

# **VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT**

**Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations**

**Interview with**

**John P. Brundage**

Conducted by Kevin Haney

April 21, 2006

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**This interview is being conducted on the afternoon of Friday, April 21, 2006, at the Indian Prairie Library in Darien, Illinois. The party we are interviewing is John Brundage. He is a resident of Gurnee, Illinois, and is a veteran of the U. S. Army of the 1940's. I am here, Kevin Haney, also with Melanie Wicker, and we are conducting the interview at this time on behalf of the Indian Prairie Library.**

**Please bring us up to speed on your years just prior to your entrance into the Army, your decision to enter the Army, and so forth.**

All right. In 1941 I graduated from grammar school and went to Fenwick High School in Oak Park, Illinois. My father joined the Army, so in my junior year I moved to Washington, D.C. where he was stationed. That was 1944. After the war in Europe was over, my father went over to Nuremberg to serve on the war crimes trials. So I went back to Oak Park and finished high school. It was wartime. Of course we had a lot of people who had relatives in the service and were worried about them, particularly in 1945. A lot of prisoners were released – American prisoners were released. People were dead and coming back. It was kind of a sad time. My father found this Army program where people who were 17 could enlist in the Army on a reserve basis, and the Army would send them to college until they turned 18. When I enlisted the war was still going on, although I think the war in Europe was ending up.

**What was your enlistment date?**

You know, I can't remember the actual date.

**Roughly?**

Roughly, maybe March of 1945. The war in Europe was over in April sometime. But I already signed the papers and the war in Japan was still going on. So, as I remember, I graduated from high school and went immediately down to Champaign. The University of Illinois was where they had this program. We were put in classes. We would march in between classes. It was kind of a military background.

**Where did you live when you were in this program? Was it in dorms?**

In the dorm. They took over what they called Newman Hall down there. There were about 400 of us. I can remember August of 1945 down in Champaign, the end of the war, they had a big celebration down there. And the next morning there were all kinds of cigarettes at the drugstore, you could buy as much gas as you wanted to, as much butter. It was a very happy time.

**So rationing ended very suddenly.**

It ended very suddenly. Suddenly we stopped marching class. They finished out their commitment of sending me to college. I turned 18 in February and I finished the term. Then they sent me to Ft. Sheridan, where I was inducted in the active Army. They sent

me down to Louisville – Ft. Knox – and they taught me how to drive an armored car for six weeks, I believe.

**That was about April and May of 1946.**

Right. Then, after six weeks of basic training they sent me to California to go overseas. They sent me to Korea by ship which took 18 days.

**Now what type of unit were you in – an infantry or was this an armored unit?**

This was mechanized cavalry – which was my basic training. But when I got over to Korea, they saw that I had some knowledge, so they put me in an office over there, in what they called the ‘machine records unit,’ operating IBM machines – where they had the old punch cards; I don’t know if you remember that.

**Now what was the situation in Korea when you arrived there? This would have been a few months, less than a year, after World War II.**

It was varied. The troops were mainly occupation troops. They were happy that the war was over. However, there was some tension with what the Russians were doing in North Korea – there was always tension. In fact, at times, we’d have to walk two or three blocks to the mess hall in downtown Seoul. And we’d have to carry carbines while we walked to the mess hall.

**So you carried a loaded automatic rifle.**

Right. There was tension. But it didn’t really break out into 1950. I was there in 1946.

**Now were you living in a barracks, or where were you at?**

I was in downtown Seoul and there was a hotel across the street where the officers stayed. And we actually worked in a building that was some kind of a wire company – where you send wires, like telegrams. We worked on the second floor, and on the third and fourth floors we had our barracks. But it was like an office building.

**What was the information that you were sending and receiving? What was the average day like, and what was the average information?**

Well, it all involves the morning reports – have you ever heard of morning reports? We’d get the morning reports and put them into statistical form. There was a punch card for every soldier who was over there. And we’d show how many were on duty, how many were on sick leave, how many were going home – every kind of a report that the Army has we would prepare.

**Any idea how many U. S. Army troops were on occupation duty in Seoul?**

Yes. There were 50,000.

**Fifty thousand troops were on occupation duty in South Korea.**

Yes. And I think it stayed pretty close to that all the way up to 1950.

**What were your relations with the local population, if any, and what was the situation in Korea – now, had that been a Japanese colony?**

Yes, yes. Being in the city, of course, we would have things such as having our film developed by local shops, laundry by local shops. They had a section where they had stores. But there was minimal contact with the local people. We had our own money. The way we got Korean money was that we would sell cigarettes – cigarettes were 50¢ a carton at that time – and the Koreans love cigarettes.

**And you had mentioned tension. Did you actually see any tension or violence during your time over there?**

No, I didn't. Of course, it's a pretty big country, and there were rural parts of the country. But there no gigantic fire fights or anything of that nature.

**Were there demonstrations?**

There might have been small demonstrations by the communists, but they weren't of any consequence.

**And Korea was divided at this point?**

Yes, it was divided. We had a northern part ...

**You mean the southern part.**

Well we were in the southern part, but there was a northern part where we couldn't go.

**It was Soviet occupied at that time?**

I don't think the Soviets were there in the same sense as we were in the south. But certainly there were Soviet citizens there. But they weren't occupying there, to my memory.

**But there was a regime in North Korea.**

Right. The Soviets were calling the shots.

**So how long were you in Korea?**

About nine months. And then I kind of confounded the clerks because I enlisted, and I didn't enlist for a term of years. And I wasn't drafted. So I enlisted for the duration plus six, and they didn't know how to handle that. But eventually I got out.

**Okay. You were on this kind of unusual program and so ...**

Right, right. And when I got back, of course it was the post war years.

**That would have been about ...**

1947. Most veterans were going to school. People were happy. I remember when I got back I spent a lot of time in nightclubs and taverns. Then all of a sudden it stopped. That's because the veterans were getting married and started to have children (chuckles). It was amazing the way night life stopped all of a sudden.

**When you were brought back to the United States, how long were you still in the Army at that time? And what was going on with the troops?**

Well, I came back from Korea on a ship, and I was sent right to – I think they used to call it a discharge depot. I don't know what that means, but I was discharged immediately. Well, not immediately – it took a couple of weeks – but I didn't serve in any capacity after that.

**Okay. So you were just waiting to get separated from the service.**

Right.

**And what did you do then?**

I went back to school – back to the University of Illinois. We had a funny situation there where they would only accept two-thirds of our credits because the term was not the usual semester. In fact, I inquired at Loyola University, and they wouldn't even accept those credits. So that's why I went back to the University of Illinois at Navy Pier. And after two years I went down to Champaign.

**And did you follow affairs in Korea while you were back stateside?**

No. I made a vow that I would never go back to Korea. I came pretty close. I didn't like Korea at all. During the Olympics of 1988, I think, I saw something of the city of Seoul and really hasn't changed very much. They have nice great big tall office buildings now, but the general atmosphere is still pretty much the same. So I'm glad I never went back.

**What was your situation where you opted out of the inactive reserves about 1950.**

I was discharged in May of 1947. They asked me if I would like to join the inactive reserves. I wouldn't have to go to a meeting. It would take another world war for me to

be called back. So I did join. And I didn't go to one meeting, and I was getting letters at least once a month. I figured it was a waste of money for me to rejoin, so I did not rejoin. And the Korean War started a month later, and they called the unit that I was in over there – they were the first ones called. But I wasn't called up, and I certainly didn't enlist again.

**Did you feel that your experience in Korea gave you any particular insight into the Korean conflict that was going on in the early 1950's, or you didn't really pay attention?**

Well, I knew that North Korea was militant. But I don't think I had any more interest than the average U.S. citizen would have. The fact that I was there three years earlier really didn't give me much insight as to what was going on.

**And did you notice a difference between the way the American public was involved with World War II versus Korea?**

Oh, yes. Yes. World War II, people were very involved, even those who didn't have any relatives over there. In the Korean War, even I didn't have that much – I knew some guys who were over there – but I really didn't have that same interest that I had during World War II. It was kind of like a police action or whatever.

**All right. And did you think that your experience in the military has at all impacted you in the years since – your attitude towards things, jobs or anything else?**

Oh, yes. Very definitely. For one thing, I worked with Melanie at the Social Security Administration. And I had a job that was very competitive – I had to take a test and get up to about 90 on the test, and it was very competitive. And the fact that I was in the Service, I got five extra points, which, when you're up near 90 it's really almost determinative. Plus, I had fun! I was 18 years old – 19 years old over in Korea – and at that time they accepted enlistments by 17 year-old's. They used to call me "Pops," and I was 19 years old! (chuckles)

**So what was the makeup of the guys you were serving with in Korea, they were basically new enlistees or draftees?**

About half of them.

**And there weren't guys who were left over from the War.**

Right, right. In fact, when I first went to Ft. Sheridan to be processed up there, all these paratroopers from World War II were getting out. And I was a young guy just going in. But I enjoyed it. I really had a good time. Plus two ocean voyages. It was kind of exciting.

**Now, were you part of the, considered under the occupation of Japan section, or were you just kind of your own theater?**

They were closely connected. I don't know how close. Like I say, my Dad had some generals he knew, and the general in charge of Korea, he arranged an interview. I went to see this general and he asked me what he could do for me. I said I would like to go to Japan. And his response was, "I would, too." (chuckles)

**And he was the commanding general in Korea.**

He was the commanding general in Korea.

**What rank was he – Brigadier General?**

Oh, no. He probably was three stars, or at least two, I don't remember, but he was way up there.

**Any concluding observations you would like to make?**

Not really. Just that for me it was a very exciting experience. I did feel that I was performing some duty to the country. And for me it was worthwhile.

Interview concludes.