

A Veterans Oral History
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Ray Severson
Narrator

Stephanie Manesis
Interviewer

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Fargo, ND

SM: It's August 19, 2011, and this is my interview with Ray Severson in Fargo, North Dakota. Mr. Severson, can you, first of all, tell me what year and date you were born?

RS: **March 31, 1922.**

SM: Can you tell me where you were born and a little bit about your life growing up?

RS: **Right here in Fargo.**

SM: In Fargo?

RS: **Yes, on about – at 10th Street and 9th Avenue, that's South.**

SM: Can you tell me a little bit about your life growing up?

RS: **Oh, not much to say.**

SM: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

RS: **I was the oldest. There were seven of us. My mother, she was a queen. She was a saint, raised seven kids with a drunken husband. He was an alcoholic, couldn't stop it. He showed me, so I don't need a beer.**

SM: That must have been hard for you.

RS: Yes, he had his own way. He had his love for the booze. Nobody could stop him. So that's life.

SM: When did you enlist in the military?

RS: Let's see, I was working at Lockheed and then I come home in – must have been 1950, pretty close, maybe it was '52?

SM: Now what about your World War II experience?

RS: Well, I served at a naval air stations around the country, different ones, and ended up on Guam at a naval air station there. And I was there when they dropped that big bomb on Hiroshima. They flew it out of Tinian, I think it was. That old rascal, what's her name? Anyway . . .

SM: It's hard when you don't remember somebody's name.

RS: See, I'm 90, almost 90 years old.

SM: You're doing well.

RS: Boy, my memory hasn't been the best.

SM: Did you enlist in the military for World War II or were you drafted?

RS: Well I was just ahead of the draft board.

SM: WOkay, so what year was that?

RS: It was probably '52.

SM: Now that would have been for the Korean War, so in 1942?

RS: Wait a minute, wait a minute. Bill was born in '52. And I went in the Korean War in 1950. It was.

After I got discharged, I was home here. And I went back to California, got my old job back at Lockheed. And you didn't have enough money left at the end of the week for a beer. So that wasn't too well. I stayed there for a year, I guess it was, then I come back home. That's when I joined the Navy Reserve. And oh, Korean War went to Seattle, ended up at Port Hueneme, Los Angeles, got on a ship and I went to Hawaii first; and from there we ended up in the Philippines.

SM: So this would have been in 1952?

RS: **Nineteen-fifty, I think it was.**

SM: Nineteen-fifty and how long were you stationed in the Philippines?

RS: **Just about a year, I think – '50,'51 – I must have been there about two years.**

SM: Two years?

RS: **Fifty-three ... Bill was born in '52 and I left there. He was born July 21st and I left the Philippines in February.**

SM: Of 1952?

RS: **Yes.**

SM: And your son was born there in July of 1952? So when you were in the Korean War, were you stationed in the Philippines the whole time?

RS: **Yes.**

SM: And what did you do in the Philippines?

RS: **Airplane repair.**

SM: Were you in the Air Force or in the Marines?

RS: **No, aviation metalsmith.**

SM: Aviation metalsmith and were you in the Air Force?

RS: **No, Navy Air.**

SM: In the Navy Air?

RS: **There's no connection between the Navy and the Air Force. Navy's got its own air fleet and everything.**

SM: So what did you do as an airplane metalsmith?

RS: **Oh, several things. We worked on B24s they'd fly. That was in the States. That was in Kansas, we had one where the mechanics took all four engines**

off of it. And they had the tail-end propped up and their support collapsed and – down; and ruined the whole bottom of that airplane.

SM: Now where was this?

RS: **Hutchinson, Kansas.**

SM: Now this was before Korean War.

RS: **No, this was during World War II.**

SM: You joined the Korean War. You re-enlisted in 1950?

RS: **No, I didn't re-enlist. They called me back.**

SM: In 1950?

RS: **Yes.**

SM: And then you were there until February of 1952?

RS: **Yes.**

SM: Tell me about your job as an aviation metalsmith.

RS: **They'd keep the aircraft in repair, like the seaplanes they had in Manila there. When they landed they'd shear off some rivets on the bottom and then start to leak. They'd pull that airplane up on the beach and we'd replace the rivets. So things like that and well, any plane that was damaged, why, we had a job.**

SM: And at any given time how many airplanes did you have landed in Manila?

RS: **Oh, I don't know how many. We had a fleet of PBMs – it's a Mariner twin-engine flying boat. They were patrolling the China coast during the Korean War. That was our base's job. So, but we had to keep them flying.**

SM: And so were all these airplanes then coming off of carriers?

RS: **No, they were big airplanes. They landed on the water and took off on the water.**

SM: How well did the Filipinos treat you as GIs?

RS: Great, got along fine, nice people.

SM: And what was your most memorable experience in the Korean War?

RS: Oh not much. It was pretty much mundane all the way through, I mean, it was routine. We never had any combat experience or even close to it. Of course, for a little bit of time they were thinking about invading Japan. I would imagine we would have been on call.

SM: So they were thinking about invading Japan in 1952 or . . .

RS: Yes, they were considering it ... didn't have to at the end. Of course, that Hiroshima bomb kind of helped that. And another one was dropped over there at that cove. I can't think . . .

SM: Nagasaki?

RS: Nagasaki, yes, the second one.

SM: So, in World War II, did you enlist right after Pearl Harbor? When did you enlist in World War II?

RS: When Pearl Harbor was hit, I was working at Lockheed Aircraft in Burbank, California – and, oh I don't know, there was four of us; two from Grand Forks and two from Fargo used to buddy around together. And that must have been 1950. This fellow from Grand Forks, he quit his job. He was working at Lockheed, too. And he come home and joined the Navy, and I think that was about October, or it would have been August, probably. He was a month ahead of me. Then I quit mine about a month after he did.

SM: So this would have been in 1941 after Pearl Harbor?

RS: Forty-nine. See '41, I was working at Lockheed in '41.

SM: Because Pearl Harbor was in December 1941 were you drafted after Pearl Harbor?

RS: No, I was never drafted.

SM: You enlisted for World War II?

RS: Yes.

SM: And when did you enlist?

RS: I think it was 1950, I'm not sure.

SM: And where did you . . .

RS: No, wait a minute. It had to be earlier than that – '45 probably '45.

SM: In 1942, probably?

RS: No, somewhere around '40 - '45, '46, somewhere in there, I think. Oh, I can't remember dates.

SM: That's okay. So you enlisted in World War II and where were you sent to Guam right away?

RS: No. I – oh, let's see – boot camp at Great Lakes, got out of boot camp and went to Aviation Metalsmith School in Chicago for six months. Then from there, we went to Akron, Ohio, for a couple of months on training of aircraft fuel cells. They were those bullet-proof fuel cells. They're rubber and if they get hit by a bullet, the gasoline in there swells that rubber and seals it. But we had to know how to fix it and how to repair it afterwards. Take them out of the airplane and fix them. Of course, I don't think we ever did it but we had to know how.

But anyhow, I was sent out to Seattle, then from there we were transferred to San Francisco, down to Los Angeles, ended up in San Diego, Naval Air Station, San Diego; and I was there quite a while, over a year, ended up on an airfield just out of San Diego. We had B24s ... they landed and took off there.

Yes, I got transferred to Kansas and had the choice to go by rail or fly in a B24. So I took the B24 we were working on. This was in Kansas we worked on B24s. And I was in Kansas over a year, got shipped out. I think we ended up at Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay. And from there we went to Port Hueneme.

In World War II, I wonder ... maybe that's when I got on that converted troop ship. It was an old tramp steamer, or whatever it was, but it wasn't too well-equipped. Hell, we had to take a bath in the salt water and do salt water soaks. Strange thing about it, the ship was manned by all Army personnel and all the passengers were sailors and Marines. It took us about a week to get to Pearl Harbor; and then we got to get off the ship and go in and take a

bath and a few other things. After that we kept on going to Guam. We went to Midway and then went to Guam and . . .

SM: Where did you go to before Guam?

RS: **Oh, that was just on some ship we went to Hawaii and went by Midway, and we got off in Guam. I was at the naval air station in Guam for a good year – a strange place. But we even had Japs in our chow line.**

SM: You had Japs in your chow line, why was that?

RS: **I don't know. Some of them were still some hiding in the jungles, and every once in a while we'd get one in the chow line. If they behaved themselves, I suppose it's all right.**

SM: They were prisoners-of-war at that point or no?

RS: **They were living on Guam in the woods.**

SM: In the woods and you allowed them to come to your chow line?

RS: **Well it happened.**

SM: So now were you an aviation metalsmith person in Guam?

RS: **Yes.**

SM: You were and so you were in Guam for about a year?

RS: **Yes, we had a lot of airplanes to work on. We had one. He was on the strafing in the island of Rota, which is just a couple of miles off of Guam. And I guess he got down too low, and he went and flew that darn thing through a tree. He managed to fly it back to Guam and landed, and we ended up patching that one. The leading edge of the airplane and the wings were all holes from the tree branches. He was lucky it was still flying.**

And we had a Beechcraft that had made a rough landing that ruined some of the bulkheads and the wings and we were going to repair them. The division officer said no. So they let it fly. It wasn't long after that, it was down on the ground. One of the wings fell off of it. We could have fixed it. But we got overruled on that one. The division officer had the power.

SM: What was your division officer like?

RS: There were too many of them.

SM: Too many of them?

RS: Yes, I don't know. I never had any contact with them, really. But it was day-in, day-out, fixing airplanes.

SM: How many aviation metalsmith workers were there that worked with you?

RS: Oh boy. Our shop was about 10, I would suppose, in that neighborhood.

SM: And when you said that Guam was a strange place, why did you say that?

RS: Well, it's different. The people on Guam were, I don't know, they had a pretty good life before we got there. I don't know if we improved their lives or not. But it was a nice island about 40 miles long, about 5 miles wide.

SM: How did the people of Guam respond to the Allied troops there?

RS: Well there wasn't much they could do.

SM: Were they friendly or . . .

RS: Yes, they were nice people. Some of them were in the service, too. The Air Force had a landing field on one end of Guam, where they flew those raids to Japan. And, of course, ours was about in the middle of Guam ... a naval air station. And I think that's all there was, just the two airfields. I would imagine that's a commercial airfield now. It was pretty close to that city, their capital city, Agana [now, Hagåtña]. Oh golly, we used to swim in the ocean.

SM: You swam in the ocean?

RS: Oh yes.

SM: On your time off?

RS: Yes.

SM: How warm was the water?

RS: Oh, it was warm.

SM: Was it?

RS: It was, yes. Well, it wasn't cold. It was all right. Yes, swam around on the reefs, saw the colorful fish and you could get them in your hand but try to close your hand, they're gone. They were cute.

SM: Was it a beautiful island?

RS: Oh yes. We had a beer garden there. I remember we had a trained monkey and we'd tease him and make him mad and we'd leave him alone. He'd [unclear] too. Oh, boy, long, long ...

Oh, I forgot to tell you about this fellow from Grand Forks, he died a few years ago in Grand Forks. I just got word of it. His name was Richard Lathrop Barnes. The last I seen him we were both at the Navy Pier there in Chicago. And I was on liberty in Chicago after I got out of the Navy Pier. I was downtown, standing in line, waiting to go to a movie. Who walked in front of me but Barnes, my buddy from California. He was stationed at the Navy Pier, too. We had some pretty good liberties for a while we were both left there. I didn't see him again. We wrote back and forth. And finally, when I was on Guam there; I had a beer, and I was sitting around the table at the beer garden there, who walks in front of me to the beer line, ol' Barnes. And wouldn't you believe he was kind of a cut-up and [unclear] . And when he was in Hollywood, Florida, they had him on court-martial for several charges. One of the charges was pulling feathers out of live chickens. Of course, he'd be drunk and disorderly and enter a restricted area, or whatever else. He got busted down, and when he was on Guam, he was a seaman then. He had been a petty officer. Would you believe, he was a steward on Admiral Nimitz's airplane.

SM: He was?

RS: Taking care of – well – he was quite a guy.

SM: Did he ever talk about his experience with Admiral Nimitz?

RS: No, in fact, I got to ride in Admiral Nimitz's airplane once.

SM: You did.

RS: Yes, they were going to go out for a test hop around the island there and he invited me, and I went along.

SM: So what was he like?

RS: **I didn't meet the Admiral.**

SM: You just got to fly in his airplane?

RS: **Yes, just got a ride in the airplane. He used to haul booze back from the States and I'd help him sell it when he got to Guam.**

SM: Admiral Nimitz?

RS: **No, Barnes.**

SM: Barnes.

RS: **We'd peddle that booze he'd bring back. It was a good old time there. I never saw him again. One of my golfing buddies here in town, he was from Grand Forks, and he knew him. He told me he had passed away just recently.**

SM: I'm sorry.

RS: **I never got to see him. I'd have really liked to see him again. He was quite a character, Richard Lathrop Barnes. I can remember that but I cannot even remember Jayden's name.**

SM: That's okay. You've been around the block a few times. So when you were in Guam, you were getting ready to invade Japan?

RS: **I don't think any of us were destined for that, but well maybe. We didn't know. Of course, when you're in the service you're on tap for anything they want to do. You never know. I had some commando training, too, when I was there on the West Coast. It wasn't too much, rifles and whatever. [unclear]**

Kay, my sister, was two years younger than me. But when I came home from working at Lockheed, the people I come home with were going to go back to California, one of the guys I worked with. And I made arrangements with him to take her back to California. She wanted to go California. And she had a friend from Fargo out there she wanted to live with, so her and Martha had a home there in Los Angeles. I was stationed in San Diego, I used to go on up there and visit once in a while.

SM: She moved out there before World War II or after World War II?

RS: **No, this was after Pearl Harbor. But she worked for a machine shop. She's still around, too. She's 87 now. My brother, who lives just four doors over, is 85.**

SM: He lives right down the street?

RS: **Four-twenty-one.**

SM: Ah, okay.

RS: **That's a picture of his family up there. On one end – picture is inside there, that's his whole bunch.**

SM: Did he serve in World War II?

RS: **Yes, he was on a ship. He was a gunner's mate. I don't know, I imagine he shot a few guns. But we never got together, not in the service. We wrote back and forth but that was about it.**

SM: And where was your brother stationed?

RS: **He was onboard ship.**

SM: Onboard ship? So, when you were done with Guam, what year did you come back – 1945 – right after the war was done in World War II?

RS: **No, Guam. It could have been '45?**

SM: Okay and you went back to go to work at Lockheed?

RS: **Yes, I went back to work at Lockheed, then I came back home. And then I signed up at the plumber's union and I got into construction. Over 60 years in the plumbers union, right now.**

SM: So you left Lockheed to go into plumbing?

RS: **A pipefitter.**

SM: Okay.

RS: **Don't call me a plumber, I'm a steamfitter.**

SM: A steamfitter.

RS: Yes.

SM: So you were doing steamfitting at Lockheed or somewhere else?

RS: **No, this was all after the war.**

SM: After the war?

RS: **Something I think I [unclear]**

SM: Okay. So you were doing steamfitting for how many years?

RS: **Oh, 60 years, I guess. That's how long I've been in the union, but 20 years of that was with Honeywell. I installed pneumatic temperature control systems in schools and office buildings and whatever, hospitals. What else? The UA, the union, give me that watch when I retired.**

SM: That's a great, that's a wonderful watch.

RS: **United Association of Plumbers and Steamfitters.**

SM: That's a wonderful watch; 1889 is when it was founded. Wow, that's wonderful.

RS: **Yes, I think it's a Hamilton.**

SM: Yes, it says Hamilton on there. So you were working as a steamfitter when you got called back up to go to Korean War, and then you were in the Philippines the whole time?

RS: Yes.

SM: Tell me about your experience in the Philippines? Were you doing also metalsmithing in the Philippines?

RS: **[unclear] metalsmith. My wife and I, before we were married, paid a visit at Taal Lake. It's not too far from Manila. It's a big lake on the Island of Luzon. But in the middle of that lake is an extinct volcano on the island. But that was quite a thing. I would imagine that started up again, too.**

SM: How did you meet your wife in the Philippines?

RS: Oh, good question. I don't even remember. Drinking beer someplace, I suppose.

SM: And so then you came back in February of 1952, you came back to the United States?

RM: Yes.

SM: And then your son was born in July of 1952?

RS: No, he must have been born after that. It wasn't that close, because it took me a couple of years to earn enough money to come back and get married. Well, yes, that's right; '52 he was born. And yes, I come home and I went to work. It took me a couple of years.

SM: Were you working at Honeywell?

RS: No, not then.

SM: Okay.

RS: Construction.

SM: So then you were saving up your money to go back and get Mary and your son?

RS: I didn't even ask her to marry me.

SM: You didn't ask her?

RS: I didn't.

SM: Why not?

RS: It never entered my mind. We just went and got married. Well she was quite a gal. She was quite a gal. Her name was Sebastiana.

SM: Sebastiana?

RS: Her last name was Bantasan (sp?).

SM: Bantasan?

RS: And she's got a younger sister, Ameransianna (sp?). And an older sister, Jobita, J-o-b-i-t-a, I think it is, something like that, different names. And she had some brothers. I don't know how many. They were quite a bunch. Her dad had died before I knew her.

And when she was 16, I don't know what happen. I think somebody, a policeman where she was living at, wanted to marry her or something. But anyway, she decided to leave home. She put together what little bit she had, took a bus to a city there on Luzon – no, on Leyte where she was – the biggest city on Leyte. And she worked for somebody there and got enough money to make a passage to Manila. Her sister was working in Manila. So she took a job as a babysitter for a lawyer, took care of his family. She was, what do you call it?

SM: A nanny?

RS: Yes, nanny, and she worked for him for quite a while. That was in Manila. And she ended up in Cavite, where I met her. She had relatives around there, too. Off the base we were living together for a while. Her birthday was February 15th and I think I was on the ship headed for the States.

SM: Were you?

RS: At that date.

SM: Did you correspond very often with each other?

RS: Oh, yes, pretty regularly. I got off that airplane and she come to meet me with Bill and he was kind of shy at first. Finally he came over and he . . .

SM: Give you a big hug?

RS: Put his arms around my leg, "Daddy." And we went to a movie, a Tagalog movie and they had a newsreel there where they showed airplane landings and stuff like that. He seen the airplane landing and he jumped up, "Daddy, Daddy."

SM: Ah.

RS: Quite a guy. Yes, Bill and his mother were pretty close.

SM: That's a great photo. So is there anything else about your World War II experience or your Korean War experience that you want to tell me?

RS: Nothing worth writing about. It was all routine work but I'm thankful I didn't get shot but . . .

SM: How did your military experience affect your outlook on life afterwards?

RS: It wasn't too bad. It didn't have much effect on me I don't believe. It's hard to change a Norwegian.

SM: But you found your wife?

RS: Yes, I got my wife, brought her over here. I had to leave before she came; and for some reason, I think my visa time was up in the Philippines. I had to get out of there or start paying taxes.

And I left her with a ticket and what money I had for her and Bill. She came when the ticket was ready. Then she flew to Los Angeles. And I went to Los Angeles, where I'd had my home. And what had happened, I had a '49 Pontiac and I drove that to Los Angeles. I left my car with my sister there; and [unclear] to getting married, and coming back.

Well anyhow, she came with Bill; and once they got to Los Angeles, my sister met her and took care of everything; put her on a bus for Minneapolis or Fargo. And the strange thing about her and Billy on the bus, she kept hearing, "Minneapolis, Minneapolis." She thought she was going to a place with 'many apples.' And once they got here, her and Billy were sitting in the bus depot when I got there.

SM: In Fargo or Minneapolis?

RS: No, in Fargo. They were ready to keep on going. They didn't even know that they were at the place they were heading for. So anyhow, got in the car and went to our house. My mother was still around. She took care of everything. [unclear] adopted her right away.

SM: So you had a lot of metalsmithing experience before you went into World War II.

RS: Right.

SM: That's why they chose you for that job?

RS: Yes, the job at Lockheed had involved airplanes, too. That's why they put me in the sheetmetal. I was assigned there. I didn't ask for it. So they put

you to where they think you can do the best. It worked out. Yes, I was a welder. I ended up being a pipe welder. That's a pretty accurate job, too.

I signed up with Strobe (sp?) Flying Service. I got the GI Bill and learned how to fly. A guy I went to school with was a flight instructor out there. We had some good times together.

SM: This was after World War II?

RS: Oh yes, after I got back from California. I had a little cub. I took here and flew to Grand Forks alone, then took off and flew to Jamestown, back to Fargo. On the way back to Fargo, I went south over Kathryn. I wanted to take some pictures of Kathryn. That was my dad's hometown. And I made it back to Fargo. That was a fun job. Good airplane, a little airplane – in that airplane, all alone. He had it all trimmed up, where it was flying straight and level. Sit there, and lean forward and the plane would go down. Lean back, it would come back up again ... real sensitive.

Yes, that was a quite a time. That was real fun flying. But if you're going to keep up flying, you better have some money; either that or have a good job that pays for your flying.

SM: And was your flying experience – did you fly after World War II or after the Korean War?

RS: This was after the Korean.

SM: After the Korean War, okayt.

RS: Yes, there were a lot of interesting experiences. My friend Barnes, though, him and being a mess cook on Admiral Nimitz's airplane. That was something. I can't believe it. I guess if you pull enough boners, you end up someplace to work. Quite a guy ... small world to bump into him on Guam.

SM: Yes.