

Interview with Peter Gruss
Interviewer: Leigh Anne Howard
May 21, 2005

Q: Were you drafted?

A: I was drafted in June or July of 1950 for the Korean War.

Q: And, what happened?

A: Well I was at Fort Sill, Oklahoma in July '50. (coughing) And I took my basic [training] there and met a lot of fine young men that I was with. Our outfit was scheduled to go to Korea in December 1950 but the outfit that went ahead of us, our sister outfit we called it because they had the same weapons, they got them over there but, in the rice paddies they couldn't maneuver them, so they sent us to Germany. We were very lucky.

Q: Instead of going over to Korea.

A: Yea. We spent the rest of our time in the service over in Germany. We called it the Russian front because the Cold War was going on. They always said that Russians were going to come through the gap into Germany there if there was anything that was going to develop. It was interesting. We had a lot of good times over there when I was with the people. I met a lot of nice fellas, and my granddad was the only one out of his (coughing) family that came to the States in 1870.

Q: Okay.

A: And he always kept in contact. He had a farm in Michigan, and he always kept in contact with his relatives.

Q: In Germany?

A: In Germany. And I have two brothers that fought all the ways through the war in Germany, during the Battle of the Bulge, and they got out safe. I was lucky I got over there in '50 or '51 it was when we went over. I wrote to my dad and asked him where my relatives came from and I looked them up, and they rolled out the red carpet because I was named after my grandfather from over there, Peter Gruss from Germany. I used to take my leaves and go up and visit with them and then when we got out of the service, I made three trips back to see the relatives and to see the places that we had been when we were over there in Germany. I enjoyed the Army. I mean I got drafted, but I met a lot of good friends, and we get together.

Q: What did you like about it? I mean why do you think you liked it.

A: Well the discipline for one thing. We had a discipline then, and now there doesn't seem to be any discipline in the world anymore and people do not accept their responsibilities like they did then. I always said after I got out if they took every kid that got out of high school and put them in the service for a year and teach them some discipline like we used to have we would have a better bunch of people in this world. It seemed to me the people then had more discipline; we did it seems like. It just... it was a good experience. Of course, it would have probably been different if I was sent to Korea.

Q: I imagine it would have been majorly different.

A: Yea a lot of differences. But we went and did our duty.

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Q: What were your instructors like in basic training?

A: Well we have two officers at this reunion that I hadn't seen since 1952.

Q: Who are they?

A: Lieutenant Robert T. Paul and Lieutenant Ron Kelly. They were both ROTC boys in college, and when the Korean War came, they got called in they were without an outfit all that time. I had real good people in basic. Of course, the discipline rules were changed... the Army changed in 1950 or '51. They changed the discipline rules, and it never was good after that. They said that all the outfits that went to Korea... the discipline was relaxed. The most casual based so it proves that the discipline is what saved them. I have a grandson right now he spent about 6 months in Afghanistan, and then they shipped him to Iraq. He is in the Marines. (crying) Now he's got to go back to Iraq; it's hard for the poor guys over there. I just heard a story the other day that gets to me. This guy got back from Iraq; he was wounded. He said to the (incoherent) ... and he got out, but he had to buy his own bus fare home. Now something is wrong in Washington when we are sending these guys over there.

Q: I have heard stow after story of things like that.

A: It's ridiculous really. (coughing)

Q: So, you were sent to Fort Sill?

A: Fort Sill... 1950, July.

Q: And then where did you go? I mean eventually you got to Badenhausen.

A: Well yea. Like I said our outfit was scheduled to go to Korea in December of '50 but they couldn't handle the equipment over there. It was too heavy in the rice paddies. So, they sent us to Germany, and we spent the rest of the time in the service in Germany.

Q: What were your jobs over there? What were you responsible for?

A: Well when I first got out of basic, they put me as Battery' Clerk. But I was a farm boy and wasn't used to working in an office, and I didn't like the Battery Clerk job, so I got out of that. I transferred into the supply and I was in supply for the whole time that I was over there, the supply unit. We had to order all the supplies for the clothing and all the different equipment that we needed. My supply sergeant and his wife, they were a non-comm marriage, and the wives couldn't get over to Germany right away, and his wife never came over and he had problems trying to find her and see what had happened to her. They took him out of the supply and put me in charge. I was acting Supply Sergeant for the entire time I was over in Germany.

Q: Did you have all the supplies that was needed for your group?

A: Oh yea. We did. We didn't have any problems. Of course, I'm not in there now, and I just hear the stories about what my grandson says from over there in Iraq. Some of the things that has gone on makes me sick.

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Q: But everything was rationed? Was that part of what you had to deal with?

A: Yea, everything was rationed.

Q: So, did you have to keep up with that as well? In terms of your job duties did you look at what their card was to issue?

A: But no, I thoroughly enjoyed my time in the service. We were in a little different situation than the boys that were over in Korea. Of course, with the Cold War that was going on we never knew what was going to happen. That Cold War thing, they always figured the Russians were going to come through what they call the Fulda Gap in Germany. That was right where my relations all came from. I have quite a few different experiences with my relations talking about the war. Being that they were there, and I had two brother that fought all the way through Germany that was actually fighting with their second cousins and my dad's first cousins.

Q: In World War II?

A: World War II.

Q: You said you had some experiences? Tell me about them.

A: Well one of them was a German, and he was an officer in the German Army and another cousin of my father's was in the Air Force. I would look at their photographs and their experiences in the Army. All the people of Germany... the people over there in the little villages never got more than 20 miles from home and they didn't really know what was going on at first. And we would get to talking about the Jew problem over there. One night the relations of mine had a gathering and a bunch of male young college students were over. We were drinking beer, and we got to talking about the history of the world situation. We talked about how the Americans treated the colored people in the country and I was getting pretty hot and heavy, so I said, "Well you people have your racial problems too." And he said, "What do you mean?" and I said, "Well what happened to 6 million Jews?" He pointed over at his folks and says, "That wasn't us that was those people that caused that." It was interesting. I just read a history book on these two young German fellas. I read a lot on history. So, I read this book on these two young German fellas that joined the German submarine service, and they were lost during the war. The Americans found this submarine off the Atlantic coast that was sunk. They spent the last 10 years trying to find out where that sub came from and who was on it. They finally found out where the sub was and who was on it and they went back and traced the living relatives of those boys who were on that sub and it was very interesting. War is hell, I'll tell you.

Q: Can you think of some other memorable experiences?

A: Well, one time I went on furlough to Rome and shook hands with Pope Pius XII.

Q: You did?

A: Yea we had an audience with the Pope, and there was about twelve of us G.I.'s there and he could speak 7 or 8 languages. I'll never forget he said to me, "He who travels much, knows much." (laughter) So that was quite an experience for me to think back on something like that.

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Q: Well that would be unusual at any time period for a normal person to be anywhere near someone like that. How long was your furlough in Rome?

A: We spent 5 days in Rome, a buddy and I. Then we went by train to Paris and spent 2 or 3 days in Paris, spent all our money because we were young and foolish then. Went and met an army lieutenant and he gave us enough money to take a cab or walk back to catch a hop back into Germany because we didn't have any money for fare. We caught a hop up into Germany.

Q: Now what are you talking about when you say catching a hop? Is that a military plane?

A: Yea and they could fly us back from Paris to Germany. You had to have a dollar to fly on a hop in the military. So, he gave us some money to get back into Germany. And of course, once we got back into Germany, the G.I.'s train fare was covered, and you didn't have to pay anything.

Q: So, you could have flown for free, but it would have been the parachute and kit you bought?

A: No, they wouldn't take you aboard unless you had a parachute and you had to pay a dollar for your parachute.

Q: That is the first time I have heard that. That is very interesting.

A: Yea it was quite an experience. Then, after I got discharged from Fort Benjamin Harrison in Pennsylvania I went back home. Of course, I was on the farm when I left.

Q: Were you married at this time?

A: No, I didn't (coughing). I had a girlfriend when I went to the service, and she said she wanted to get married and I said no. If I didn't come back, I didn't want to make her a widow, so we waited until I got out of the service. Got married, raised seven kids (laughter)

Q: So, she waited for you?

A: Yea. I have a daughter that spent 9 years in the Air Force. She should have stayed in because she had a pretty good job, but she didn't care for the way they were treating her, so she got out. She's never been married, she's single.

Q: So, what did you do when you got back over here? Did you have a job before you left?

A: Yea I was working with my father on the farm, but the farms were getting to where they had to expand in Michigan in the '50s and if you didn't expand there wasn't nothing there. So, I worked in an auto factory in Mt. Pleasant, so I had a job there when I got back. I worked there 20 years and I didn't like things there, so I went to work for a chemical plant in Midland and I worked for 22 years there. Finally, I retired, and I was Township Clerk for 26 years along with my job I had and raising a family. It was... I say take these kids out of high school put them in the service for a year and give them the discipline. I think it will do them good, and they will find their way in life. (coughing) I know we were just talking, me and the guys down there, and lifelong friends you gain.

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Q: How many of these reunions have you been to?

A: Oh, we started having these about 14 years ago, I think. I have been to everyone except two, I think. I was sick for two of them. I had open heart surgery so I couldn't go, then the next one I had prostate cancer. You know you get friends there, and you are closer than brothers. I think they teach you that in basic training. You have to protect your brother. I shouldn't have asked for this interview because I get too emotional.

Q: You need to understand that I have spent two years interviewing veterans from World War II as well as Korea. Half of the men that I interview have this kind of reaction and experience because you are depending on these men for your life and I think... it's not easy or unusual by any means. Day-in and day-out that is who you see; I think that kind of thing happens.

A: Like you say when you are in the military you don't know anybody but pretty quick you find a friend and you keep together. It's a funny experience really. You get closer than your own brothers.

Q: Were you in a team with people? I know a couple of people, Mr. [Ewell] Scott and Mr. [first name unknown] Grotto and Mr. [Leo] Lenihan they were in like a three-person team.

A: Well the guys in the other batteries and what they call the firing battery with their equipment were. But I was in supplies, so I probably was in what you would call a team because I worked with all the batteries bringing supplies for them. My job was mainly on my own. But it's really been a great experience for me. It had been something that you never forget.

Q: Anything else you want to share as Mr. Scott says, "for posterity?"

A: (laughter) No it's just that I'm proud of what I have done and would do it again if I had to.

Q: Let's... we will go over and fill out this Biographical Data sheet. (Filling out of the Biographical Data sheet) Before I turn off the tape recorder is there anything else you would like to share or anything else that happened over there?

A: Not really.

Q: Well I appreciate you taking the time to talk to me today.

A: Well what I told you is a bunch of...

Q: No! You told me all sorts of interesting things. The parachute is the first time in two years that I heard you had to buy a parachute. So, it's all these little things.

A: Yea, you had to buy a parachute, or they wouldn't let you catch the plane back into Germany. Of course, once we were back in Germany, we could take the train because our fare was covered. And what was so interesting to me was that my grandfather came from Germany and my two brothers fought during the war over there then I was over there. Just meeting the people and swapping the war stories and things that had happened. How they looked at the Nazi situation over there. All the people in Germany were not Nazi's but they had to go along with the flow. One guy told me, "What happens in your country when you get a president in Washington that you don't agree with? You go along with it just like we did." Of course, over there they had that situation, the Jewish situation, and that was one of

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the things where I don't know how the German people can ever live it down. How can a Christian country accept what happened? But they had no alternative. We had a lady, well two of them, that the guys married overseas that were from Germany and they will tell you the same thing. That is the way that things were run and there was nothing you could do about it. Just like the book about the two good-looking German kids that were in that submarine. Both of them hated Hitler and the Nazi situation but the German people, they're dedicated to their country and nationality. It is a history thing, centuries back.

Q: I interviewed Frieda Hermann.

A: Frieda is the one I was talking about.

Q: Yea I interviewed her yesterday and it was very interesting talking to her and her experiences being a child during World War II and then during the time period that you are talking about.

A: Now you take this generation today and I don't think they teach enough history in school. There are these young people today who do not realize what some of these people did.

Q: Yea I agree. Well I'm going to turn the tape recorder off and this is the release form that gives us permission to put it into our archives at the Folk Life Center.

A: I hope nobody ever hears mine!

Q: I don't know.