

A Veterans Oral History
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Tom Dowdell
Narrator

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Interviewer

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TD: Thomas Dowdell, I'm usually called Tom. I live here at Waterford at Harwood Groves in Fargo. My wife and I moved here a little more than a year ago and we live in one of the cottages on the periphery of the campus. I'm 76 years old. I spent some time in the military when I was younger, during the Korean War.

I have a particularly interesting relationship to the military, because prior to going into the service, I worked for the government as an engineer in the Ordnance Department at an arsenal in Philadelphia, developing recoilless rifle ammunition and fuses. It was my first job out of the service – out of college. And with the Korean War going on, I was liable for the draft. After about a year-and-a-half of civilian work for the Ordnance Corps, I decided to enlist because I thought I'd soon be drafted, anyway.

My wife and I had been married the weekend that I graduated from college, so we were living together in Echelon, New Jersey, at that time. I went in as a volunteer and an enlisted man and was processed in Maryland, and sent out to Kentucky for basic training at Camp Breckenridge. I found myself in a company of enlisted men being trained who happened to generally be college graduates. So I enjoyed that quite a bit.

During that time, I volunteered to go to Officer Candidate School (OCS), which would be at Fort Benning, Georgia. After four or five months there of training and difficulties, I graduated second in our class and was returned then to my ordnance activity. I was sent first of all to Aberdeen Proving Ground in Aberdeen, Maryland, for some basic officer training. Then with the help of some of the people that I had known when I worked as a civilian for the Ordnance Corps, they had me transferred to Picatinny Arsenal in Dover, New Jersey. I spent a year-and-a-half at that arsenal as a Second

Lieutenant working on fuses and artillery ammunition and recoilless rifle ammunition.

At the time that I was discharged, which was in May or June of 1955, I was promoted to be a captain. No, I was promoted to be a First Lieutenant. That's right. Then I went into the reserves at that time.

When I worked for the Ordnance Corps as a civilian right out of college, I was involved in the engineering and development of recoilless rifle ammunition, which is essentially rockets, not rockets, but projectiles that are able to penetrate a good bit of steel armor the tanks are supplied with. Then after assignment to Picatinny Arsenal, I continued in that work, the same kind of development; and participated in the development of prototypes, testing of prototypes at Aberdeen Proving Ground and, essentially, developing shaped-charge ammunition that has been used ever since to defeat heavy armor of tanks. That was very important in the Second World War but that was prior to my time in the military. By the time we developed this shaped-charge artillery ammunition, the Second World War was long over with. The Korean War was over and our Army troops trained with the 105-mm Ontos weapon and bazooka and other recoilless rifles that were able to fire the shaped-charge projectiles.

Okay? Military service isn't always soldiering, out in the field, carrying rifles and tramping up and down in the cold. Some of my best recollections of military life come from basic training times and also Officer Candidate School. During basic training at Camp Breckenridge in Kentucky, a very barren area – and I've since found other barren areas.

My friends, toward the end of our training, we could get away on a weekend and we would go to a nearby small town and spend the weekend. It was during that time that my first child was born back in New Jersey, and I didn't know it for about 24 hours, because we were "in town," as we would say and nobody knew where we were. Also a memory from that town ... Evansville is the name of the town. We went to a music store because I always go to music stores. I've been a piano player since I was six years old. And we played the piano and to their great delight in the store – maybe they sold a few pianos as a result. At any rate, the second time we went back there, they took us home and we spent Saturday evening with those people who owned the store.

TD: Oh yes, while in Officer Candidate School (OCS) at Fort Benning – no, it was during basic training in Camp Breckenridge at the same time we went to Evansville. We also were not able to go home for Christmas during training, and so we went to our company commander – a number of us who had something in mind – and said, "We'll put on a show, a Christmas show for the company and anybody else you want to draw in." We composed some special words to familiar songs that made sense to only the people that were

doing it and were receiving it ... making spoof of military life and things like that. And we dressed up some guys as girls and danced and carried on, and we were very popular. But they didn't want us to take the show on the road. Instead we were moved along and eventually graduated from basic training. I went on to Officer Candidate School.

At that place – in OCS – we found new friends. And, once again, there were a lot of college graduates in that company and they became some of our best friends that we've kept over the years.

The company clerk and you might know what a company clerk is by the series called "MASH," where the clerk is very, very obvious. The company clerk in my OCS company was from Long Island and was an opera lover. He had a very fine collection of operas at that time – LPs – and I and some of my friends would listen to operas during Officer Candidate School and that was kind of a switch.