

A Veterans Oral History
Heritage Education Commission
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Verdie Ellingson
Narrator

Linda Jenson
Interviewer

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LJ: Please state your name.

VE: Verdie Ellingson. Do you want me to spell it?

LJ: Yes.

VE: V-e-r-d-i-e E-l-l-i-n-g-s-o-n.

LJ: Thank you and what era military?

VE: I served with the occupation forces in Korea between World War II and the Korean War. I served prior to December 31, 1946, so I'm considered a World War II veteran.

LJ: In what branch?

VE: I was in the Army, Signal Corps.

LJ: Verdie, where were you born and raised?

VE: I was born and raised in rural Montevideo, Minnesota.

LJ: And what did your family do?

VE: They were farmers.

LJ: Did you finish high school in Montevideo.

VE: Actually I finished high school in Milan. And the reason I went to Milan, it was about the same distance as Montevideo but Milan sent a school bus and they came right by our farm. And so it was natural for us to go to that high school.

LJ: What did you do after high school?

VE: That's the part of this story that I wanted to be sure you understood and why I'm considered a World War II veteran.

I graduated from high school in May of 1942. The war started in terms of our participation in it with the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. My older brother, Orville, had been drafted in October, two months before the war started. My next older brother brother enlisted in the Marines in January of 1942. When I finished high school in May of 1942, you know in my mind I was thinking I will probably be drafted or do what a lot of my friends were doing, volunteering for the Air Force or the Navy or Marine Corps, whatever branch that you might want to serve.

However in my case, the draft board said, "You can't be drafted. You are needed to work on the farm." By now they realized, we can't take all the boys off the farm. Someone has to be there to run the farms. And in my case, my dad was 66 years of age; and he had a chronic asthma condition which means some aspects of farming were very difficult for him to do. So the draft board said, "You need to stay home until such time as your brothers return from the military, and you will not be drafted."

So when I finished high school in May, that's what I did. I took over the farm with my dad. He was still able to do lots of things; but for all practical purposes, it was my job to run the farm.

LJ: And when did that change from going to the farm to . . . ?

VE: The war ended in European Theater on April 7, 1945. The war ended in the Pacific Theater on August 13th, I believe, in 1945. Both of my brothers had been very active during their military service. Orville served for 20 months in the Aleutian Islands in Korea. Right after the war started he went with his antiaircraft battalion because they were sure that Japan was going to attempt to take Alaska. They didn't. There were some feeble attempts. One time they shot down a Japanese plane; but there was very low activity that came from that.

So he came back for furlough for two weeks; and then he went to infantry training and was sent to Europe and fought with the General Patton's army in the battles of Germany and France. And when the war ended, he was in Linz, Austria. My other brother served with the Marines in the Pacific and fought very difficult battles in Guam, Saipan, Guinea, some of those places.

And so both of them had high points' value. When the war finally did end, they were discharged quite quickly. Orville came home in late September of 1945. Calmer came home in late October of 1945.

My intent had always been to go to college, so when they came home I anticipated that I would be drafted. In the meantime after they now took over the farm, I enrolled in college in January of 1946. In February I received my draft notice. I asked for a deferment until I finished the semester, which was granted. So I entered the military service in June of 1946. I did 2 months/8 weeks of basic training at Fort Knox in field artillery. I was sent home for a 10-day furlough. We rode by train both back from Fort Knox to Fort Lawton, Washington, and from Fort Lawton, Washington, I was shipped to Korea where I stayed for the rest of my service time.

LJ: What was that like when you got to Korea?

VE: It was for me it was fascinating and very interesting. Very different culture of course than what I was used to. But we learned very quickly that the Korean people were very happy to have the Americans there. There were the other forces there, too, besides ours in the occupation from England and other groups that we had served with in the European Theater and in the Pacific Theater. At any rate, they were delighted to have us and we did our jobs.

I became a teletype operator, but in my experience of moving around the community, we found the people and especially the children very happy to see the military and very happy to talk to them. They spoke English very well. And so it was a great experience for me. I have nothing but good things to say about my military experience.

LJ: Can you tell us more about the work that you did in Korea?

VE: I had trained as I've already told you in the field artillery basic training. But when I came to Korea, they did some evaluations and they determined that I would serve better in the Signal Corps. I was a good typist. I had taken typing in high school and they were looking for someone who would operate a teletype machine. And a number of us were transferred from the Field Artillery into the Signal Corps, and I was one of them. So I served my time in Korea as a teletype operator. We had operations in Japan, and – now it slips me – the one island, large island off Japan, which was one of the battlefields in World War II. Hopefully it will come back to me before I'm through. But, so we would be in contact with them. All our messages were in script or you know in code. So we never knew what was said - we did to a degree - but we had to send them out in code. We didn't type words as such as a teletype operator. We typed letters in groups of four. And that was the code messages that were sent out on the teletype machines.

LJ: Can you recall, all this time later, certain people that you worked with?

VE: I can't recall names. Which I have difficulty with now especially. I can recall individuals, especially my captain, who would come around only occasionally, but who I enjoyed and liked very much. You know we had a technical sergeant in our

unit who was basically in charge of our room. We had a large room. You know maybe 20 by 30 total of teletype machines. And it was his responsibility to be sure that everything was moving along okay. And we, we couldn't use the teletype machines for our own use. They were strictly for the military.

I wish I could recall names of people but I can't. I recall some of my buddies in the barracks. Wayne Duke from Connecticut was one of them. Unusual name and probably why I would remember it. Luke Brown, who was another one of the fellows who was in our barracks; but he didn't work at the station with me, so I didn't get to know him as well. So individuals such as this I recall and we would take walks together. We'd go hiking in the mountains as it was pretty well surrounded by mountains. We found this fascinating to do on our day off or on an afternoon free.

LJ: How long were you in Korea?

VE: Only for 10 months. The military was asking us to join the regular Army. Now they said if you joined the regular Army, we guarantee that you'll be home in 18 months. And a lot of fellows did but a lot of us didn't. We decided we were going to stay as draftees and not join the regular Army.

And it turned out that about the Spring of 1947 - as I recall the time, about 2 months before I was shipped home - probably it was earlier, maybe about February - we found out that they were going to start dismissing the draftees. By now they had discovered they had more military than they needed. And so not only from Korea but from Japan and from Germany, from Okinawa.

Okinawa was the island I was trying to think of what we had of the teletype station. From all over the world where our troops were stationed, they were finding they had more military than they needed. So they decided to dismiss first the draftees who hadn't committed to a certain thing, so I came there about September 1, 1946 and I left there about May 15th of 1947. So it was the period of no less than 10 months.

LJ: Good for you. What was that like when you found out that . . .

VE: Well it was very exciting. I had a girlfriend at home that I was writing, too. We weren't anywhere near consideration of marriage. But never the less, I wanted to go to college. She wanted to go to nursing school. But we were correspondents. Of course I was happy to go back to see her. I was very happy to go back to see my family. And so it was a thrill.

We went on a ship back. Made a stop at Hawaii for about a week to pick up dependents of some Army people in Hawaii. And then, we were shipped back to Camp Stoneman, California, and that's where I received my dismissal from the Army.

LJ: What was next in store for you?

VE: First of all a good friend of mine from the Army and I decided that we wanted to see part of California before we were to go. So for about a week we were in San Francisco and then we went to Los Angeles and Hollywood and visited some of the places of interest there. Then we took a train back to Minnesota. And I knew I was going back to college in the fall, so I got home in the middle of June right before harvest time. So of course I went to work on the farm until late August when I went back to college.

LJ: And where did you go to college?

VE: Luther College in Decorah, Iowa.

LJ: And what were you studying?

VE: I had a major in business education and a minor in history and a minor in education teaching. After four years of college, I started teaching in southeastern Minnesota.

LJ: And how long did you teach?

VE: From 1950 until 1982, I was in education for 32 years. I was a teacher for several years. I was a high school principal for several years. And then, I was the superintendent of schools for 26 years.

LJ: That's wonderful. Are there any stories that you would like to share that stand out before we . . .

VE: About the military?

LJ: Yeah, about the military or anything after the military that you would like to share with us?

VE: Well one thing that I might have mentioned already is that the young children especially the junior high and high school age students, we'd go for a walk. We'd go hiking always go as a group. For one thing we enjoyed that. When we had friends, you could enjoy the trip more and the Army had recommended we do this.

There were very few problems in Korea at that time at least with getting along with the Korean people. As I've already mentioned, they loved having us. But there were exceptions. Part of it probably was caused by the military. Some of the men in the military were dating the Korean girls, so a lot of that was happening. And in some cases they were causing pregnancies. We heard stories that some of the Koreans were very upset that this was happening. It was just very contrary to their culture. And there were occasions when the GI's, especially individually, who were

visiting homes or bars and would get in fights or conflicts with the Koreans. So they said if you go anyplace go in groups. I think they were thinking especially more of the dangers of the bars and that kind of thing.

But even if you know go hiking, go as a group. So we would do that and this one day we went to a place called the Thousand Steps. Very interesting. There were actually about a thousand steps to climb to the height of this particular high hill or mountain, whichever you want to call it.

And when we got to the top, there was a group of young boys, I would say from maybe ages 12 or 14 to 16 and maybe 18, about 6 of them. And they just started following us. We had a group of about 7 or 8 Army guys and they were up there on the hike and pretty soon we got realizing it was getting late and we had done a lot of walking. It was too far to go back the way we had come so we thought it would be fun to find our way in the dark.

So we headed to a part of the city that none of us knew before. We told these boys who we were, where we lived and would they be willing to walk with us and take us there. Oh sure and once we got down - this area was real slummy. There were not a lot of beautiful homes in Korea. There were some very lovely homes mostly, not real large homes, although there were some of those, too. But anyway, in this particular area it would be like old Washington Avenue in Minneapolis. And we were scared. We really were. We were so happy that we had these boys leading us to take us home. We didn't bother anyone. We just kept on going. And I've never forgotten it because to us it was a bit traumatic. I don't think the boys even sensed it. They didn't know that why we were so anxious to have them show us the way.

We were anxious. Not only we weren't sure that we could find the way but also we didn't want to be cut up with diligence or something in Korea that weren't happy to see us in their area.

LJ: That's great.

VE: Anyway there were very interesting places to visit in Korea. Seoul, the city we were stationed in, was the capital city. Many beautiful pagodas, temples, shrines. We'd go to the capital Seoul. We took a good advantage of being there. And we had some interesting stories. We had some friends.

Seoul, Korea is not very far from the 38th parallel. The 38th parallel was what divided North and South Korea. We had friends that we met in our basic training who were on the south side of the parallel. They were doing some training of their own just to protect South Korea from North Korea.

At the same time they could watch the North Koreans with full military training from the Chinese who were coming down there and training them. And so it was not a great big surprise to me when the Korean War started. You kind of sensed

that it was something that they were building up for already. When we were there. And this was in 1946 and '47, the Korean War started in 1951.

LJ: Now did you go to any reunions after the military?

VE: **No, that's one thing I have missed. You know I think part of it is the short time we were together.**

The group that we were in basic training with at Fort Knox really split up. I remember when they were posting the assignments where we were going to be sent. And our company of probably about 200 men were seeing a sign that they posted on the bulletin boards where everyone was going. We all wanted to go to Europe, especially Germany. I especially wanted to. But very few were sent to Europe. Most of us were sent to Japan or Korea or Okinawa.

And so, that was a disappointment for me at the time. Since you know I had a great experience there and I have since had a chance visit Europe, and so I was kind of glad that I had a chance to serve in Korea. But at the time that it was not what we wanted to do. We wanted to go to Europe.

LJ: But no doubt after 10 months and being you were told to go you could go home that had to have to been just a really a . . .

VE: **Oh yeah, that was very exciting. I didn't finish telling you probably why we were never a group that got together afterwards. Because we knew each other for a short period of time, especially for myself who was only in the military for a year. And we spent the two months in basic training. And after that I think there were only a handful of us from that group that went from my unit and basic training that went to Korea.**

I remember about four of us and so then when we got to Korea we were assigned different units. There I went to the Signal Corps. The other three fellows, two of them stayed in the Field Artillery and one was sent to the Infantry. And so, I was only with the unit then in Korea for about 8 months; and we didn't get those close bonds that fellows that served together on one plane for example. And they fly one forward after the other, back and forth to Germany and bombing Germany and they got so close. That it was just common for them to start a group that would meet. We didn't have that, that closeness as we weren't together that long.

LJ: When you say that. Verdie, how would you like to be remembered?

VE: **Okay. I'm uncomfortable with that. I really struggle with trying to write something. This is so often asked for and I don't want to be critical of those who give a very good statement and but I'm uncomfortable with it. I feel almost like I'm boasting a little bit or I just lose my humility when I try to say something.**

Here's what I wrote down. I hope I will be remembered as someone who lived to honor first his God and second his family. Now that's the way I feel. I went on to say someone who lived and worked in a way that showed respect and honor to everyone no matter their stature in life. And these are things that I feel.

When I put them down in a statement that I'm saying how I want to be remembered, I feel almost like I'm boastful like I'm saying that these were things that I did and you better try and do as well because I'm not at all sure those things really are completely true.

By the way our family is very close and not just my personal family but my siblings and my family of eight children and my mom and dad and our whole relationship of uncles and aunts are a very close family. All of my grandparents were born in Norway. And I think this may have something to do with it. Not that Norwegians do these things any better than others, but all my grandparents that I know are of the same kind of training and background. And most of them were happy in America but they also longed for those days they spent back in Norway. My dad was born in Norway and came to this country when he was five years old. So he didn't remember a lot about it. But an awful lot of people came though when they were in their teens or twenties and even older and they remembered what Norway was like. And although they were pleased to be in America, they could have work opportunities and go for it but they still were longing for the Old Country.

I think my family background, the closeness comes partly from that because we were all of the same background and our families have just remained amazingly close. And so that's a very important part of my life today.

It remains now and I feel my grandchildren, although they are scattered all over the world, I have one in Hawaii, one in Boston, two in Florida, two in Colorado and three in Minnesota. But I'm in contact with them really quite frequently. I don't see them as often anymore, but by emailing, telephone calls or letters. And I'm not into texting at all. I stay away from that. That's something I'm not quite wanting – not part of my culture.

LJ: Well thank you Verdie.

VE: Oh, you're welcome.