

Stephen R. Dorsey
Veteran

Michael Russert
Wayne Clarke
Interviewer

Interviewed on June 18, 2003
Saratoga Springs, NY

Q: Could you give me your full name, date of birth, and place of birth please.

SD: My full name is Stephen R. Dorsey, I was born in West Islip, NY on August 26, 1913.

Q: What was your educational background prior to entering military service?

SD: Well—I got out of high school when I was nineteen, I applied for admission to Columbia University. But at that time the colleges were cutting back on bringing in coal miners from Pittsburgh as part of their football team, so I was pretty wound up in high school athletics. I played four years as a third place regular, I won the county championship [unclear]. The last year that I came back to get my degree that I needed. But I couldn't get into Columbia, Columbia said "we're not accepting anybody at this point". So, like I go. My father was out at work, he had started building, and he got on at WPA, 15 dollar a week, five dollars a day picking up trash along the roadways. That's when I went back for my extra course, we didn't have a golf team. I got the boys from West Islip and we're all ex-caddies and most of us played pretty good at golf. We played eight matches the first year and we won six of the eight matches which was unheard of. I didn't play any basketball and my family said I'm in enough sports now, you're in baseball in the spring and in football in the fall. So, that was my limit. I knew I couldn't get into club year, so I caddied for the owner of the company I was working for, Herbert J.H. He's gone now, thank God.

Q: Do you recall where you were when you heard about Pearl Harbor and what your reaction was to that?

SD: Yes, yes. We had gone out to Connecticut to visit my wife's sister. She has two sisters and two boys. He was a farmer; my wife was a farmer that quit high school. We were coming back from Danbury, Connecticut when we hear the news on the radio, and I was just shocked to think that all the fleet had been bombed and what a terrible beating we took in Hawaii. And uh, there wasn't much that I could do, I was working at the time and I was also a very capable sonographer who was working for General Tire, working for the Eastern Coast manager. I made a big twenty-four dollars a week and I think she made twenty-six dollars a week, that was big pay.

Well the banks were closed; Roswell had closed the banks and you just couldn't find a job. My father was working fifteen dollars for three days a week

when he could get it. And I waited and I finally caddied for H one day and I said, “So do you have any openings” and he says, “come in Monday and we’ll see what we can do for you”. So, I went in Monday and his son ran the treasury department, he interviewed me. He said we could use ya, we’ll pay you twelve dollars a week. That’s a job and I was glad to have it. I stayed with that company for twenty-six years and they finally went bankrupt. They made one decent picture. They made I guess about eight or ten pictures with John Wayne in it, but all of his pictures flopped because Yates had brought across from Czechoslovakia a female ice skater. She was a fancy skater, and he fell in love with her. He had three boys and 1 daughter, in time, his wife passed away and he remarried this woman. She’s still at the coast rather living out there; brought her mother over and her brother and they were all given prominent jobs. Then they finally sold out.

Q: Did you enlist or were you drafted into the service?

SD: I was drafted.

Q: When did you enter the service?

SD: May of nineteen forty-three.

Q: In what branch of service?

SD: Rifle platoon—we were a rifle company, the sixty ninth division and the commander of that company was given leave of the company that he had and somehow he was able to get back; he knew somebody in Washington and he gave him another chance so he became our commander in chief. So, I was training in camp Shelby and then Alabama and I was there almost a year when they interviewed me and asked me if I wanted to go to OCS. I said, “I’d welcome the chance”. I went to OCS and did very well. I went in as a staff sergeant and then I got my degree and then I became a second lieutenant. And then they decided they were going to ship out the nucleus of the troops to be available to them right now because the war was winding up in our favor and I was picked. So, I went in May and had about a year of training at Shelby and then I got the call to go to Fort Benning to later become an officer; so, I became a second lieutenant. When I got through there, they sent me to Florida as a second lieutenant to train the troops and at that time I smoked and we had a break in training, our superior officer had a [unclear]. It was a story of finding your way out of an unknown situation. One day I had a group of men, we were putting them through an obstacle course. They had to scale; where they would climb up and go over. A couple of the boys were missing. So, an inspecting officer came around and said where are the boys and I said, “I don’t know, I’ve just been told to take these men out to this area and give them the training”. And that’s what I was doing. We were outside at the time smoking a cigarette, we were on break and he went inside and raised hell with the instructor. He said “You got two out there that don’t know what the hell their doing, they’re not doing the job. There’s broken timbers on the scaffolding and

these guys are just running their men's through it". Two days later, this other fellow and I were on shipping orders overseas and we had been in Florida maybe 6 months at least with training. Then we went over on the Aquitania with the crew for the ship and about fifteen other ships in the convoy. We ended up in Scotland, and in Scotland we rode the trains down to England into Liverpool and then across the canal to the French and they put us on forty and eights and we ended up being assigned to a group.

Q: Did you go in as replacements?

SD: Yes, as replacements.

Q: What unit did you end up with?

SD: I think the ninth infantry. We passed our old outfit, the sixty ninth on the road after we got through with Belgium. It was the ninth infantry and I forget what regiment.

Q: When did you reach Belgium?

SD: We reached Belgium within three or four days of landing in France. France was cleared, Belgium had been cleared already. They were moving troops up the river to cross into Berlin.

Q: This was after the battle of the Battle of the Bulge?

SD: Yes, yeah.

Q: This was probably in the spring of forty-five?

SD: Yeah, yeah.

Q: Did you go right into the frontlines or?

SD: We did, a lot of small towns we hit heading towards Berlin. My platoon was 39 men. I was in charge of them. We'd take the platoon and split it half on one side of the road half on the other but in heading towards Berlin. Then we got instructions to hold up for the tanks to catch up with us. When the tanks came along, we rode the tanks for a while. Then when we got to Berlin, we had to hole-up because the Russians were given the privilege of being the first ones in Berlin. And Hitler by that time had taken off somewhere, I don't know what happened to the bastard, but uh that was the end of it.

Q: Did you ever have any encounters with the Russian troops?

SD: Only in the camp. We went to camp in Hemer, Germany. They had twenty-five thousand prisoners, mostly Russian that they had brought back with them. And they had the French troops that they captured and all the Allies that they captured.

Q: Now were you liberating these camps or were these people already liberated?

SD: No, we weren't liberating it, no. We got to the camp and he heard through the grapevine that president Roosevelt had died.

Q: What was your reaction to that, how'd you feel when you heard about that?

SD: I felt I lost a friend because I got out in thirty three from high school and he put through some tough stops like you could only buy milk maybe for five cents a quarter and uh I felt that he was trying to hold the thing together. But the war brought the country to a climax because when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, everybody wanted to volunteer to win. But I was going steady with my intended wife and I stayed with her. She worked in New York, I worked in New York, we got married thirty-seven. We lived together for sixty years before she finally passed away. She raised two kids, Averiane, and my son, Steven. He wanted to know where he should go, he was in the navy and he had the ships on the Roosevelt. One day we get a phone call, he calls us from London *chuckles*. We didn't have that kind of money at that time.

Q: I got to go back to the Soviets, the Russians and French that you liberated from the camps. What kind of condition were they in?

SD: We didn't see too much of them because we were put in a special area, they had a little bachelor's building and Red Cross came in once. We were actually in prison for two weeks and then we were liberated.

Q: You were captured?

SD: Yeah.

Q: Oh, I didn't realize that.

SD: Yeah, we were captured.

Q: Where were you captured?

SD: I think it was Salzburg or *pauses* I can't remember the name. But I went back forty years later to look up the town and the camp was gone. They had demolished it and put up apartments.

Q: Now how long were you in the camp?

SD: Two weeks.

Q: What were the conditions like when you arrived there?

SD: The conditions were bad, there were people being carried out all day long that were dying. Some of them got soup once a day, we were lucky we got soup twice a day because we were officers.

Q: What kind of guards did you have? Were they older men or young boys?

SD: Older guys that had the keys and whatnot, they became a little bit friendly with us. This one day we were liberated, this guy comes over the mountain top

like a raised plateau. I said, “Where the hell are the troops?” This guy was a lone scouter *chuckles*, and the troops were all behind him and then the shells started to come one way and then come another way. We were in the basement of the large building there and we stayed there until the shelling ended. The guards gave up from terror, there’s no shots fired, and they got rid of the big guns that were firing at them.

Q: Was the camp all American G.I.’s?

SD: No, the camp was mostly Russian.

Q: Okay so it was mixed?

SD: It was a mixture and the Russians were dying like fleas.

Q: Were they treated any differently than the Americans?

SD: I think so, yes. We got treated a little bit better. I guess the guards knew the war was over for them, so we got better treatment than the Russians. But when they captured us, it took us five days to get to the camp. We had to sleep in the church chapels, on the benches.

Q: Was it a forced march?

SD: Yes, it was forced. We would march all day and then they’d give us a couple hours of sleep time and then they’d wake us up again and then were off again. We were just walking and we saw our planes fly over, they took a look at us, and we waved our hands and they realized that we were captured. And there were at least two companies that were captured. Our company and I think it was A company. Each had about two hundred fifty troops. So, they had about five hundred and at that time sixteen days were the most that we were going to be held. We slept in flea bags with hay in them, in rough clothes with bugs and all that stuff.

Q: Were you aware of concentration camps?

SD: Well I knew of a concentration camp and we were not allowed to mix with them because the building was a little bit off center. But we could look at the window and see these guys carrying these boards with guys flat dead.

Q: After you were liberated, where did you go?

SD: We went back to France. They picked us up, one of the sergeants had list of names, you know he called off names. I had gotten a very bad case of diarrhea. I cooked up one of their SPAM hams. I haven’t touched one since.

Q: *laughing*.

SD: Oh God I was dying, I was running over to the latrine you know, trying to get free, and finally, they said they’re here for pick up and I said “Make sure they get my name because I want to get out of here” *chuckles*.

Q: Were you hospitalized at all or?

SD: Yes, I was hospitalized.

Q: How long were you in the hospital?

SD: Ohh I think this was an open field hospital, there wasn't anything fancy.

Q: Where did you go from there?

SD: We went out of Paris I think about forty miles. They gave us new clothing, we had one shower where they took our clothes and made sure that the bugs were gone and gave us our stuff back. In my pocket I had a pocket comb that was all with it so they put it through hot air I guess to kill the bugs that we had picked up. But down the hold there wasn't much they could do because when they saw this big group of troops behind one lone Brooklyn guy. He's waving us on and then all of a sudden you see tanks come up and they start firing at the ones that were firing at us. A lot of the shells were dropping inside the tent, in the camp rather. But we just sit there, we grab cigarettes from the guards.

Q: When did you return to the states?

SD: We returned to the states; we were in mid-Atlantic when we heard that the war with Germany was over. I think I got back to the states a day after Easter, just sixteen days after we were captured, I'd say early May of forty-three.

Q: Were you discharged right away or were you kept in the service?

SD: No, no they sent us too Jersey camp and they interviewed us, and they gave us a thirty-day leave. They said, "You could be with your family for thirty days". Then we had to report to Macon, Georgia, to an army camp. From there on I brought my wife down and then my youngster and then we were there; that was in May. We got orders that we were being shipped to Fort Ord in California and they were looking ahead of themselves and they had finally.... I stopped in at the studio where my boss was and I said, "I can't get out, I don't have enough points". So, he said "who's your commander", I said "I really don't know I haven't checked in yet". So, he said "find out his name and I'll write him a letter". And sure enough, I gave him the name and he wrote him a nice letter. I was making at that time, thirty-nine dollars a week and I'd do a little bit of lying and I said, "I was also booking pictures for this studio". I booked RKO theaters and all the smaller theaters and then I was called in for inspection. They said, "We have you set to go to Japan", I figured that's where I was sent.

Q: Now did they do any extra training or different training?

SD: Yeah, we had a new group of enlisted people and these big guys were bastards. During the nighttime they would start calling names: "Lieutenant colonel da da da horse's ass".

Q: *chuckles*.

SD: And somebody would go around and try to find who was causing a rumpus *chuckles*. I was interviewed by a guy and he says, “your salary was listed very low, why was that?” I said, “I also worked on commissions, that was my base salary, so I just listed my base salary”. I had to do a little lying. He says, “I want to get out too”. The commander at Fort Ord said he was looking to get out and he writes [unclear] a nice letter and he realizes that fellows that have been taken away from business should be back in doing their job again and not worrying about Japan, but then the war with Japan ended in August and I give Harry Truman a lot of credit he took out the bomb that had never been tried anywhere you know, they had explosions in the states and he just knocked the hell out of those cities. He killed thousands and thousands of people and then they threw in the sponge. But the commander said that he was looking for a way out too, he wanted to know if could do anything for him.

Q: When were you discharged then?

SD: I was discharged in April of forty-six.

Q: Where did you go after you were discharged?

SD: Well, wrapped up the kid, we stayed at Pacific Grove.

Q: You stayed at California?

SD: Yes, southern California. I ran into my brother in law and he loved the younger fellas. His wife was out there, and he was a chef on board [unclear] and then I came back to the camp, picked up my stuff, I had my release in my hand, I had to go to the release department. I went up to San Francisco again and the guys says to me “stay one more day and you’ll be a first lieutenant not a second lieutenant”, I said “I don’t care, I don’t want to stay another hour, get me out of here” *chuckles*. So, he wrote me, then I bundled up to go back to Pacific Grove, picked up my daughter and my wife, and we head for New York in an old Dodge. I wasn’t making any kind of money at that time and we tried to get into Mexico to see if we could pick up any souvenirs and whatnot, but they were very strict, they were checking all the cars and whatnot so we said to hell with it so we came back into the state again and we rode across the country; it took us three days full days.

Q: Did you ever make us of the G.I. bill?

SD: No.

Q: Did you ever use it at all?

SD: No.

Q: How about the fifty-two/twenty club? Did you ever use that?

SD: No.

Q: Did you ever stay in contact with anyone you had served with?

SD: Uhh, no.

Q: Any veteran's organizations?

SD: No.

Q: Never did?

SD: I met a couple of guys that we were friendly with, they liked my daughter, she was cute at that age, and I don't know what happened to them.

Q: *chuckles*.

SD: My wife would be carrying her in her arms, she was about three and a half years old. We struggled, we hit a place in Texas, we finally got a room, had something to eat. So, the three of us go to bed, then wife said, "Get up and get her a glass of water", I went and put on the light and the sink was covered with roaches, oh my God. I said "you know I we want to leave early" so 4 o'clock in the morning were packed in, were moving on *chuckles*.

Q: How do you think the time you were in service... did it affect your life in any way or change your life?

SD: No, it's just that I appreciated what the president had done, and Truman had acted wisely he didn't delay laying the bomb down, but I don't know, I don't think so. By that time, I was kind of accustomed to it. I had been in the New York state guard maybe about two years or so. We came up to camp Smith for two weeks. I said to my wife "were going to leave you or two weeks", she said "where you going" I said "I'm going to camp", but that's just before the war broke out.

Q: Thank you very much for your interview.