

Interviewer Notes: The interview concerning World War II had to be done over the phone because my grandfather lives in Pennsylvania. We had to set up a time on when we could contact each other, so we did, and it worked out from there. There weren't many issues except for that fact that my grandfather's words sometimes flow together, so I had to play the tape back many times to get an understanding of some parts. We also ran out of tape for the last 5 to 7 minutes of the interview, so all that was typed as he was saying it.

Transcriber Notes: The main problem I ran into while transcribing was that we ran out of time on tape. While he was answering the questions, I had to type everything that was said in that last two questions of the interview. Wasn't that big of a deal and we were able to work around the issue.

Q: The first question to this veteran's interview is where exactly did you go?

A: What do you mean where did I go?

Q: Like where? Where were you stationed, I guess it would be?

A: Ok, I took my basic training at Fort McClellan, Alabama.

Q: Ok.

A: And then from Fort McCallan, Alabama I came home for nineteen days, after which I went to San Francisco to Camp Stoneman which was a replacement depot. A couple days later, I was on a ship, on a troop ship, with seventeen hundred other troops and we went to Yokohama, Japan.

Q: Ok, and...

A: Which was... go ahead.

Q: And, like what was it like when you arrived in Japan?

A: Very docile because the war had been over since August of '45, and I got there in October of '46, and. Then, of course the war was officially declared over in December of 1946. So, I started occupation in Japan in October...of 1946. So, I was there from 1946 to October 1947, and I got on another ship, and I came back to Fort Lawton in Seattle, Washington, where I was discharged and then I took a train and went home.

Q: What was the trip to Japan like for you? What was it like?

A: Well it took thirteen days on a troop ship and I was seasick eleven days. Until we got to Japan there it got really smooth because I was on K-P all the way over, I was allowed to walk on deck at night. I could see that moon shining right on that big ocean which was very smooth, and that is when I got home sick.

Q: Huh?

A: So, we were in Japan two days later, and I was processed in Japan and assigned to a unit. There were several units in Japan, the eighty-second airborne was stationed in Hokkaido, which is Northern Japan. The first cavalry division was stationed in Yokohama, Tokyo, and the 25th infantry was stationed in Osaka, and the 24th division was stationed on Kyushu and I was sent down to, uh military government team, on the island of Shikoku off the southern tip of Japan, and I was there for 12 months.

Interview with James Ertz
Interviewer: Chris Butto
November 11, 2009

Q: Hmm, alright going back a little bit can you tell me a little bit about boot camp and the training experience?

A: Oh, basic training?

Q: Yeah, oh yeah.

A: The navy calls it "boot camp"; the army calls it "basic training."

Q: Ok.

A: I went into basic training in June of '46 in Fort McClellan, Alabama which is about 20 miles from Birmingham, Alabama and during the process of basic training we went through a lot of physical training, a lot of weaponry training such as M-1 rifle, 30 caliber carbine, machine guns, bayonets, rifle grenades, hand grenades, and we did that for nine weeks. And after that we were put on a troop train, and we went from Fort McCallan, Alabama to Cincinnati, Ohio, where we were then dispersed. We had nineteen days to get to California. Camp Stoneman, California, which is right near San Francisco. So, I went home for fourteen days. I left there and I took a bus to Harrisburg, took a train from Harrisburg to Chicago, and I rode the civilian train all by myself. And I went from Chicago on a train that stopped at various stations, but I never had to change trains; it went right to San Francisco. And I spent about a week in San Francisco...no three days in San Francisco, and then I was put on this troop ship and assigned K-P which is kitchen patrol for the duration of the trip to Japan, which is very good because I got to eat before the rest of the troops, and I threw up every day but at least I had something to throw up. It took 13 days to get to Japan.

Q: Eww.

A: Because I got seasick.

Q: Alright.

A: Then we took what we called the Southern to Japan which went down past Hawaii, but I didn't get to see Hawaii, the Hawaiian Islands, and then we went up to Yokohama in Japan.

Q: Can you explain how you became involved in the military or in the army?

A: Yes, I graduated when I was seventeen from high school. I was seventeen on April 3, and I graduated June the 7th. The draft for the Second World War was still on, and I figured I would be drafted, so I decided to enlist instead. At the time they had eighteen-month enlistments, and the reason for those eighteen-month enlistments was to get all the combat troops home as soon as possible. And, you know, to relieve the people that were in the occupation and that had been in combat, but they wanted to get them home. So, the army had this eighteen-month enlistment, and I thought "jeeze, this is easy. I will go that route," so I enlisted for the 18-month enlistment, and that's how I got in because I thought I would be drafted anyhow. Eleven months after I was in, they stopped the draft.

Q: Huh!

A: Which was ok. I liked the army anyhow.

Q: Right, did you have to pick a particular branch you wanted to join?

A: Yes, the army was offering this eighteen-month enlistment, and all the others were three-year enlistment. The army, the marine corps, and the air force were all three years. Well, it was the army air force, so at that time we didn't have the United States Air Force; we had an army air force, and I don't remember when it changed to the U.S. Air Force.

Q: Ok, do you remember what the public perception of the war was at that time? Like what the people thought?

A: Yes. Everybody was for it because, you remember, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

Q: Right...

A: ...and of course that started the war and Franklin D. Roosevelt a couple days later declared war on Japan, Germany and Italy, so that is how we got involved. So, in other words, we were protecting our homeland really because they attacked us, and they attacked us on our homeland which of course Hawaii was a possession of ours. It wasn't a state at the time, just a possession of ours, and that's why we got involved. And it was amazing that all of the people that rushed to get into the service. If you didn't enlist, you were drafted. You had to register for the draft when you were eighteen years old. Then they gave you a number, and they would call those numbers up out of the lottery and that's how people were drafted.

Q: Ok, let me see. Did that ever change over time? Like did the peoples, did the public's perception ever change over time?

A: Of what?

Q: Of going to war or staying in war?

A: Well, I will tell you, there was a lot of controversy about us getting involved in Korea because it really wasn't our war, and there was a lot of controversy for getting involved in Vietnam, which again was not our war, but we got in to protect other people. We, as the United States, feel we are responsible for the world, so if somebody gets in trouble, we send troops to help them out. I think that was a mistake for us to go to Korea, and I think it was a mistake to go to Vietnam because it wasn't our land, but they said "Well, it could spread," and you know it was communism at the time that could spread. Basically, they could attack us if we didn't protect ourselves and a foreign country. Which did not involve our people immediately, except the service people, the service men and women, that's the only people that got involved. Others got involved by being bombed by foreign country, like we were at Pearl Harbor, I don't think that it would come to that, but that was the opinion at that time. There were a lot of adverse opinions against us getting involved with Korea and especially in Vietnam, that was even worse. The veterans of those two wars weren't treated very well when they came home, because people blamed them for killing women and children. This happened because they didn't know who they were fighting. You'd go into a village and you weren't sure if those village people were armed or not. Otherwise people got killed because of people they didn't know, so then they started shooting back, and what happened, of course, some families, some men, women and children were killed. Then the United States

population started to really get upset because they said we were massacring women and children, especially in Vietnam. A lot of bad tales came out of that.

Q: I am kind of going back to your basic training a little bit, but what were your instructors like in basic training?

A: All of my instructors were combat veterans; they were coming back from the war, and they still didn't have enough points to get out after the war was over. And the points were gathered by how many battles they were in and where they were fighting, were they in the United States, Europe, Japan or the Pacific. So, they were basically just either going to be career soldiers, or they were just buying their time until they got out. But they were all combat veterans, which means we got firsthand experience of what combat veterans had experienced. Our training became very combat orientated, mostly a lot of physical training and weaponry, and how to do certain things with different weapons. Bayonet training, which nobody knew much about the beginning of the war. The Japanese were very good because they knew jujitsu and when you get in close to hand and hand fighting, they really, really beat us up pretty good, so they taught us how to defend ourselves with bayonets.

Q: So how did you get through all that? Was that tough for you, or did you find that easy?

A: No, I'll tell you what, Chris, you know, I was only 17 years old and I didn't mind physical things; in fact, I enjoyed my basic training because it was spit, polish, and discipline. And I could get through that because I got that at home. So, I didn't have a bit of a problem with my basic training; I enjoyed every bit of it. It was hard and it was tough. We started at five o'clock in the morning, and we usually didn't wind-up getting done until 9 o'clock at night. And then you were just so tired you would clean your rifle, and your boots, and stuff like that, and then you went to bed because you were getting up at 5 o'clock the next morning.

Q: After training, what was your job or assignment that they gave you?

A: Well, when I was sent to Yokohama, Japan, I had several they could have assigned me to. As I said, the eighty second airborne was volunteer; you had to volunteer for that. But it could have been first cavalry. Could have been the 24th infantry, or it could have been the 25th infantry, or whatever. And the main army was 8th army, and all these divisions were part of the 8th army. And I don't know how I got assigned for military government; they just put me on a train, sent me south and said, "You're going to military government," and I don't know how I did that. I don't know what it was based on; it must have been just saying we need so many people from military government, so that's where you're going. And the same thing happened to the people that went to the infantry division. They didn't volunteer; they were assigned. And how they come up with these assignments, I really don't know. Because I had basic infantry training, I was considered a rifle man in infantry division, when I took my basic training. But I don't know how I got involved with military government, but I did. And I am thankful for it.

Q: Now, you never saw any combat, did you?

A: No, I didn't. Because, you see, the war in Europe was over in May of '45, and the war with Japan was over in August of '45 and that was after the [atomic] bombing. One dropped on Hiroshima on August the 6 1945 and the next one dropped on Nagasaki. on August the 9th. After that the Japanese surrendered

because the bomb in Hiroshima killed 100,000 people and the bomb in Nagasaki killed 80,000, and that doesn't count the many people who died after with radiation effects even if they didn't get blown up by the bomb. They got radiation burns and eventually a lot of people died from radiation. The war with Japan officially ended in December 1946.

Q: Can you tell me a little about your most memorable experiences when you were over there?

A: I guess just about all of them, Chris, because everything was so new to me. I was stationed in a city called Matsuyama on the island of Shikoku which is off the southern tip of Japan. So, there wasn't much there, you know, it was all farmland, a lot of rice paddies, no industry. It was, I guess, 50 miles wide and 150 miles long, and there were 4 military government teams on that island and our military government team consisted of 19 enlisted men and 7 officers, and we were responsible for running the government in that area for Japan because we were in the process of giving the Japanese a code to a democratic type government. We had 4 prefectures on this island, and I was in the Ehime prefecture. A prefecture was like the size of a county and so we set this up that they had a mayor and then that mayor, had to report to our major, and that was the top officer that we had in our group. Our team was broken up into other sections, such as the welfare section, which I was in the welfare section, which I was responsible for inspecting orphanages and some food rationing and making sure the children were being treated well. So, that was my assignment, initially, and then, I got sick, I guess it was in January, I was over there since September, and they didn't know what was wrong. They called it a jungle fever; I had a temperature of 104, so I just stayed in bed for a week. And in the meantime, they transferred me out of that section and put me into the administrative section of the military government team. Did you ever watch the show MASH?

Q: No, I didn't.

A: Ok, well anyhow on that show MASH, there is a company clerk, and the company clerk is responsible for the morning report, the daily report requisitioning supplies. And that's what I finally wound up doing. So, that's what I did up until I left. Once every two weeks we had to take charge of quarters; we had to stay in the office overnight, to answer the switch board in-case any calls came in. And once every two weeks, we had to do the mail run, which we had to go to the headquarters company, which is 150 miles away, and we traveled by train. We'd go down one day and come back the next day, stay overnight and pick up the mail and if we got a movie, we would pick up the movie and bring it back.

Q: Right. That's what I was just about to ask you. How did you stay in touch with your family?

A: Letters.

Q: Did you? Ok.

A: That was it.

Q: Ok, that's what it said; it said either letters and or packages; that's just what I wanted to know.

A: Yes.

Q: When you were over there, what did you think of the food?

A: Our food was great. Our food was very good food. I liked our food. I didn't have a problem with our food.

Q: Yeah! What were the living conditions like?

A: Well, we were, now you can't take this for everyone because if would have been a assigned to an infantry division, it would have been a lot different. But being in the military government, it was different; we worked out of an office located in the Prefecture Office Building. There were 3 concrete buildings in our area of the island, and one of the buildings we took over. It used to be a library building, and we made it our quarters. The first floor was the mess hall and the post exchange and dispensary. And the second floor was out sleeping quarters for the 19 enlisted men. The officers had a separate building. On the third floor we had a big lounge; it was an auditorium at one time and that's where we had our Thanksgiving dinner and Christmas dinner. It was the whole thing you know, tables, and tablecloths and turkey and all the works.

Q: Ok. Can you describe a little bit about the interaction with civilians that you had? How did they treat you and how were you treated?

A: Well, you have to remember one thing: Japanese culture is a little bit higher than ours; they respect everything. Since we theoretically were the conquerors, everything we wanted, we got. They bowed to us, and stuff like that, which I didn't like. They treated us as conquerors. And as time went on, it got a little bit different; when I got there the occupation was already a year old, and by that time the people respected you and you should respect them. A lot of the G.I. 's didn't, but I respected the Japanese people because we weren't mad at those kids, and those people that didn't get to the war, so why should we take anything out on them? It wasn't their fault.

Q: Right! How did you guys entertain yourselves while you were over there?

A: Ha, that's a good one! We had a library, and we had a lot of paperback books, which I did some reading while I Was there, and then we had the wind-up record player; you crank it up and put records on. And we had records. I mean the army supplied us with the latest 33 records. And then there was a Japanese dance hall about a mile down the road from us, and we used to go there, and dance and we taught the gals how to jitterbug. We also had a beach on the inland sea.

Q: Oh, there you go!

A: It was like a dime-a-dance thing. We had to buy tokens, and when you danced with a girl, you'd give her a token.

Q: Right. Did you build any close relationships with your co-soldiers at all?

A: Oh yeah. When I went in, there were two other younger guys that went in at the same time, one was from Iowa and one was from Rochester, New York and they were both 18 and I was 17, so we became very good friends. And then I became very good friends with another guy that was a staff sergeant that was from Altoona. So, the four spent a lot of time together. We went Japanese fishing. They used to take us out fishing, I didn't like to fish, but it was on the inland sea; it wasn't that rough, so we went out

there, we went fishing and that was a real experience because I never saw how they fished before. They had row boats, the bigger row boats; they put them in a semi-circle and then they just took these buckets of minnows with sand in them and just threw them in the water, and then would throw in their hooks, bare hooks and they used to hook fish, a lot of fish. Then they would give it to a little boy in the back of the boat, and he used to kill it with a hammer.

Q: wow!

A: Yeah! He used to beat it until it died, so, but that's the way they fished, There also was some commercial fishing. What I did was mostly family fishing because the island didn't have any animals on it; food meat animals that I saw, all they had were the rice patties and the fishing.

Q: Ok. Can you describe to me the day that your service ended? Briefly!

A: Well, you know, it was sort of a happy day, because when I came back, I had never been away from home and I had been overseas for 13 months. The whole time I was in the army, I only saw my parents 19 days, 15 days when I was home in furlough before I went overseas. So, I didn't spend any time in the states, I wasn't stationed in the states for anything except for training and replacement depots, I only spent that short bit of time at home. So, I was quite happy when I got home. I didn't have a girlfriend, so I had to go looking for one.

Q: Right! Yeah! What did you do in the days and weeks afterwards, like immediately upon returning?

A: Well, I looked for a job, and then we used to go out and of course a lot of my friends were a couple of years older than me and they were actually in the war, in combat and they were discharged. Some were discharged before I left, some of them were not. So, when I came home, we got together, and we used to hang out. We would go out for lunch, and we used to go out bar hopping every now and then, but I didn't drink. I would have a beer, and that was it. I couldn't handle the stuff; I didn't even drink in Japan, because I didn't like beer, so I used to drink a lot of coke.

Q: Did you ever end up staying in contact with soldiers from your platoon?

A: Only once. After your grandmother and I got married, the staff sergeant whom I met in Japan lived in Altoona and when we got married and I was talking to him, he invited us to stop out there on our honeymoon, so we did. And he gave us his apartment for the night, and they went and stayed with some relatives. Your grandmother and I got married in June of 1950 and that's when the Korean war-- I'm sorry, we got married in September of 1950 and the Korean War broke out in June of 1950, and when it broke out, the recruiting sergeant came and said hey "We'd like for you to come back in" and said "we will give you your sergeant stripes back" and I said "I'm not coming back in," and they said, "Well you're going to be drafted anyhow," and I said "You can't draft me, I am considered a veteran of the Second World War," and they couldn't draft me. But anyhow, after our honeymoon, we went out to see this friend of mine in Altoona, and we spent 2 days there. And then we came back, and we corresponded a little bit, and then they put him back in the army because his specialty was a cook, and they pulled him back in the army. I have never heard from him since. So, I don't know what happened.

Q: Ok, did you ever join a veteran's association?

A: American Legion.

Q: Ok, did you ever attend any reunions?

A: No, our platoon was too small, really, when you think about it, you know, 8 army is a big army. We had 19 enlisted men and 7 officers on our military government team. I really was only close to that one staff sergeant that I was just talking to you about. I went to visit him after I came home and got married. We all left and went by the wayside, so we never really kept in touch.

Q: Ok, in what ways did the service affect your life afterwards?

A: Well I tell you; I grew up, Chris, in a hurry.

Q: Did you?

A: Oh yeah! Well, next thing you know, you're a kid and all of a sudden, you're exposed to a lot of men. Hard men because some were combat veterans, but a lot of good men, in a way that they were glad that they were still alive. Some came through the war without a scratch. So, you know in that respect, it was good.

Q: How did your military experience influence your thinking about the war or the military in general?

A: I'll tell ya!! I almost re-enlisted. I really liked it, I really liked the experience of the army, and being in the army, I don't know if I did tell you, but 9 years after I was out of the army, I enlisted in the marine corps reserve, and I was in the marine corps reserve for 6 years after I got out of the army. I just liked the military. I like the military and sometimes I often thought why I didn't re-enlist, and I almost did when I was still in Japan. If I would have re-enlisted while I was in Japan, I would have to stay another year, but I could come home on furlough, and then come back and serve the year, but I opted not to do that. It probably worked out pretty good because I would have definitely been in the army during the Korean War. So, you know, I thought about it, I really thought about making a career out of the army because I really liked it, but once I got out, it was too late. Often wish I could have gone to West Point, that's how much I really like the military.

Q: That's neat, that's interesting, I did not know that! How do you think people in the U.S. would act today if they were asked to make the same sacrifices as the civilians made during WWII?

A: They wouldn't hold still for it because there is no reason for us to do that same thing again, and they're not going to go through that for the sakes of Iraq, and they didn't do a lot of sacrificing for Korea or Vietnam. Like I said, they we're all dead set against those. The country was dead set against those wars, and the people are slowly turning against this war in Iraq too because it's just dragging out. Look, we've been over there 6 or 7 years and we haven't accomplished anything.

Q: Yup, this is true. But that leads me into the next question, In the aftermath of 9/11, many people compare the attacks (tape runs out, so I type it while it's being said) in 2001 with the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Do you think they were similar?

A: No, absolutely not. There was no comparison. We really rallied up after Pearl Harbor. They ran to the recruiting office and built up an army of thousands of people, in no time. People wouldn't do that today.

Q: Ok, I'd really like to thank you for doing this for me. Is there something else you would like to add that we did not cover in the interview?

A: All in all, I don't regret joining the army. I would do it all over again. It was a great life lesson. If I had to join today in today's society, I wouldn't do it. I really don't like how things are being run. I mean we have been in Iraq for 6 years and have accomplished nothing. That's just something I wouldn't want to be a part of.