

A Veterans Oral History
Heritage Education Commission
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Peer Hedrick
Narrator

Polly Wendelbo
Interviewer

About 2007

PW: This is Polly Wendelbo. Today is February 20th; it's 2 o'clock; and today I am interviewing Hedrick Peer. Hedrick, can you tell me where you grew up?

HP: I grew up in Kansas City, Missouri, and Glendale, California.

PW: Can I ask your age?

HP: I was born in 1922.

PW: What did you do prior to military service and how did your military service evolve?

HP: I was working at Mare Island Navy Yard in California helping build submarines. They told me I wouldn't be drafted, but I was.

PW: Did you pick the area of the service you wanted to be in?

HP: No, I had no choice.

PW: What were you in?

HP: I was drafted to the Army.

PW: Do you recall your first days in the service?

HP: First day? Yeah. Well, I recall waiting for the bus and go to where I was going to go. I think they sent me down to San Bernardino. I ended up in Florence, Arizona, what they call a prisoner of war camp. I trained there as a guard and then we got in Italian prisoners there and then German prisoners. This was in Arizona about 80 miles from Phoenix.

PW: Were you specifically trained just for guards there?

HP: No, just basic training.

PW: Like boot camp experiences?

HP: Uh ha. Well, we were trained to be MP's, also. It was an escort guard. The purpose of this was because they transported prisoners from half across of the United States. That's where the escort guard came in.

PW: Do you remember your most memorable boot camp experience?

HP: Actually I do. It was taking a test they gave us. When you first come in, they give you pages and pages of test.

PW: To evaluate what area you'd be good in or what?

HP: Well, I.Q. and general knowledge, whatever. More like an I.Q. test.

PW: Did you serve during wartime.

HP: Yes, I was drafted in January 1943.

PW: Where were you stationed?

HP: Originally I was stationed at Florence, Arizona, and that was about 80 miles from Phoenix.

PW: Where were you during the war?

HP: Then I was moved to Camp Gordon Johnston (Florida). I was moved to an infantry division in Wisconsin. I was training as an infantry soldier. They pulled me out of that, sent me to New Orleans, then they put me in a harbor craft outfit. And we trained in the gulf on tugboats; and I ended up in Le Havre, France.

PW: Is that where you spent the rest of your service in France?

HP: Well, more or less, about half of it was. I saw a sign where we ate; and it said, "Wanted Actors." I called up and said I'm an actor. So the guy come and I told him I had amateur work and high schoolwork and he said fine. So I went to his outfit and we traveled around entertaining the troops. We had two actor technicians from New York that worked with us.

PW: That's one of my questions down the road. How did you get to France though?

HP: On a luxury liner that had about 32,000 troops on it. I went to England, took a train over to somewhere else, and then took a boat to Cherbourg, and then got on another boat and went to Le Havre; and that's where I was stationed at Le Havre.

I got what they call a 46 foot tug watch. One night we tied up and all of a sudden I heard MTL, MTL (“Mean Tide Level”). Now all of a sudden I tried to climb and get out, but I couldn’t get out. So I had to go to the front of the boat. What happened was there was a high wind and all the regular boats that were tied up to us, pulled us and we went right into a bridge and just sheered right up in a pile there.

PW: Wow, well there you got some experiences ...

HP: That was a thriller.

PW: ... right off the bat. When you got to France, can you remember what your first day was like? What did you feel when you first got there?

HP: We landed at Cherbourg where the original invasion was. You could look up and see the top of the hill where the Germans had been shooting the guys in June. But I landed there in October so many months later. How did I feel? Just like very other guy. Gulp, you know?

PW: Was this your first time out of the country?

HP: Oh yeah.

PW: How old were you then?

HP: I was a little older than most of the guys, I was 20.

PW: Did you see combat?

HP: No, I went into an auto craft outfit.

Did I say got in a soldier’s show, got out, got a job, had to work with some kid, told him where to go and got fired, and I kept doing this, so I re-enlisted and stayed in 22 years.

PW: Well you’ve got a different history then, with your military life. Tell me a couple of your most memorable experiences, because you are different when you had that branch of entertainment style.

HP: Originally in Le Havre, we lived in a chateau and we practically had a French girl to every room. Because what we had it was an unbelievable affair for young guys. But anyway, there were women everywhere. And they didn’t like that, so they transferred us and got some new barracks in town. I ended up entertaining the troops. The main thing that I did was called stand-in sketch. You know what that is?

PW: No.

HP: Well, they have a director that says, “Now Clark Stable you’re going to do this.” And so then the director says “stand-in.” And this guy comes and first they put a pot or a tin with apple butter in it. So I put that on my face and would I fall down and they would laugh about it and fall down. And then they’d take a pitcher of water and they’d pour over me. That’s a great skit and something I did that brought down the house.

They had a famous director, Josh Logan, that happened to rehearse and he’s the one that told me what I should do. Josh Logan did “By Jupiter” and all kinds of stuff on Broadway. But he was the captain in Paris and he was coming home. That’s how I got involved.

PW: Now how often did you do shows?

HP: Every night, day and night, sometimes.

PW: Did you go to other camps?

HP: Yes. We went to other camps.

PW: Were you flown to different stations?

HP: No, well, I’d say 50 miles to other places.

PW: Did you have plenty of supplies in the Army?

HP: Yeah, even in the field we had plenty of supplies. They were all canned stuff but we had plenty of supplies.

PW: As an entertainer were you also trained to carry a gun and shoot a gun, and you said you were in the MPs, also?

HP: Yeah, I went through basic training on the old M-1 rifle and automatic. And in fact, I got transferred to Minnesota into an infantry division. Then they pulled me out and sent me to New Orleans, then they sent me to Camp Gordon Johnston and I trained on a boat and then I ended up at Le Havre, France. That was in World War II.

PW: Did you receive any decorations during the time?

HP: You mean special? No, I’ll show you my uniform later. It’s got all kinds of stuff on it.

PW: Now as an entertainer, does that put you in a different category for military service?

HP: No, it's a job.

PW: How did you communicate with your family when you were over in France?

HP: They had little envelope-sort-of-things, and you wrote your stuff in there, and you just turned it over, and it would be mailed to the States.

PW: Do you recall any humorous or unusual events?

HP: Oh, again I was in the service for 20 some years.

PW: So you could have quite a little book of?

HP: Yeah, numerous.

PW: Well what were some of the pranks you pulled on some of the other people?

HP: Pranks?

PW: Or did you do that?

HP: Oh, I don't know about that. Essentially, we were in a chateau; and we had women. You couldn't believe the women we had. And then they moved us out of there and put us in the barracks. But they had dancers, and so I found one woman. And I had a woman over there that I used to meet.

PW: Now did you meet some interesting people while you were in the service?

HP: Yeah, I usually had some good buddies. I always had one good buddy.

PW: Do you still keep in touch with any of them?

HP: No, I don't know where any of those people are.

PW: Can you remember your worst military meal?

HP: What a question. When we were in bivouac they had what they call K-rations and C-rations. The K-rations were a little box. In the box was all you needed for a meal. They had a breakfast meal, a dinner meal, and a supper meal. It had packaged stuff, little cans you opened. They always had a pack of cigarettes in there. In World War II, why cigarettes were the thing, you know? You know it's much later when this part came about smoking.

I didn't smoke but you could buy cigarettes by the carton. So I bought them by the carton and then I'd trade them, one pack, the whole – you'd get 50 candy bars. I'd trade one pack of cigarettes for candy bars. I didn't smoke in World War II.

PW: What were C-rations versus K-rations?

HP: K-rations were in a little box. Everything you needed for a meal, even tissue for the bathrooms. Everything you needed for life was in there. That was in K-rations.

Now C-rations were two cans. And one of them had some kind of food in it. If it was breakfast, it had eggs in it, although some may have beans in it. Then we would have some powdered coffee and salt and that kind of stuff in it.

PW: Did being in the military and seeing what you saw in Europe, did that define your outlook on life since you were such a young man?

HP: No, later on I enjoyed talking about it. .

PW: When were you discharged?

HP: The first time was over little three years. Why I went on a boat back to the States and I trained at Kansas City and discharged. That would have been 1945 or 46.

PW: How long after before you re-enlisted?

HP: A year, I re-enlisted because I couldn't keep a job. I would go to work and there'd be some young kid and I'd tell him where to go and I'd get fired. So I went back in and stayed in.

PW: So you were in 22 years after that.

HP: No, a total of 22 years.

PW: What did you do after your military life of 22 years? Where were you at the time?

HP: This has to do with my wife. I ended up stationed in Brooklyn Center or somewhere like that. I went to one of these large places where they used to have these big dancehalls and I met her. I took her home and dated her for about a month and married her. And that's her, that was my wife.

PW: So you got married when you were in the military during those 22 years?

HP: Yeah.

PW: How did you end up in Fargo?

HP: I had put in for a lot of government jobs. In fact I had some sort of relatives over in Grand Forks. I put in for a bunch of jobs and a guy called me from the V.A. Here at that time I was living in a town above Duluth. He said that he saw my application and to drop down some time to talk to him about it. I says, "No way," I said, "I'll be on my way." And so I went right down to the V.A. in Fargo and got hired as a food service worker.

PW: How long did you work here?

HP: In a short time, I became a food service supervisor. And I worked there until I was 62 and then I retired. That was the largest mistake I ever made.

PW: Why was that?

HP: What do you do? Only 62 years old, I'm almost 86 now.

PW: Had a long time of retirement?

HP: Yeah.

PW: Maybe you should go back to work now?

HP: I work as a volunteer at the V.A. Hospital every Monday. I take care of all the magazines and books for the veterans. When we leave, I can show you my card. I've got a picture there of my card, all of my books and magazines.

PW: Are you involved in any veteran organizations?

HP: I'm a life member of DAV. That's Disabled American Veterans and I'm a life member of VFW, Veterans of Foreign Wars. I never joined the American Legion but a life member of the other two.

PW: Do they have certain activities that those posts do?

HP: They do but I haven't been active for a while.

PW: Did you enjoy being in the military?

HP: Yeah, I had no trouble adjusting to the military. Well, anyway I can follow the leader or I can lead either one. And that's what I did depending on what the situation was.

PW: Did you use any of the benefits of the military to buy a house or educate or ...?

HP: Yes, I used the GI Bill and I went to NDSU for 6 years to get a degree. I went at nights. I was going to NDSU, but I took almost half my quarters over at MS

[Moorhead State]. **I took them wherever they were. In fact, the people at NDSU complained because I was over there. I said, "If you can't give me all I need, I'll go over there and you can just do what you want to do." I just went whenever there was a course.**

A lot of it was papers. So I'd write a paper, give it to my wife, she'd type it up and it'd be a beautiful paper, a perfect paper. I even talked to a couple of professors that did the same thing when they went to school.

PW: So you graduated then your wife did, too?

HP: Yeah, you might say that.

PW: As a last thought, after all your years that you did spend in the military, how would you like to be remembered?

HP: What, for military or where?

PW: Well as your life.

HP: How would I like to be remembered? Somebody that never gave up. I haven't given up yet. I have a woman here at Bethany. I had two women but the other one went somewhere else. But usually, I try to have two women.

PW: So you enjoy life?

HP: I figure as much as I can I do. Right.