once you came back?

WD: I got my old job back. I was a reporter on the old *Boston Herald*, which went out of business. I’m trying to think of any others. No, I didn’t do anything else.

MH: Yeah. Did what you had seen in the war ever come back up and bother you once you were back home?

WD: It bothered me to the extent that I couldn’t believe what I had seen. It bothered me that there were some Germans that I liked a lot who were prisoners, and they were working for us. This was in occupation. And I just couldn’t—I could never warm up to them. I couldn’t believe that human beings could treat people like that.

MH: Were these the people who would say, “We didn’t know what was happening. *Nicht Nazi*,” that sort of stuff?

WD: Yeah. Yes.

MH: Yeah, nobody was a Nazi.

WD: (laughs) Nobody was a Nazi. You couldn't find a Nazi after the war—I mean, after the war was over.

MH: That would tend to make me a little crazy, because most of the camps, anybody in the area knew they were there. They had to smell it, they had to see it.

WD: Oh, yeah. Yeah, absolutely.

MH: But did you ever write about it for the paper?

WD: I wrote them about fifteen stories—no, a little less than that. This was when the division was fighting its way up to the Rhine. I wrote—most of the stories were on page one of the *Herald*. I got out of the army and went right to work for the paper.

MH: Yeah. But after the war, when you were working for the paper, did you ever, you know, write any reminiscences of your war experiences?

WD: No, all of the stories I did on the war were published in the paper.

MH: Okay. When did you get married?

WD: Nineteen fifty.

MH: And you have children?

WD: Two children: a girl, who lives in Newcastle, which is right outside of Portsmouth. And then I have a son, and he is a business consultant. He lives in Quincy.

MH: Um—

WD: Go on.

MH: Did you ever, you know, go over and talk to school kids or anybody else about what you'd seen?

WD: No. I tried on one occasion. One of my granddaughters was in elementary school, and she wanted me to give a talk. And I choked up—I couldn't. Just the memory of Ahlem was enough to set me off. I was very emotional about that, and I think probably everybody that went, because the guys that were in the divisions that took the concentration camps—I mean, the pictures were horrible.

MH: Right.

WD: Have you talked to any of those people?

MH: I've talked to many people who were at the bigger concentration camps as well, yeah. How did you know Maurice Miller?

WD: When they transferred me into the division as a correspondent, we had—I was assigned—I got him as a partner. There were six of us, one for each regiment. And we took turns going up to the front, getting stories or taking correspondents. Most correspondents had no desire to get up to the front.

MH: Okay. You said you still have the photos that your photographer took?

WD: I have copies that were—they were copies. I'd be glad to send them to you.

MH: I'd appreciate that, and I'll scan them and send them back to you. Do you have a picture of yourself from World War II?

WD: Uh, I don't think so. Maybe I'll ask Alice. I'll have to ask my wife. I can't remember.

MH: Okay. And what about a relatively recent photo?

WD: Oh, I can—I've got a couple of photos that were taken up at Fort Devens. I'm not very proud of that, but you know. Drove me crazy, because I was—I only have one eye and I should've known better, but I wasn't gonna get very far in the army with one eye.

MH: You only had one eye?

WD: Well, yeah, one good eye.

MH: And they sent you into combat.

WD: Yeah. Well, the reason they did is because the general was a friend of my brother. And he asked me: he said, "Do you want to go overseas with us?" And I said, "Yes, very badly." So, that's what happened.

MH: How did you lose an eye?

WD: Well, I was just born with a bad eye.

MH: Oh, okay. Would you like me to send you an envelope, a photo envelope, so you could send me the pictures?

WD: Yeah. It's going to take me a while to find them.

MH: Okay, there's no rush.

WD: Yeah. You live in—

MH: I live in Florida.

WD: You do live in Florida.

MH: Yes.

WD: You're writing a book?

MH: Yes, I'm writing a book. It'll be published in early 2010 by Random House. As I said, at this point I've interviewed more than 160 guys.

WD: Great.

MH: The book really sort of covers the last six weeks of the war, when the Americans were liberating camps, you know, almost every day.

WD: Yeah.

MH: But—

WD: You must have a wealth of experiences from that.

MH: The conversations have been very, very interesting. And it also makes it easier to talk to the guys, because I was a combat correspondent in the army in Vietnam. And I was also imbedded with the Air Force in Afghanistan to write a book.

WD: Great.

MH: So, I was with the Air Force at the end of 2002.

WD: Okay. You let me know when they're gonna be published, 'cause I—

MH: You will get a copy.

WD: Great.

MH: You will get a copy. I'll send you an envelope for the photos, and there'll be a release form in there for you to sign that lets me use them.

WD: Okay.

MH: Okay? And if you could look for a picture of you from the war and then a current picture, that'd be great.

WD: Okay.

MH: Okay. Thank you very much, Bill, I sure appreciate it. Have a happy New Year.

WD: Thank you very much.

MH: Right. Bye-bye.

WD: Bye.

*End of interview*