

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT
Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Rutch Johnson

Conducted by Deb Barrett

October 15, 2014

**This project sponsored by the Indian Prairie Public Library
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This interview is being conducted on Tuesday, October 15, 2014 with Mr. Rutch Johnson at the Indian Prairie Public Library in Darien, Illinois. My name is Deb Barrett. Mr. Johnson was born on May 18, 1926 in Blue Island, Illinois. He is a retired builder and learned of the Veterans History Project through his daughter, Sherry. Also with us today is his wife, Shirley. Mr. Johnson has kindly consented to be interviewed for this project. Here is story.

Life Before Entering Military Service

So, Rutch, where were you living before you entered the service? What was your life like just before then? How old were you?

I was in LaGrange and had just finished high school. I knew I was going into the service in the fall, so that summer I didn't do much of anything with some of my other boyfriends. So I went into the service with two of my high school teammates.

So you were 18 at the time?

Yes.

And you enlisted.

I was drafted.

You were drafted while you were still in high school?

Yes.

Had anybody in your family been in the service before?

My immediate family? No.

So what was their feeling when you got your draft notice?

Well, it was expected.

They were probably worried for you.

They probably were, but I didn't hear about it really. My dad was on the draft board!

And you were drafted anyway! So you graduated high school in June.

Yes. And I went into the service in September.

Which branch of the service? Did you go into the Army?

Yes.

Induction and Basic Training

And where were you inducted?

Fort Sheridan.

Right in Chicago.

Yes.

What were those first days like when you were inducted? What was the process like?

It was just mainly medical interviews and testing. That's what I remember.

Were a lot of guys being tested?

Oh, yeah.

Tell us, was it a big room?

It was a big room and a lot of men, yes.

Lots of lines?

Yes.

You didn't have far to go for your induction.

I went with two of my teammates.

High school friends?

Yes. They were teammates from my baseball team. That helped a lot.

It gave you a little extra courage?

Yes. We supported each other.

So all three of you ended up going into the Army. So you got your supplies. You got your medical exam, your shots. What kind of testing did they do?

I have no idea.

Was it medical testing?

Yes, it was just medical testing. It was just medical that I remember.

And obviously you passed.

[Shirley adds: You wanted to go into the Navy, didn't you? But you were color blind, so you had to go to the Army.]

The Army didn't care, but the Navy did. And that was because of the signal flags, right? You had to be able to see the colors.

Yes.

So you were in Fort Sheridan for your induction. Where were you sent for your basic training?

I went to Arkansas, near Little Rock. I forget the name.

How did you get there?

Train.

Was it a troop train or a passenger train that were you on?

Troop train.

So everybody on there was going.

Yes.

How long did it take you to get to Little Rock?

Probably a day, a day-and-a-half. I don't know.

What did you do on the train?

Nothing!

Did you play cards or read?

Just talked, mainly.

Your two buddies were on the train with you?

Yes.

Anybody else you knew?

No.

So the three of you kind of hung together.

Right.

So you got to Arkansas, the camp near Little Rock. I can't remember the name either right now.

Well, I can look it up in a book if you want.

So you got there. And how did you get from the train to the camp? Or did the train go right into the camp?

No, I think there were trucks that took us to the camp as I remember.

While you were on the train were there any sergeants or anyone like that talking to you?

I don't remember that that was true, no.

So you got to the camp. You got onto the trucks. How far did you have to go to the camp? Was it just a short ride?

It could have been as much as twenty miles.

How were you received at the camp? What happened when you got there?

I don't remember too much about that. It was just to go through, get your Army uniform, clothes, your combat boots and were assigned to a barracks.

Do you remember what your barracks looked like?

It was a typical barren barracks.

Rows of bunk beds, and rows and rows of bunks?

No, I think they were just one.

Single beds?

Yes. That's what I remember it was.

Do you remember about how many men?

Maybe thirty.

Where did you store your stuff?

They had a locker in front of your bed.

Like a foot locker?

Yes. That was it as far as I remember.

So you got there, you stored your stuff. Tell me what a typical day was like. When were you awakened and how were you awakened?

We were awakened early for field exercise every morning. Then we went to eat, and then we had training after that – different types of training: marching and other things such as that.

So you were awakened by somebody coming in and letting you know it was time to get up.

Well, the sergeant would come in and blast his voice.

He didn't gently wake you! So the sergeant would come in and tell you to get out of bed. . How much time did you have to get up and get ready?

I don't remember. It depended on how fast you got up. You had to go to the washroom and shave and whatever.

Were there inspections in your barracks?

Yes, quite often. They were very particular about that.

And what were they particular about?

Your bed blanket had to be so tight that if you dropped a quarter on it, it would bounce.

And if it didn't bounce?

You had to do it over.

Did you go to breakfast together? Did you exercise before breakfast?

We exercised before breakfast.

And what kind of exercise did you do?

With the rifle we had to run in place.

Calisthenics.

Yes, calisthenics – we had to do that, too.

So you did calisthenics and then went to breakfast.

Yes.

Did you go to breakfast as a group?

Yes.

What kind of breakfast did you have? Was the food good?

I don't remember that too much. There usually wasn't enough. There was always a battle over the milk – a pitcher of milk or a bottle. And then we all sat around a table when we all go there. And we had to pass around the milk for your cereal. You tried to be careful so you didn't take it all. You wanted to be sure everybody had some.

[Shirley adds: And that's all you got?]

Well, I don't remember. I just remember the milk thing.

So you had cereal. Were there eggs and that sort of thing?

Yes.

Could you get as much as you wanted?

No.

Was it one time through?

Yes.

Did they just automatically put the food on your plate, or did you tell them what you wanted?

No, they put it on automatically.

So you basically got a tray, and a "Here's your food for breakfast."

Yes.

Do you remember how long you had for breakfast?

No. Probably about a half-hour.

And after breakfast, then what?

Well, I don't remember if I went back to my barracks and then from there we would reform and go out and do our training. And I remember very little about that.

The only time I remember was when they took us out to a barren place and had us dig a foxhole. They wanted to make sure you dug it deep enough, and then they'd run a tank over the top of it.

So it better be deep enough!

[Shirley adds: You were in it?]

Yes.

So they gave you very practical skills.

Yes.

And another one was going underneath a barbed wire and they shot bullets over the top of you.

It was live ammo.

Yes.

Did anyone get hurt?

I don't remember.

So they were giving you very practical skills. Now, having a tank drive over you and having the barbed wire with live ammo made the war seem a lot closer. What do you remember talking with your buddies about?

I don't remember talking to them too much about that. We just took it for granted, I think.

Had you handled a gun or rifle before you went in the service?

No, just a bb gun.

So you had a bb gun. So you had to take classes in shooting.

Yes. I won a sharp-shooting medal.

Do you remember what kind of gun you had?

It was an M1 – the regular Army rifle, whatever it was.

Did you have classroom work also?

I don't remember, but we probably did – how to take it apart and clean it and things like that; how to maintain it.

Did you keep it at your side at all times?

Most of the time.

How long was your base camp?

Seventeen weeks.

Seventeen weeks of learning all the basic things you'd need.

One time they had a race for anybody who wanted to be involved in a 3 mile race – I forget if it was three or five miles. I didn't win, but I won a \$25 war bond!

Well, that was something. Did you have any free time?

Not a whole lot.

I know one time on a weekend we went into the city, Little Rock, on a Sunday and went to church there – two guys. We probably went around, got something to eat and took the bus back to camp. We had the day off.

Were you able to contact your family and friends back home?

We just wrote letters. I don't remember calling on the phone or anything.

While you were in base camp, boot camp, were you able to get packages from home?

I don't remember getting any packages.

So your seventeen weeks were all these specific skills. And you said you won a sharp-shooter medal. Any other awards?

Not that I know of.

So when those seventeen weeks were up you had some sort of graduation?

Yes – a 25 mile hike, all night long! That was the last day. And just before that I had trouble with my boots. So I went to the commissary and got some new boots.

Just before that.

Big, big mistake! Because the boots were not broken in. So, on the 25 mile hike one of them started rubbing on the back of my leg. It was very, very painful rubbing on the back of my leg. But I made it through. That was the last day.

When you finished boot camp did you get any leave?

Yes. We went home for two weeks.

How was the reception at home from your friends and family?

They were probably happy to see us.

How did you get home from Little Rock?

Train.

Troop train again?

I don't know if it was a troop train or regular train. I'm not sure which.

Deployment

So you got home and relaxed a little bit. Then where did you go?

Got on another train with my two buddies and we went to San Francisco, California. That was not a troop train. It was a regular train. It was a long ride.

A couple of days?

Yes. And when we got to San Francisco we went to a resort on the Pacific Ocean – some resort that was being used by the Army to oversee the men who were going through. We were only there a few days – maybe five days at the most. Then one of the friends with me, Jim [Stavenger] and, went on a train going to Portland, Oregon. The other fellow [Jim Edwards] went on a different route and ended up in the Philippines, and ended up involved in a battle in the Philippines.

So you were just a few days in San Francisco, then went up to Portland. Do you remember the camp in Portland?

No. We were just a couple of days there.

Then you were ready to ship out.

We got on an old Javanese ship crew. The conditions were not very good. And the minute we got out to sea with the waves I got seasick.

Do you remember the name of this boat?

I didn't want to remember that!

Was this the first time you were on a ship?

Yes.

I'm guessing you were not the only one to get sick.

No, there were a few. Because there are rough waters right off of Portland in the ocean, as soon as you got out of the river. And then the winter storms.

This was winter?

Yes. By the time we got there it was February or March – somewhere in there.

So you had already gone through the Christmas holidays. And in February the ocean can get kind of rough. Do you remember about how many men were on the boat?

No, but I'd guess 1,500 maybe.

Did your family have any idea where you were going?

No.

And you were not allowed to tell them where you were going. Did they know you'd left the States?

No.

So the last they knew, you had headed to San Francisco?

I wrote something from San Francisco.

And that was it.

Yes.

So you shipped out, and from Portland where did you stop?

Hawaii – Oahu.

And how long were you there?

A month.

What did you do in Oahu?

We enjoyed the nice weather during the winter from back home!

You probably welcomed it after that rough voyage!

We had more training there – jungle training and landing craft training; things like that.

So how to get on and off the landing craft?

Yes.

What did the jungle training consist of?

I don't remember what the jungle training was. But the landing crafts were very painful. We'd get on a landing craft, go out in the ocean a couple of miles or so, then turn around and come back. And it was wavy. And by the time I got to shore I was so seasick I just stumbled out of the landing craft, laid on the sand to recover. And they said, "Get back in." And we'd get in, go out and do it all over again. We did that three or four or five times – I don't know how many times – for a couple of days.

To make sure you could do it.

That was nothing new for people to go out and get seasick on those flat-bottomed boats.

So you were with your full pack and everything, get off the landing craft, head for the shore and then turn around and do it again.

Yes.

Was your one buddy still with you?

Yes.

Were you assigned to the same unit?

There weren't any assignments there. It was still a group for work. We weren't assigned to anything. That didn't happen until I got to Okinawa.

What were your living conditions like in Hawaii?

We had barracks there near the air field. They were nice barracks.

Kind of like the ones you had ...

No, better than that.

What was different about it?

It was more permanent buildings.

You got to enjoy some of the local food?

I think we got one pass. I remember we went to Honolulu with a couple guys. I got a haircut. It was the first time I got a haircut from a Hawaiian girl. It was a big deal!

Let's see. You were in the Army. How much hair did you have to cut?

I don't know, but I did.

Did you have any downtime – any recreational time – while you were there?

I don't remember if I did.

So you were there for about a month and then shipped out to Okinawa.

Yes, eventually.

Where did you go from Hawaii?

We got on a ship and stopped at Eniwetok. It's an island in the middle of the Pacific. We were able to get off the ship and go to the beach and swim and things for a few days. And more ships arrived until we had maybe eight ships. Then a couple of destroyer escorts came and we had a small convoy.

We left and farther southwest to the island of Saipan.

When you left Hawaii, you knew you were headed into combat.

Oh, yeah.

What was the mood like on the ship? Was it quiet?

No, no. The ship to Saipan was like riding on a cruise ship. The water was calm and you lived daily. You had two meals a day. You could go out on deck and take a sunbath.

Just kind of relax a little bit.

Yes.

One interesting experience on the ship, about 15 of us were sitting on the front of the ship and could see something in the water. We couldn't spot what it was, but it got bigger as we got closer. Pretty soon we could see it was a big round ball with spikes in it. So we knew right away it was a mine and we were headed right for it. Well, there was nothing we could do. We just stood there and looked at it and watched as it came up to the ship. It so happened it was about four feet off center of the ship bow. And the waves from the bow were enough to move that mine a few feet to the right. And as we continued, each wave moved it farther and farther until we passed it without it hitting the ship.

So no one in the convoy was hit.

No. Once the convoy had passed, one of the escort vessels blew it up. But it was very hairy for a while there.

Kind of interesting to watch! Did you see any other activity – submarines or anything like that while you were going?

No.

So we got to Saipan and unloaded there. We were there only maybe about 8 to 10 days. We got all our military equipment – our rifles. We practiced shooting the rifles, zeroed in the gun sites. We got all our equipment, did a few exercises and things like that, but for just a few days.

The most important thing that happened was we had a day off. And another fellow and I walked to the airfield on the island of Saipan to see where the B29's were taking off and landing, and things like that. We thought maybe we'd try to get a ride on one of them, but we got there too late in the afternoon. We were able to get in a couple of ships and look around on different things. But some of my buddies went on as many as three flights on a B29. That would have been exciting, because we'd never been in an airplane before. That opportunity passed.

So they weren't going on missions. They were just taking a ride to see.

They were testing after repairs.

So we got back and within a few days we got on trucks and went to the other side of the island – we were on the east side and now we went to the west side where the big harbor was. Well, we got there and there were ships everywhere!

We got on a Navy transport ship. It didn't take us long to get on there. And the harbor was filled with ships of all kinds from destroyers, cruisers, battleships, carriers – the whole deal. All I could see was ships.

Eventually we got together and moved out in a formation, and started moving northwest.

At this point you were 19 years old?

No.

You were still 18?

Yes. My birthday was in May and this was a little before that.

And you were a private at this point?

Yes.

So we got on the ship and eventually they gave you an information sheet about Okinawa – what to expect. The only thing I remember is they said to be careful of the six-foot long snakes! That worried us that we'd get in a foxhole and have a snake crawling in with us! But during the whole time I was there I only saw one snake, and it was after the battle was over. We were able to shoot it.

So you sailed to Okinawa on this troop ship.

We got into the harbor and got ready to disembark when the air raid siren went off. And they wouldn't let us get off the ship because of the Kamikaze attack by the Japanese planes that were attacking the ships in the harbor. So there was action – gunfire and things such as that. But they wouldn't let us out and we didn't know what was going on. We just didn't want one of those planes to hit our ship!

So you were below deck?

Yes. They wouldn't allow us on deck.

But you could hear everything.

Yes.

Were the explosions near you?

Well, I don't know. Mostly we heard the guns shooting off. We didn't know what was going on. We were there until it was all over with. It didn't last too long. They came and went. I don't know what happened. That's all I know.

So when you came above deck again and you were getting off, did you see anything then?

No.

Everything looked the same.

The side of the ship we got off, we couldn't see a thing.

The worst experience there was climbing down the net into a landing craft. It was very, very difficult.

Do you know about how far you had to climb down?

I would say 15 or 16 feet. It was very hard with the backpack and all the equipment on your back.

Do you know about how heavy your backpack was?

No, I don't know how heavy it was. Probably 30 pounds, maybe. And a rifle and everything.

So we got on the landing craft and it took us into the shore. We were what you called reinforcements. So we were there three weeks after the battle started. We landed on the shore, and during that day we were processed and assigned for companies – all different: 7th Division, 17th Division, 25th. So we were all assigned to different divisions as reinforcements.

Was your buddy still with you?

He was in my division, but in a different company. He was the 17th Infantry, and I don't know what company. I was in the 32nd Infantry, company ... [E].

So we made our way to our companies, made our hello's there and got assigned different things. We were fortunate because they were in reserve at that particular time, so it made it a little easier for us to acclimate to the division and meet other people.

And what do you remember those people telling you about?

I don't remember them telling us about anything. All I know is I had guard duty. And one night I remember all of a sudden there was a burst of guns from across the other side of the hill. We were on a hill and there was a valley and then another hill, and there were men on the other hill. And for some reason they opened fire and burst of massive fire. We didn't know what to do or what was going on. We didn't know until morning that the civilian Okinawan people had been trying to escape, and a whole group of people were moving through the valley in the middle of the night.

Who had fired on them?

The results were total – they were all killed. So it was hard to take.

Who had fired on them?

We did – the people on the other side. But we didn't know if it was Japanese.

But they didn't know who it was.

That was my first acclimation to Okinawa.

Then we moved out to replace another division and moved up to the front lines. And we were in our first attack. We were walking through a wooded area – maybe it was a small town, or I don't know what – but, as we were walking south toward the battlefield all of a sudden we

could see all these tanks headed toward us, going as fast as they could. And the shells from the Japanese were trying to get them. They were trying to escape and the shells from the Japanese guns were trying to get them, and they were trying to run toward us, and they ran past us as we were headed in. That wasn't very comforting!

We proceeded through a small two-foot path, marked by white stakes, through a minefield, through this wooded area, until we cleared that. And we moved up on some hills and attacked the Japanese in their positions.

I don't remember a lot about it. The thing I remember most was at the end. I was assigned to carry a case of grenades to the first platoon that had made the major attack. We were kind of a reserve. So carried a case of grenades for their reinforcement.

Just by hand, walking.

Yes. Boxes of them. They were heavy. I dropped them off and started back. Then the men from our company said to get down, "Dive!" So I dove down to the ground, and a bullet landed about four inches from my head. The sniper had zeroed in on me. I didn't know what to do. And pretty soon another one came two inches from my head. I knew the most important thing I could do was to pray. So I prayed this prayer, and I'll remember it as long as I live: *Lord, I'm too young to die. You have so much for me to do.* I didn't want to say this was my last.

Well, He honored my prayer that day. And after two more bullets landed there I lifted my head up and one landed right where my head had been. So I just lay there dead for maybe an hour. And the sniper quit shooting. Finally I got up and ran down the hill to where the rest of my platoon was hiding.

We stayed there until it got dusk. I picked up two foxhole mates. And it got total darkness and walked up to the top of the hill. And we located along a line with men in foxholes spread out in foxholes all along the line. So the three of us started digging a foxhole in the middle of the night, in the dark, with those little shovels.

I don't know how long it took us. It had to be three feet wide, three feet deep with those little shovels – taking turns to do it. But we had it done by morning. When it started to get light we did everything we knew to relieve ourselves before we got in there. We picked up some food and got into the hole just as daylight started. So we spent the rest of the day in our foxhole. The only time I got out was when it was early dusk until it was total darkness. But we could see them, but they couldn't see us. It was just those few minutes there.

Now this was right at the front line. Did you say this was on a little hill?

On top of the ridge, yes.

I don't know how long we were there. From there on we'd stay for a little while and make another attack and move, and continue this process.

So you kept advancing the line.

Yes.

We finally got to a foxhole and got through digging – every time we moved we had to dig a new foxhole and then crawl in. Well, this one day we got done, and this area is semi-tropic –

very warm and humid – but this morning it was cloudy and we were kind of thankful for that. Then the wind picked up a little bit. And it started to rain. And it rained harder and blew harder. And it got harder and harder. Well, it turned out we were in the middle of a typhoon. It had hit Okinawa a couple of days before – 120mph winds, and 20” of rain! So we’re sitting in this foxhole – the three of us, one facing one way and two another – and we sat there for a couple of days in our ponchos. We just had to sit there and suffer through it all. You couldn’t touch anything that wasn’t all mud. There was no food or water other than what we had with us.

Finally we moved to another location for another attack somewhere past that mud hole.

Finally we got to that escarpment – the 40-foot high wall. It didn’t look very inviting. We were on a ridge with some woods. The company was lined up along the ridge. They talked about attacking at night so the Japanese couldn’t get us. But our sergeants weren’t too happy with that. They said, “No, it’s too dangerous. We’d kill our own men.” So we attacked early in the morning.

All they told us was run fast, zigzag and keep your head down. Well, we’re packing with all that stuff on our backs, carrying our rifles and carrying ammunition for the automatic rifle man. We were very loaded down with weight, running and zigzagging through this valley which was made up of rice-paddies. They were dry. There was no water in them, but they had ridges. So that’s what I did. And we couldn’t stop.

So I ran – dodging four sideways: left, right and so on. Well, I must have dodged at the right times because every once-in-a while a bullet would come past me.

You could hear it.

Oh, yes. They were real close. I don’t know how many came past me. But I just kept on going. I passed a dead guy here. I finally got closer to the escarpment, and the Japanese switched to the guys coming behind me. So at the end I didn’t really hear them shooting at me then, because maybe we were where they couldn’t angle down at us. All I remember is I got to that bank against that 40-foot wall. I sat down and my lungs were burning like I’d never experienced before from the stress and sweat and heat and all that. They just burned. But I was safe. And soon other men joined me as they made their way across.

So the Japanese were right above us on that ridge above us. So we stayed where we were until we gradually got back all together.

One of the things we did always on that island was to connect one company next to the other. Our company was in this position and another company was on the left. We always had to connect so the Japanese couldn’t sneak between us, because they had a tendency to do that.

The lieutenant sent a platoon which headed out to my left. To our left were anti-tank trenches made by the Japanese to keep our tanks from going through this area up to a ramp up to the top of the escarpment. They were protecting that ramp so they couldn’t get there. So there was this big valley, and this group of men went to connect with the company on our left. Well, they got half-way through that when shells landed right in the middle of them. The Japanese had a gun located on a cliff to our right, and we couldn’t see hardly where it was. And when they saw all those men he opened up on them with the gun and just about killed them all who were in that trench. It was very disheartening.

Somebody carried a soldier. We were sitting up against the bank and he laid this soldier down in front of us. One of the guys got out his mirror and checked for his breath, but he was dead.

That was probably the most disastrous day in the life of our company. I have no idea how many people died crossing that field and in that trench. But when it got dark we located our foxholes and started digging.

We dug all night and crawled in our foxholes before daylight. Foxholes are pretty close – 15 feet, maybe, between each one. So then we were there. And in the morning we had to keep our heads down because they were on top. They could see in our foxholes. But we just stayed against the bank in our foxholes.

All of a sudden that gun down there opened up again, shooting shells into our area. And one landed 15 feet from me, right on the edge of the foxhole next to mine. Right on the edge. I don't know how bad they were hurt from the shell or the fragments from it. But our lieutenant, Lieutenant Joseph – a man I hardly knew at all because we didn't have time to converse. But he was well-respected by the men. He rushed over to that foxhole to see how badly they were hurt. He wasn't there ten seconds when a sniper put a bullet in him and he was dead. It was very disheartening. It was painful to watch.

So the rest of the battle we were left without an officer running our platoon. The sergeant was in charge until we joined up with another platoon that had a lieutenant.

How much longer did the battle last?

I have no idea. I don't know the timing or anything. We were there about three months. I hadn't got there until after the three weeks, so I didn't know where it was.

Anyway, it was getting near the end – maybe two or three weeks near the end. So we were there a few days. And a tank was brought up and was able to fill in that trench with a bulldozer ahead of the tank. And we moved up that ramp. It was just a normal opening to the top of the escarpment. It was 40-feet high. The whole end of the island was a 40-foot high escarpment. We walked behind the tank watching for snipers who might pop up to try to shoot him or us. So we slowly moved up to the top of the ridge, and we spread out along that ridge looking for any Japanese we saw.

That means we were up on the escarpment then. It was mainly coral rock, so it was pretty hard to dig a foxhole! And I don't remember even digging a foxhole. I don't remember what it was, but it was not easy.

Meanwhile, one morning I was trying to eat some of my rations and I had trouble opening my mouth. My mouth was being restricted by something. I got out my stainless steel mirror, opened it up and looked at my face. The sight I saw was not very encouraging. My whole neck and face was all covered with a fungus – across the bottom of my nose, around my mouth and up my cheeks. And on my neck was a big glob of fungus. I had picked up somewhere along the way – maybe it was during that hurricane with all that mud – I picked up something. And in that semi-tropic area it grew pretty fast. I knew I had to get something done. It couldn't get into my nose and my eyes. So I went to my medic. He took one look and sent me down to the aid station. They took one look and put me on a Jeep with two other guys heading back to the field hospital. I don't know how far we went. Maybe it was only a half-hour or an hour. I don't know how long it was. And we got to that field hospital.

It may have been a field hospital, but to me it was something else. I was looking at what was commonly known as a maximum-fancy hotel! All I saw were these tents that had a roof overhead to keep the sun out and the rain off. And there were those beds called Army cots. And there was a clean blanket. And not only that, there was a pillow! All these weeks and months

sleeping in foxholes or on the ground. Why, it was just absolutely the most glorious sight I had ever seen! So I got in there and laid down and enjoyed those moments there.

So you were 19 at this point?

Yes. I had my birthday sometime there in May – toward the end of the battle.

And, believe it or not, they had a shower! They had put up some canvases around and had some big tanks with water and heaters. And I was able to take a shower. I took all my filthy clothes off. I hadn't had no clean clothes, no clean socks, no clean underwear for all those weeks up to that point, or had a bath or anything, or washed my face or anything. So I took that glorious shower. I took my clothes off and I don't know what happened to them.

It was probably the best shower you've ever had!

Yes!

So I got that shower and they gave me all clean clothes and socks and everything and I went back to my wonderful bed and rested there.

Well, the next day they took me in. I don't remember if they put me under or what, but all I know is they scraped everything off my face. When they got through I looked like a piece of red meat. And they put penicillin salve on and gave me a penicillin shot and I went back to my bed and lay down and enjoyed the days after that like I was king-of-the-hill. I wasn't sick. I wasn't hurt. I had three meals a day. They nurses came in and serviced me, and the doctors. What more could a person ask for! It was better than a hotel!

How long were you there?

I don't know how long I was there – maybe seven or eight days; I don't know. But I started healing pretty quick. And the place was loaded with our men who were wounded, and all kinds of things. The whole thing was filled. It was a big "U" shape with hospital beds in it, and the medical end was on the other end. So it was a square. It was about a 40-foot square in the middle of all those tents. I forget the name.

Anyway, I was laying there and was awakened at 9:00 in the morning from my morning nap. I had my early breakfast and then it was time for a nap. The air raid siren went off. I thought, "what in the world are they doing with an air raid siren out here in the middle of nowhere?" But I guess because the Japanese planes were still active they thought that was the best thing to do. Anyway, nobody did anything – no protection was done, there was no place to go hide or anything.

Anyway, I decided to get up and go stand in the middle of that 40-foot square area. And I thought maybe I could see a U.S. plane trying to shoot down a Japanese plane. I knew the odds were very poor, but I thought maybe I would see a plane or something. But I didn't see anything. I was standing there for maybe five minutes.

Finally I heard a new noise, a noise I hadn't heard before. I didn't know what it was, but it grew louder and pretty soon I saw it was a Japanese flying over that hospital, over the tips of tents. I could see the head of that pilot. He wasn't 50-feet from me. It was the most amazing thing to see him pass us headed for the harbor. It was a Kamikaze pilot looking to go into one of the ships in the harbor. I knew where he was going, but I didn't think much about it. I stood

there a little bit longer. It was a shocking thing to see. In all that time I hadn't seen a Japanese plane the whole time I had been there.

Then I heard another noise. I dove to the ground and covered my head with my arms and a shell ...[landed] to my left. I knew immediately I hadn't been hit by any of the shrapnel. I was far enough away from the explosion that I was not hurt. But then I had to do one of the hardest things I ever had to do. I brought my arms down along my side, raised up my body and turned my head to my left to a sight I'll never forget. The shell hit in the middle of all those soldiers in those tents. They didn't have a chance. It was a disaster. I was crushed.

So basically, the fact that you had gotten up and taken that little walk saved your life.

It didn't land where I was. It was in a different spot.

So I got up. I knew there was nothing I could do. I knew within seconds the whole hospital staff would be there to try to take care of the situation. So I went back to my cot, laid face down with my head in my pillow, covered my head with arms to cut all the sight and sounds of what was going on around me for the rest of the day as they proceeded to clean up that accident. We didn't get any lunch or supper. But before it got dark they were able to deliver some food to us – the rest of the hospital patients.

You never want to know how many people died, so I never asked. I don't know how many were wounded. But I never forgot it.

After a few days they told me to go home – to go back to my outfit. I asked, “Where is it?” They said, “Just start walking. You'll find it.”

So another guy and I started walking and hitch-hiking, asking if anybody knew where the 7th division was, where the 42nd regiment was; and I wanted to stop and see my friend who was in the 17th regiment. So I found where the 17th was, and the company where my friend was. I went to this company and asked if they knew where my friend, Jim [Stanger] was. Somebody finally said, “I know Jim [Stavenger]. He's not here. He was wounded and sent back to a hospital.” I said I was sorry to hear that, but they didn't think it was serious. I made my way back to my company. They outfitted me again with a rifle, and we proceeded to finish the rest of the battle.

The most amazing thing that happened there, thank goodness, was the Japanese soldiers during that period of time started surrendering – something during all the four or five years of the war they'd never done anywhere. But in the hundreds and thousands they surrendered, which took a lot of the action that we were involved in. We had to be careful because you never knew when one of them would pop out with a hand-grenade or would shoot. It was risky business.

We continued to make our way south toward the end of the island. Our company was made up of all the men from the other three platoons into one platoon. I guess we did have an officer in charge – I don't remember; maybe it was just the sergeants running the outfit by that time. And we made our way south.

We finally came to what I called the last day. There was D-Day in Europe, D-Day in Japan. But this was the “last day”. I'm going to tell you about it.

We got up early in the morning because we knew it would be the last day. We could smell the ocean and we were anxious to get there, to finish up and just search. The first place we stopped that we came to was a cave about the size of a one-car garage. And in it we discovered tables and maps and papers and clothing that had been the last stance of the generals. There were three generals running that campaign, and this had been their last location – the Japanese generals. They weren't there. So one of the guys took a coat. There wasn't much there to see.

In the meanwhile, I had read in a book, the Japanese generals had committed suicide and their bodies thrown off a cliff into the ocean by their men – that’s what happened to them.

So we continued on. We could smell the water. We finally reached a pivotal point. We reached a point where you could see the water way out there. And as we got closer you could see it closer and closer. Pretty soon we got to the point where we could see the waves. And it was the most miraculous thing to see those waves, because the sun was shining on those droplets of water as they broke over the tops of the waves and it shined like diamonds. It was the most brilliant sight I’d ever seen, it seemed like. All of the dirt and dirt we’d seen, and mud and death – this was just the most comforting sight to see that we were there at the end and it was so beautiful. So I walked up to see the waves breaking against the bottom of the cliff.

Suddenly one of the men to the left said, “Look over here! Come over here.” I don’t know how many men were there, I couldn’t even tell you – maybe 50, maybe a hundred. So we all moved over to the edge of the cliff to my left and there was a sight we couldn’t believe, either. We looked down, and there the waves had carved out a bay. It wasn’t very big – maybe about half a football field; about fifty yards. And in that fifty yards was a sand beach. And those waves were breaking over that sand beach. And that beach was about 30-feet wide. And there was a path down to the beach. The Japanese had made a path where they used to go down to take a bath.

We decided this [was] the best thing we could do – get a bath. I hadn’t had a bath since I was in the hospital. A lot of the guys had never had a bath! So one by one all of us, all those men, zigzagged down that cliff until we got down to the sand beach. Then we moved over to the place where we took our rifles off, took our bayonets and attached them and stuck our rifles down into the sand. Then we took our helmets off and set them next to them. And we took off our backpacks and set them next to them. Then I took off my shirt, I took off my pants and my boots and my dirty socks and my dirty t-shirt – everything was dirty again. I set them there in that pile, turned and made my way slowly, faster, faster, faster. As we got near the water like all of us had done. Anybody who’s been near the water knows they run when they get near the water. We ran until the water tripped us up and made us dive into that warm, soothing, cleansing water!

Best swim of your life!

That was the most delicious water we’d ever seen. And we all got in that water, acting crazy like a bunch of wild teenagers.

[Shirley: Well, you were! That’s what you were at that time.]

Yes, most of us were teenagers. We were laughing and talking because we knew we had all survived those three months.

Some of us had those little bars of soap. They took and washed their hair and passed them around as best they could. Otherwise we just took our hands and rubbed our bodies as best we could to get the dirt off our bottom and legs. We just enjoyed ourselves as much as we could, cleansing ourselves in that warm water.

After a short time – maybe fifteen or twenty minutes – we gradually, one-by-one, got out of that water and gathered in small groups of maybe fifteen or twenty along that beach.

Everyone was naked – every soldier was naked – standing there, carrying on joyfully. We knew that we had survived the battle.

After the sun had dried our bodies we knew it was time to go, so we made our way back to our clothes as best we could. And we put our dirty shirts, dirty underwear, dirty socks – put all our equipment and everything back on until we looked like soldiers again. One-by-one we made our way back up that cliff to the top. We knew we had completed the battle.

It didn't end there because we had weeks of searching – stragglers in caves. That went on for a number of weeks, living where we were on the ground, still eating our lousy food – rations and stuff. But we did get some mail. I got a few letters. One time I got 13 letters. Another time I got 26 letters; 65 letters one day!

That must have been wonderful to sit and read those letters.

Well, it was good and bad. How could you read 65 letters and remember what you read! And how could you carry all that mail around with you in your backpack? That's a lot of mail stacked up. So I don't remember a lot of what I read. But I did read that my friend, Jim, had died. He died in the hospital. The guy was in that spot where that shell landed.

He was in the hospital when you were there. And he got hit.

Yeah. So that was tough to take.

Finally it was over with. We had put up our tents and had made our way back to the bivouac area, where we could sleep and eat and probably just about do nothing, except oiling the road that went by our tents to keep the dust down. We'd get about a 5-gallon can of lard, punch holes in the bottom, went down to the Army carpool and got oil and brought it back in those cans. We'd walk along carrying those cans between two men on a stick to keep the dust down. That was our biggest job we had to do.

But then we had some really ambitious guys in our company. Some of them went down to the carpool in the truck spot and picked up a truck. There were keys in it and it was available. They went down to the harbor and met some of the men from the ships in the harbor and made a deal. They told them to bring all the lumber they had on the ship and they'd give them souvenirs. We had a lot of souvenirs. So that truck came back with a whole load of lumber and we took souvenirs back down to them.

What were the souvenirs you took to them?

Bayonets, rifles; things like that.

So the men got together – some of them – and built this beautiful mess hall. It was up ...[on] steps with a deck and railing and tables. We were the only ones in the whole area with a mess tent like that! And we put a tent over the top of it to keep out the sun and the rain. We'd go there and play cards and do all the fun stuff we liked to do, and talk and drink coffee. That was one of the good things that happened.

And some of the guys got another truck and went down to the harbor. They talked to some of the guys and said, "You load our truck up with food, we'll give you souvenirs. Good food – fresh food." Sure enough they came back with a whole truckload of food, brought it to the chefs and said, "Here." So we had good food to eat.

There was a lot of battering going on!

Yes! They were enterprising, and it was wonderful. We were the best outfit in the whole place.

So we enjoyed that life there, not having much to do. We didn't even do any training too much. We'd finished that and had maybe a month in there. The battle ended around the end of June. Then we had July, and August 15 was the end of the war. So it was just that six week period in there.

But when they announced about the bombs going off and that peace had come, the island became the most dangerous spot in the whole world to be. Everybody who could handle anything, from rifles to canons to bombs, the whole island had lit up with fireworks for two days. I think only 15 people got killed!

How did you hear? Was it an announcement that was made or something written?

I don't know how we got the information. We knew it came right away, but I don't know how they got it.

So that's what happened, and that's how it ended. That was on August 15.

By the end of the month – those two weeks – we had moved to the harbor, moved our equipment and loaded ships. Our company was loaded on ships; our whole division was loaded on ships on the west side of that island of Okinawa. We didn't know where we were going, but we had escort vessels and ships to protect us from any miscellaneous submarines or ships that would think they had a real opportunity to retaliate. We made our way up along between China and Japan, up to the small peninsula called Korea. We were very disappointed that we didn't get to go to Japan. And we suffered that way the whole time I was there.

We got to that ...land which had been occupied by the Japanese for 75 or 100 years and it abused that country and all their products and minerals. And the women were taken by the Japanese soldiers to service the men – wherever they might be in that southwest area of the Pacific. So it was bad what they did. So that all ended.

We landed at Incheon on the first of September.

This was 1945?

1945, yes. We got off the ships. And believe it or not there was a train there waiting for us. There must have been a few people who went ahead and made arrangements to have that train there. Our men got on that train until it was full and went for about a 60-mile ride to Seoul, Korea – that's the capital city of Korea. We loaded on that train. We pulled into that station – it was a nice, bit railroad station.

Amazingly, on the train next to us was filled with Japanese soldiers. They were getting ready to go back the way we came to go down to the ship to go back to Japan. It was strange looking at them as they looked at us. It was just a strange feeling to see that happen.

Face-to-face with the enemy.

So we got to the city. We unloaded, got out of the station and lined up in formation out there in the open area of the station. There weren't any people except some Japanese soldiers or police – whichever they were, I don't know – with their rifles making a line down the boulevard from the station to the main road. And they were lined up with their backs to us showing the way to go. So we lined up and marched down that highway. There wasn't another person to be seen. The city had a couple million people at that time, but there wasn't a one to be seen – not a dog, not a person. It was totally quiet. All you could hear was our feet as we marched down that highway. We marched down to a bivouac area where the Japanese soldiers had been staying all those years. They had built barracks and had a car place for their trucks. And that's where we were led to – that spot.

So we got there, unloaded our equipment and stuff into different barracks and within a very short time we were loaded back into trucks and positioned at different intersections in the city, in groups of 3, 4 or 5 men at different spots in the city. And slowly, slowly the Korean people would come out to us. They were fearful and didn't know what to expect. And pretty soon it became joyously, and pretty soon it became a celebration. Because they realized that period of those many years with the Japanese had ended and they were free.

So that's what we did for a number of days, weeks. Then it was time. We got robbed again. Our company was loaded on trucks and started up this long road to the 38th parallel – the line between North and South Korea. The Russians were on one side and we were on the other, establishing control of our territories along the 38th parallel. We ended up in a town and in an old school where we set up our bunks and a place to cook and sleep in the town at that school. Shortly thereafter we began patrols. We were located in one town, and there was another town maybe 20 miles away – I don't know because it was mountainous country.

First of all they took me and some other men. I don't know if I was a corporal at this time or not – I don't know when I got that; may I was private first class. I don't know. And then we picked up additional soldiers – replacements – because a lot of our men had gone home; they had enough points to go home, so all the older men had gone home. So we got a Jeep and took a Jeep ride down this road until we stopped at a schoolhouse and said this was where we would stay overnight. And then we went down to the next town and said this was where we would meet the men from the other direction. We met in a police station, had our lunch and marched back to the school, stayed overnight and finished up. It was a three-day walk along that 38th parallel.

When we started it was fairly cool. But it grew worse – very cold and wintery. And, of course, we hadn't received all our winter clothing either. So we suffered through that a few times. But pretty soon we got everything we needed. We went out on those long cold walks. We got to a schoolhouse that had broken windows in it. There was one oil stove in the middle of this room and some bunks around it, as close to it as we could get to keep warm.

I remember going to bed one night. I put blankets down underneath me, put my sleeping down on top of that and blankets on top of me and I was cold all night long. I slept with all my clothes on. I don't know why it was so cold, but I was. Anyway, it was that was for a number of weeks.

Do you know how long you were in Korea?

A year.

So it got to be Christmas while we were there. Meanwhile, our colonel Mickey Finn – very popular with the men, very well known; there had been an article about him in the Saturday Evening Post. I put it in my biography.

He was all for sports, so he established sports there. We had our group from our little town up there. We had a basketball team that went down in the wintertime and played basketball with other ...[teams]. We played in this gym – that's what they called it. It had a very low ceiling and had light bulbs that were so dim you could hardly see the basket! We'd play right in our combat boots with other teams for a number of weeks.

It was during this time I got sick again – not sick, but injured or whatever it was. So I went to the medic and discovered I had hemorrhoids. So they proceeded to get me ready and operated on my rear end, which is one of the most painful things I'd ever had done. And the men didn't enjoy it much, either. But Colonel Mickey Finn came to visit me while I was in bed. So I thought that was pretty impressive that he knew who I was and came to visit me. I was there for a week or so.

So, after the basketball season ended it was time for baseball. So I tried out for the regiment baseball team and I was good enough – I was a great athlete.

What position did you play?

Outfield. So a bunch of men go together with Lieutenant Josey. He was a graduate of West Point. He was in charge of athletics.

So we led the good life. We practiced. We worked on our diamond and made it better. And we arranged for trips. We'd get a truck and go out and drive to different places. We rode the trains. I just played sports! It was better than walking up there along trail up there in the winter or in the spring in all the mud.

So you played baseball in combat boots, too?

No. We wrote home and asked to have our shoes sent. We all had our shoes sent to us.

[Shirley: Really? You mean all the way from LaGrange they sent your shoes?]

Yes, yes.

[And you actually got it?]

Yes. So I had my own baseball shoes. And our enterprising lieutenant went to the commissary, rounded up 20 mattress covers – really nice mattress covers. He took them down to a seamstress in town, made up uniforms! We were the only team in Korea that had uniforms! We were very impressive. We wore our Army hats, but we had baseball shoes and uniforms! I was fortunate to be able to do that and made some good friends.

But then Colonel Mickey Finn was transferred back to the States and we got a new colonel. He was all spit-and-finish, and soon started putting the pressure on us to work. The only way we could work was at night if we wanted to play baseball at any time. And that's what he made us do. So we'd work eight hours somewhere – go to ships down in the harbor or whatever tasks they had – and we'd come back and play baseball. But it was worth it.

Well, somewhere along that line I started not feeling exactly right. I don't know when it happened – maybe right after Christmas. But it was from Christmas all the way to August, the end of August, before I got on a ship to go home – the 15th.

[Shirley: Were you still walking the parallel? Why were you there? Why did they keep you there?]

To keep the Korean soldiers and the Russian soldiers from crossing over into our area to collect food. They lived off the land a lot. So they would rob the peasants of their grain and feed. They'd try to shoot the peasants. There were a lot of peasants. So that's why they did that.

I don't know when it was. Like I said, after Christmas some time, I don't know anything about what brought it on. It started affecting me, although I didn't know it. I didn't understand it and I didn't know what it was. But it affected me because I didn't have any desire to write letters home and to my girlfriend. I finally reached that point – I don't know when it was – somewhere halfway between December and maybe July or somewhere in there. I don't know how long it was that I went without writing any letters.

So it sounds like a depression.

I didn't know what it was. I didn't tell anybody and I didn't go anywhere. I was still having fun playing baseball – what more could you ask for. So finally the captain talked to me and said, "Johnson, why aren't you writing letters? Your parents contacted the Red Cross to find out what happened to you because they hadn't heard from you for months. Sit down and start writing. And I want to see it!" So that was the initiative I needed to start writing a letter to my parents and to my girlfriends. I'd give anything to this day to read what those letters were like. I can't imagine what they were like. I have no idea what I could write, or if they made any sense.

I don't know how many letters I wrote before it was time to go. Somewhere in the middle of all this they moved me. They got me ready to go on a ship home.

I loaded on a ship down in the harbor. I got on a ship with 5,000 other guys on one of those liberty ships, where they're stacked five-bunks high down in the hold. That wasn't too bad.

Were they bunks or were they the hammocks?

They were cots.

Returning to the States

So this was August, 1946. And you were 20?

Yes.

So we started out on our summer cruise home across the Pacific. I don't know who our captain was. But he got us around the island of Japan, around the southern tip, out into the

Pacific Ocean. I don't know what he was thinking. The only thing I could think was he thought, "I'm going to practice my seamanship skills. I'm going to see how good I can do in a typhoon." And that's what he did.

He steered you right into a typhoon.

Right into the middle of a typhoon.

How big was this ship?

A liberty ship. I don't know how long it was.

How many men on board?

5,000. There were probably only 4,500 seasick men on that ship, but I was one of them. And it went on for days. That storm lasted for so long, and I was sure that ship was going to sink. It would just go up and bang down. It was the most miserable thing. No food, no nothing for days. And we struggled through that storm before we made it through into calmer waters. Boy, I wish I had a rifle. I would have shot that guy dead if I had a chance, I think, to make those men suffer like that. I was bitter about that for a long time, and I still am.

Finally we were in calmer seas. I sat down with three other men and started playing pinochle – double-deck pinochle. That's all we did all day long for about ten days or whatever days it was until we got to San Francisco. Those cards got dirty. And pretty soon that deck of cards was that thick, and then it got this thick and pretty soon that thick.

[Shirley: Did you put powder on them or something?]

We put foot powder on them! So we could deal them!

So the foot powder kept caking up on them and it got thicker and thicker.

My partner and I, we lost \$10,000, but it was just fun money.

Finally we reached that point where we could see land, and we ran and saw the Golden Gate Bridge. And we sailed underneath that into San Francisco Bay. It was a wonderful feeling. We pulled up to the dock and they had a band there playing, believe it or not. It was a year after the war ended and they were still celebrating the soldiers, because they were still veterans of the war. It was just a band and they played a few songs and then it was all over. That's all it was. But it was something.

And we marched down to some sleeping quarters right there, somewhere near the harbor. I don't know where it was.

Like a hotel?

I have no idea where it was, or what it was. We slept there one night. Then we got our train the next day heading east, back to Chicago. It was a troop train – still a troop train – loaded up with soldiers. We made our way across the country. I don't know how many days – it

probably took two or three days. I remember how hot it got on those trains. They had a special railroad car made up to make food, so we had food to eat. But it was a long ride. And sleeping on those seats is not very comfortable. But we went up to Chicago and then up to Fort Sheridan where we got off. We were processed for three days when we were ready to go home.

Discharge and Return to Civilian Life

So you were discharged in the same place where had been inducted.

Yes, at Fort Sheridan.

And I called my parents when I got out and they met me at the gate. I got in the car and they drove me home. I don't know if my sister, Ruby, was with me or not. I don't remember. But I can remember I was happy to be home.

I'm sure your parents were happy to see you!

Oh, yeah. But I didn't have a lot of joy. I was suffering a pretty deep depression then. But I was happy to be home and sleeping in my own bed.

The next day my mom and I went down and zipped through the Village of LaGrange haberdashers, and bought some leftover clothes. Everybody else had already been home a year, and here I was trying to find some clothes. My mother was trying to buy some clothes for a man after handling three older sisters! And I was colorblind to make matters worse. We found some of the ugliest clothes you ever want to imagine!

So I came home, got up the next day. I got in the car with my dad and my sister, Alice. All three of my older sisters had graduated from Augustana College in May and had made arrangements for me to go there that fall. And even though I was ten days late, they still thought I could get in; maybe two weeks late. So they drove me down to the school that day.

We met a girlfriend of my sister's and we went through the catalog. They helped me get a curriculum. They gave me a key to my room in the dorm. And we got in the car and drove home. We made all that in one day.

The next day, believe it or not, I got on a train in LaGrange, on the Zephyr, up to Minneapolis, Minnesota. I felt it was important that I go visit my girlfriend. After all, she had been writing to me for two years and I hadn't seen her in all that time. So I went up there for a weekend – got there on Friday, stayed there on Saturday and came home on Sunday. It was very bad.

When I got there I must have looked like death-warmed-over, because the first thing they did was put me to bed! I was really blue. I was not ready for all that. So I spent a long, long weekend there with that girl and her parents. That was not very nice – not what you want to remember. But they thought maybe if I came back in another month it would be better. So I made arrangements to come back in another month, in October.

I got home on Sunday and my dad drove me down to school on Monday. I started class on Tuesday.

What were you studying?

I went to class on Wednesday, and I went to class on Thursday. And I know I was lost. I was so depressed and lost. I knew I had to make a decision on what to do.

The first thing I thought was that I'd just continue with classes until the end of the semester over and flunk them all. I decided to call my dad and have him come and pick me up and take me home. That's what I wanted him to do because I was just so sick with depression. But I went to my counselor, who was a friend of my sister's, and talked to her on Friday. So we went over the curriculum again and looked to find the four easiest classes in the book. It didn't make a difference what they were, just the easiest. Then we would see what happened. And that's what I did.

On Monday I started again, three weeks late to these classes. I don't remember what they were, but I struggled with them for some time.

Then October came, and I got my friend from home town and he drove me up to Big Rock. I picked up the Burlington Northern train there and rode up to Minneapolis again to see my girlfriend. It was a long ride, again. And when I got there I spent the weekend. When it was over I got on a train and came home. Oh, what a miserable train ride! I was so depressed. I didn't know how bad it was. I knew it was over. I had performed so poorly, and they didn't know what to do about it. They didn't know what was wrong with me. It was just terrible. I came back and continued in my classes.

That was October and November. Meanwhile I had my hometown friend and we had made some friends. There were about fifteen of us who had made friends with this group of men called a fraternity. They proceeded to have an initiation in the middle of November on a Friday night. All week long they had been making us do things. Our clothes had been dyed black. We had eggs in our pockets. They made us stay up all night. They just abused us terribly as we went through this initiation to this fraternity.

So Friday night we went to the home of one of the men who lived in town. We went to the basement and they laid us down on the floor. They had music playing and our eyes blindfolded. And that was the end for me. I went into convulsions and became unconscious and slipped into a coma. I didn't know what was going on, and they didn't know what was going on, and it scared them all to death. They couldn't take me to a hospital because of the way I was dressed. So they took me back to my room and called some doctor friends they knew and brought them to watch over me. I laid unconscious in my bed all Friday night and all Saturday. By Sunday morning I started to wake up. Gradually my mind came back to me. I started to eat some breakfast. They brought me stuff to eat. We went down to the lounge and turned on the Bears game – we had TV as I remember. I spent the rest of the day recuperating and having my mind gradually recover – become conscious.

I had a good night's rest and woke up the next morning. Though I was weak I went to class again – to those classes I was taking. It wasn't till many months later before I realized what had happened during that weekend. I finally remembered, discovered, that my mind had been totally blacked out from my army career – all the suffering – that I didn't have a girlfriend; all the misery, all that was blacked out and just left me a friendly, joyous life.

I was able to make the basketball team, went to college and played on a baseball team. And all this time I was gradually recovering from the depression. The depression had left me that weekend. The Lord had performed a miracle and blacked out my mind so that I didn't remember anything. It made me a new person.

Gradually my health increased and all that happened. By the end of May, when school was over, I still knew I had to get away. My poor parents! I never talked to them about it. I

never said anything to anyone about my behavior or my personality or anything. And I never talked about it either. But I'm sure they wondered.

When I got home I said I had to go up to the farm. I bought some overhauls and shirts, packed a suitcase, and rode up on the Burlington down to Chicago in the morning, got on the Northwestern train and rode up to Rice Lake, Wisconsin. My uncle, my mother's brother, had a dairy farm there – a place I had been many times, a place I enjoyed so much. He treated me as a son; he only had one daughter. And I began helping him farm that farm. It wasn't big, but it was all by hand – no electricity, no telephones, no running water, no bathrooms.

So it was much more primitive living than here.

But I loved it, and they loved me. They fed me like crazy. I had made a boy friend on another farm about a mile away. We used to go out to free movies at different towns – they'd show them on weekends on a Friday night; they'd show them on a wall somewhere in town. Or we'd go get ice cream or just drive around. We went to church together – they were going to the Lutheran church where I was going right in the town. He had a brother. I just had a good time with them, so that helped.

So I worked there. Then, in July, my uncle, Herman Olson was his name – he and his wife Lila and Carol, my cousin – he had brought a threshing machine. He had bought it for a number of years and was getting ready to go the circuit. He got it all ready and we proceeded to move from farm to farm to farm to farm, around a number of miles, threshing the grain of the farmers. They would all come together with horses and wagons. The farms weren't that big, so it didn't take that long to get through the oats and barley and grains, and move from one farm to another.

And we'd go home to milk the cows. We milked them in the morning and at night. I milked five cows and my Uncle Herman milked the rest – by hand.

Finally I finished that. Now we're at August.

This is August, 1947?

Yes.

My uncle was a joyous, friendly guy.

[Shirley: I don't know how much more she wants because this is mostly about your Army.]

So how long did you spend on the farm with your uncle?

Three months.

And after those three months you came home?

Yes. I was a new person.

Those three months really helped you process all your experiences.

Yes.

What did you do when you came home?

I went back to school.

The same school – Augustana?

Yes.

This time you were able to go ahead and do the classes.

Yes.

What did you study?

Math, science – physics – astronomy, geography and geology.

Was the school on the GI Bill?

Yes.

And you got a degree?

Yes, in mathematics.

When you graduated you went into what line of work?

I didn't! I had no idea what I wanted to do or where I wanted to go. I only did math because I could do it and I liked it pretty much. I got home from college and I never even looked for a job. For three months I played around with my friends and just had a good time. But then it became September and I knew I had to get a job. I couldn't just keep living off my folks. I was the only one at home. Everybody else was gone. My brother was there – he had been in the Army and had gotten out.

So I went and looked at one job. And I finally went to General Motors, Electro-Motive plant in La Grange. They made diesel railroad engines there. I went there and got a job in the Engineering Department as a clerk. I don't want to give the other term I used! I decided I would spend a year there. I got to know some of the men there.

I had a job where I had a lot of freedom. I was assigned a job of assigning extra for each railroad engine that each railroad wanted and where they wanted to position them on the engines. I had to take the photographer down there and have pictures taken of the engines when they were done. So that's what I was doing that year.

At the end of the year I quit and went home.

Meanwhile, because I was at a General Motors plant I decided to buy a new car so I could get a discount. I bought a Pontiac and had a new car. Meanwhile my brother had a friend who was another fraternity brother of ours – Ed Davis – who quit his job. I said, "Come on!

Let's go out and visit some of our national parks." Neither one of us were interested in working, so he said, "Okay." So we bought a pup tent and some sleeping bags; my folks had a gas stove. We loaded it up in my car and we took off at the end of September for out west.

The first day we made 150 miles and ended up at Augustana College where we were going to a wedding. That was our first stop. We spent three days there, and from there we made our way to Nebraska and camped there. Then we went to the Rockies and we just wandered. We just wandered our way. We had no map, we just wandered wherever we wanted to go.

We went through the Rockies and then to Yellowstone, Tetons, down to Salt Lake City, west to the mountains there. We went to the big lake – Lake Tahoe. We went there and went to some gambling resorts. We went to Squaw Valley State Park. We slept there in the middle of winter. It was cold, but we put our tent up there.

You hadn't had enough of tenting yet?

No! We went to every State park through there, Yellowstone – all those parks we went to – down to the Grand Canyon, the big caverns in New Mexico.

How long did you go on this excursion?

Five months. Not bad!

So you finished this excursion and went home. Did you get started in your career then?

No! I came home and my roommate and good friend, he said, "Let's go to Florida!" I said I couldn't go to Florida because I had been gone five months and I owed my dad \$100. I had to pay him back. I said I'd get a job, pay him back and then we'd go.

So I got a job. I don't remember what it was. And I paid my dad back. And we got in his car and went to Florida.

How long did it take before you got into your career?

Patience!

So we went down to Florida and we were gone for two weeks. We spent \$1.50 each on a room, for two weeks. We lived at a dorm at the University of Miami in Miami. We slept in whatever beds we could find. We spent two weeks there. We were enterprising young men!

I could tell!

So we drove back. My friend had taken over his dad's construction business – Carlson and Johnson was there name. Glen ... [Carlson] was my friend, and he was managing them. Every once-in-a-while I would go visit their construction sites. And I would go play baseball with him and go out with him at night and everything else. Finally he said, "I'm tired of you standing around and doing nothing. You come out here and pick up lumber and junk and clean up the job site, and I'll give you 50¢ an hour. I said, okay. So I went there. I don't know what he paid me, but I started working on the job sites. It wasn't long before I had a saw in my hands and a hammer.

These two men were friends from our church – Carlson and Johnson. And I just had the magic talent to be a carpenter. They taught me the trades in order to build all these beautiful houses they were doing. They both died and I became a foreman for my friend. And he had promised to make me a partner, but I could see it wasn't going to happen. He wanted it all. So I quit.

I found one side job. My neighbor wanted to remodel his kitchen. So I called my friend and gave him two weeks' notice and I went into business for myself and started my own construction business.

And that's what you retired from.

Yes. Was that long enough?

So, you said you went into friends: Two other friends, and the three of you went in together. Jim died. What about the other friend?

He went to the Philippines and came home – he made it home. He ended up working for Prairie Farm for a while. Then he went into his own printing business and became a success in that.

Do you still keep in touch with him?

[Shirley: Is that Jim Edwards?]

Yes, Jim Edwards. A little bit – he came to high school reunions and stuff like that.

Did you join any veterans' organizations or keep in touch with any of those other folks?

No.

Lasting Impressions

When you look back on your experiences in the military, how did those experiences affect the way you think about war in general, and things that are going on in the world today?

I have a negative view of war, of course, and the abuse and the pain and atrocities. It's just unreal.

How did your time in the service affect your life?

I don't know how it affected me. I was a hard worker, ambitious.

[Shirley: One of the things we feel the Lord save his life for is he became involved in our church in Naperville, and built a church building. In fact, they just had a 50-year anniversary of that building. He built it all with volunteer help.]

It took a couple of years.

[Shirley: It felt like maybe the Lord spared his life for some of that.]

So you thought you've give something back.

That's where he wanted me to go, and that's where I got involved. I worked hard in my business. I worked harder at that church.

Is there anything about your military service that we haven't covered that you'd like to mention?

I would guess that it was just two years of misery!

It certainly sounds like you had your share of difficult experiences while you were there. But we'd like thank you for sharing your story. And we'd especially like to thank you for your service.