VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Howard L. Vander Meer

Conducted by Ms. Deb Barrett

November 26, 2011

This project sponsored by the Indian Prairie Public Library
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This interview is being conducted on Saturday, November 26, 2011 with Mr. Howard Vander Meer at the Indian Prairie Library in Darien, Illinois. My name is Deb Barrett. Mr. Vander Meer was born on July 17, 1925 in Chicago, Illinois. He is a retired president of a company called *Rail to Water Transfer* in South Chicago. He learned of the Veterans History Project through Joe Popowitch, the librarian in charge of the project here. Mr. Vander Meer has kindly consented to be interviewed for this project. Here is his story.

Life Before Entering Military Service

Howard, tell us where you were living before you entered the service. What was your life like just before you went in?

Well, I was one of seven children, and I was on the tail end of the food chain. We lived in the Roseland area in Chicago. That's the only home I really ever knew when I was young. I went to Fenger High School which is still in Chicago. Not too long after that I got a few part-time jobs. Eventually my number came up and I was drafted into the service.

How old were you when you were drafted? Had you already graduated from high school?

Oh, yes.

So I had a notice that was sent to my parents' house that said I had to report to the local draft board and I went there. So I went to the draft board and there was a school bus sitting there. There were about 35 of us they herded on the bus.

May I inject some humor?

Sure. Absolutely.

Induction and Basic Training

They took us downtown to some big induction place. We got in this room. And by the way, on the bus very few people were talking to each other. I think they felt like I did: What's going to happen to me next!

How did your parents react; your family? Did they expect this?

Oh, yes. Yes. In that day and age that was quite good.

So we got in this room and there was this very long table with about 8 or 9 officers sitting by it. The first fellow took my papers, looked them over and stamped them "Navy." And I looked at him and said, "I don't want to go into the Navy." He said, "Well, I'll be darned. If you don't want to go into the Navy, I'll call the Secretary of the Navy and tell him that." And, of course, I couldn't find a crack small enough to crawl

into. So he said, "I want you to come with me; follow me." I told him, "I don't mind serving my country. I just don't want to be in the Navy. That's all." And everybody is looking at me. I felt so humiliated –almost shameful.

He took me in an end office. There was an officer in there who probably was a psychologist. And he said to me, "Young man, I understand you don't want to be in the Navy. Can you give me a good reason for that? Because, you know, Dutchmen are the world's best sailors. They brought all the tea from Indonesia in frigates, in big sailing vessels, into England and Rotterdam. And you don't like the Navy?" I said, "Not really." He asked, "Why?" I said, "Well, if the captain makes a mistake and turns the boat to port instead of the other way and they take a torpedo, we'll all go down because of the captain's mistake. And that's why I'd rather be in the Army. I'll have better control over my own destiny than having someone like a captain figuring it out for me." This man sat back and said, "Well, I'll tell you something. You're the only person I'll ever change this for. That was a good reason." So he scratched it out and wrote down, "Army."

And that was the beginning of my military career.

I was skinny, shook up, and apprehensive about everything that was going to happen to me. And that's where I am.

Where were you that day?

We went to Fort Sheridan. We were only there for a short time.

And what happened besides your conversation about Army or Navy? What else happened while you were there?

Nothing much. That was sort of a holding pattern for new draftees.

How many men were in that facility that you saw?

I really don't know, but there were a whole lot of them. They were coming from all over the Midwest. My busload was only a little tiny bit.

They finally gave the orders and put some of us on a train. We went to Fort Roberts, California where I took basic training in field artillery.

So at Fort Sheridan you got your equipment, you sworn in – all of that.

Yes.

And then you got on a train.

And went to Camp Roberts.

How long did that train trip take?

I think it was almost two days.

Did you know anybody on the train from your neighborhood?

Never knew a person.

What was the train trip like? Did you guys play cards? Did you read? Was it noisy, quiet?

I think some of the soldiers-to-be because of the length of the train ride. I was talking to a fellow who was sitting near me. And people were starting to fraternize with each other. They don't have any choice!

When we got there, that's when I got my basic training in field artillery.

Had you been to California before?

Never. It was a new experience.

What was it like when you stepped off the train? Did they have a bus waiting for you?

They had buses waiting for us. They put us in a barrack and we had a half a day to settle down.

The next morning we had to go on a march.

What was your barrack like? Was it a one-level barrack – like a Quonset hut kind of thing?

It was a two-story barrack.

Bunk beds or individual beds?

Bunk beds.

I spent my first night in that barrack. I was on the first floor. I don't know how they picked me for the first floor. The next day we went on a forced march.

And how did they wake you up? Very gently, right?

Yeah.

How did they wake you up? Do you remember?

Well, the first sergeant hollered from the end of the hall, "Everybody up!"

And how much time did you have before he came down the row?

I'd say ten or fifteen minutes.

And so he'd say, "Fall out." And everybody would go outside, line up and then we started our first march.

He was a rather nice man. I was very impressionable. I like people who like people, and he was quite nice. After, I believe it was nine months, our orders were changed. We had heard that the war was going bad and they needed more soldiers overseas.

Let's back up a little bit. You're doing your forced march. Tell me a little bit about what it was like during those nine months.

It was kind of nice. I'd never been in an area where there were such big hills and nearby mountains.

Certainly not in Chicago!

That's right.

We were trained to use 105mm howitzers, and we would go out to a place called Hunter Liggett, which is a huge military reservation. And we'd fire at targets somebody put up on the mountainside. That's really what I was trained for.

Was this part of your initial training – your basic training – or was this part of your MOS?

That was basic training.

So finally I came up and they told several of us we were going to get a furlough, and we'd have five days.

So we went back home, and I spent four days with my family.

How did you get back home?

By train.

And then I had to report to South Camp Polk in Louisiana.

When you went to visit your family, did they tell you why you were getting a furlough?

No.

They just said you were getting a furlough.

Yes. Because we were between different training sessions.

So you had your basic training, and you talked about the march you did that first morning. Tell us a little more about what it was like in a typical day during that time. What was your wake-up time?

We got up generally at 6:30 every morning. Every day we had a fall-out outside to do exercises – push-up's and things like that; that was a daily routine. And sometimes we'd hitch our guns behind a truck and go up in to the mountains and start shooting at targets.

Did you have classroom time at all?

We did. Not very often.

What sort of classroom training did you have?

That kind of training, in a classroom, had much to do with safety of the equipment we were using – how to use it, how to load a shell, how to catch a hot shell when it's fired and things like that. That's really what the school part was.

You had to learn how to use a rifle, too?

Yes.

Had you fired a gun before?

Well, I was a hunter.

So that was not new to you.

Right.

What were your meals like?

I don't even remember, but they were good.

You were probably hungry by the time meal time came around!

That's right. And on weekends I met a fellow – he and I became sort of friends. He said, "Howard, do you want to come with me? I'm going home near Los Angeles." I said, "I don't know. I was going to go to church on the base here." He said, "I'll take you to something you'll never forget." So I went with him and we hitch-hiked to Los Angeles.

Were you in uniform?

Oh, sure. And he took me to hear Aimee Semple McPherson, a famous woman pastor. Do you remember her?

Yes.

She really blew me away! She's dancing around up on the stage. I'm from an old Dutch family, and we don't do that in church! But she was just so dramatic. And her sermon was good. Then my friend took me to his parents' house and we had dinner. Then we had to quickly leave to go back to the camp.

You had to be back by a certain time?

Yes. I think it was 7:00 or 7:30.

What happened if you didn't get back in time?

Nothing, really. They weren't that strict. But I did that for almost nine months. And I got to see a little bit of California that way.

And that was a rather interesting experience because I never thought in my life I'd be working on a 105mm canon. That's a big thing! It kind of surprised me. I really felt bad when I was told I was going to get a furlough and then was told I'd have to report to Camp Polk. One of the staff sergeants who was in charge of our barrack, he said, "I want to tell you guys something. You can set your clock by this. You're going to go to Camp Polk South. There's only one place worse than North Camp Polk, and that's South Camp Polk. They're going to walk you 50 miles a day. You're going to learn how to crawl under machine gun fire. When they get through with you, you're going to be a soldier's soldier." I got a little bit worried!

It didn't sound like fun, did it?

He didn't paint a pretty picture!

So when I got there at Camp Polk I had a tech sergeant who was in charge of our barrack. He was an older fellow. I don't know why he liked me, but I didn't get some of the dirty details that some of the other guys got.

What did some of the other guys get?

Well, I always had my bed made. He'd come out and inspect how your bed was made every morning.

And if he didn't like it, what would happen?

He'd just grab one end, throw it across the hall, you'd go get it and do it again. He never did that to me. I guess that came from my up-bringing. I was raised in a large family and everybody had their place, and everything had its place. I just do that intuitively. I don't need a letter or orders! So he took sort of a shine to me.

I don't remember how long we were there – but it seemed like forever because they worked us so terribly hard. We went through calisthenics, we went through all sorts of exercises, road marches; we crawled under live machine gun fire.

So that sergeant in California had been right.

That's right; absolutely.

And as we went along we finally were told we were going to go overseas.

Deployment and Overseas Duty

Did they tell you where overseas?

No, they didn't say anything. They just said we were going to be mounting up the following week and going to a ship-out station on the east coast. They took us to the east coast. I forget the name of the fort we were in.

By train again?

Yes.

Were you able to tell your family that you were leaving?

No. No.

Were you able to be in contact with your family during your basic training at all?

Yes. Of course in those days the telephones were not that frequent and cheap. My mother had a nickel (jar) and you'd put in a nickel in every time you made a call. We were on the frugal side.

But we finally got to the east coast. I think we were there for two days, and then we got aboard a ship.

Do you remember the name of the ship?

No, I don't. I remember the one going to Japan – that was the Sea Bass. But I don't remember the other one. But it was a passenger ship that was converted to a military ship. And on the back of it – the fan tail – they mounted a canon and off we went.

How many men do you think were on the ship? Do you have any idea?

Oh, I would say there had to be 1200.

All Army?

All Army. All from the 8th Armored Division, 49th Infantry Battalion, which I was in. So we moved as a unit. And we got to England and they put us on another train.

How long did the trip take you across the Atlantic?

I think that took us three or four days.

That was a pretty quick trip.

I can't be sure. But I know at one time there was a submarine alert.

What did you have to do?

Well, we were told when we got on the ship if anything happened what to do: go back to your bunk and stay there.

So they had this alert. And some of the crew men fired this big gun in the back. It must have been 155mm. And it shook the boat so bad that some of the water pipes came loose. When you were down in the galley where you eat, there was about a foot of water. So when the ship rolls this way there's three feet here and nothing up here, then it changes to the other side. And that was one of the exciting moments on that trip across the Atlantic. And the Germans were sinking our ships like all get out. Fortunately we made it.

Now you said you were told to go to your bunks. Did you have regular bunks, or were they the hammocks?

They were the hammocks.

How many high?

Three hammocks high.

Three high. And how many were in each room – in the space? Were you in individual cabins?

No. We didn't go in individual cabins.

You were in big rooms.

Big, big rooms.

So where were you – the top, middle or lower hammock?

I was in the middle.

You were in the middle.

So we finally got to England and they took us to a place called "Kidderminster," a quaint little English village. And I didn't know what was going to happen.

Several of us got along pretty good. We kept asking questions of other people: "What do they do in Kidderminster?" Finally we found out we were going to have some more advance training.

What year was this? Do you remember?

This was all in 1944.

We were taught how to ride the back of a tank.

Than back of a tank.

Hang on to the back of a tank, up on the tank, but laying down on it. Then the tanks would go down some big hills and back up again. The object was to hang on!

So we did that for about two weeks. Then we shipped out and went across the channel. We were nowhere near Omaha Beach or any of that; we were late-comers to the war. When we go there we went to Pont-aMousson, France – almost as far as you could go in France without going into Belgium. There we were billeted in a field.

What were your living conditions like?

They varied. As it happened, it turned cold. In the distance I could see a cathedral. I'm not sure. I don't remember which one it was. That stood up above the whole countryside. It was a magnificent view. We had to sleep – they pulled our half-tracks off the road and put them in an orchard. The company commander told us to take out our bedrolls and put them on the ground. And there was about four to five inches of snow. I went to take my bayonet out of the scabbard and it was frozen. I went to untie a knot, and the knot holding my bedroll was frozen. We had all kinds of 15¢ problems when we got there.

So you had to have your bedroll out in the snow.

Yes.

Suddenly the chaplain came along. He told us to take our canteens out and hold the cups up, and he poured about this much bourbon in them.

About two inches or so?

Yes. He said that would keep us warm during the night. The chaplain passing out booze!

That's where we were. From thereon we started moving toward Holland. This was when Patton was on the rampage. He was advancing so fast they couldn't keep up with him, bringing fuel for their tanks and half-tracks. So we wound up filling our half-track with maybe 18 or 20 cans of gas. Fortunately there were no enemies there.

There would have been fire!

So we were bringing this forward for two days. From there – I don't remember the towns – but we were in the Netherlands.

Now, you have relatives there?

No. But I made some friends there. Remind me to tell you about that.

So we got up to the Roer River. That's the first time I really saw firsthand what a terrible combat mission looks like. The Germans were on this side of the river, and we're on this side of the river. And there would be five P47's circling high up in the air. And the Germans were shooting their guns at those planes. And as they'd make a turn, one plane would peel off and dive-bomb. We were just sitting on the hill watching all these fireworks. I thought that was so awesome because many times a guy who came down like this never came up because they caught him with the guns. That really made me think hard about what was going to happen to us.

This was no exercise!

No, that's right!

Eventually we went over the Roer River. We were in a tiny town and dug in. There were some haystacks out in this field. One of my friends discovered something unusual. He said, "See that second haystack out there?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Where we're standing right now it looks like there's 15' between them. Yesterday did you know there were 30' between them?" I said, "Do you mean there's somebody in those haystacks?" He said, "You're damn right." And our lieutenant knew that, too. So we had to crawl over this field which was maybe 1,000 yards – that's a pretty long stretch. We had to go at night, but we couldn't go the first night because there was a full moon. We had to go the next night. And we had prods to poke in the ground in case they put mines.

So we went all the way across there and were getting ready to turn at the edge of a road and go toward those haystacks. All of a sudden we see these eleven German soldiers walking down this road. So we all jumped in this ditch. And there was one guy in our platoon. He knew a little bit of German. But we're all sitting there hunched down. We really didn't know what to do. And we're all scared.

They came fairly close, and my friend says, "Up with your hands [in German]." They put up their hands and we took 13 prisoners.

Wow!

And we made them walk back, because we figured they knew where the mines were. So we walked back.

Was your lieutenant with you?

Yes.

So you took prisoners. Where did you take them?

We took them back to where we were billeted. Then somebody else came from another outfit and took them away.

But that was our first encounter with the enemy. My one friend who came from Grand Rapids – and we were buddies most of the time during the war. Up until the time he died he'd call me every once in a while and say, "Howard, do you remember how we caught all them guys?"

So from there we moved on.

Did you ever get the guys in the haystacks?

Yes. What happened is, the next day they brought up some artillery and that took care of the haystacks. Because we weren't an artillery company. We were armored infantry soldiers. We could operate the M1 carbine, a grease gun – that's a machine gun. We could operate a bazooka, a mortar – every kind of ordnance. We were all trained on that at Camp Polk.

So they finally got rid of the haystacks and we were able to move on. I don't remember how far we went or where we went. My lieutenant – his name was Lieutenant Bill Fruehwirth – he only came up to here on me. And rank doesn't mean much in combat – you could be a major or colonel. You're there because you're trying to save your skin and somebody else's. You're not worried about whether you've got gold bars or silver bars. So he used to sit around and tell the guys. He'd say, "You know, when we go on a scouting mission I like to take Howard Vander Meer with me because he's so tall and the 'krauts will think that guy must be the head officer, and they're going to shoot him!" You won't believe this, but a week later we were in a position where we were trapped by some Germans. We had just bounded from out half-tracks, and Bill Fruehwirth says – I had the radio strapped on my back – he says, "Howard, come over by these couple of bushes here. We're going to order some mortar fire on these Germans."

So he gave me the coordinates and I called them in; they verified they were the right numbers and all that. Within two minutes you could hear these mortars coming over our head and one fell short. I was probably six to seven feet away from Lieutenant Fruehwirth. A piece of shrapnel cut his head off and killed him instantly.

That's when I started reorganizing my thought process. That really scared me. First of all, he was a nice guy. It was sort of like losing a friend – you'd never know he was a second lieutenant. I learned from that a whole lot of things about trying to save yourself, and what you think you can do to help others.

So we went on and on. I can't tell you how many little gun fires we were in. But being we were in half-tracks, strafing by German airplanes was not uncommon. Fortunately, our platoon never really had a problem that way. I don't know what that was. We all talked about it. We were moving targets, sitting out on the road a plane can't miss you.

So we went on and on, through one town then another. We got to the place where this citation was written about.

Your bronze star?

Yes.

They said that our intelligence operator said there weren't too many Germans between us and the Rhine River. So we went down this road, and all they did was lay a trap for us. After they got our whole unit on this road they opened fire. They were using machine gun fire.

You were circled.

Yes, on both sides of the road. They were coming together. It got so bad we had to dismount. What I did, I stayed by my 50 caliber gun and started spraying it this way …

Side to side.

Yes, to keep the Germans down while our guys left the tracks – in front of me and behind me, then my track.

Where did our guys go?

They went on the other side of the road. There were more Germans on this side.

So they went on the side where there were fewer Germans.

Yes. And they hid in some woods.

Did they get behind the Germans then?

They did run into a few. Apparently this assault was from one direction. So that's what happened.

So you were firing to keep the Germans at bay so our men could get off.

Yes. We had five half-tracks in our platoon. That was something I just did instinctively. I was trained to do it.

Did you stay there firing, or did you have to do something else at some point?

After everybody left I got off the half-track. That citation said I made myself a messenger, and I ran between different units of our division telling them what was going on.

So our guys were gone and you were the only one left – the Germans were gone?

No. I've got a note here that says how many we got.

On your citation here for the bronze start, the lieutenant colonel says, "I desire to personally commend you for your heroic service and gallantry against the enemy in Rheinberg, Germany, March 5, 1945. I wish to specifically mention your personal initiative and daring during the above mentioned engagement. Not only for the covering fire you furnished for the men in your track so that they might deploy, but for your devotion to duty in operating your radio when all others had been forced to take cover. I understand that after that you acted as a dismounted messenger."

Right.

How long were you firing at the Germans.

I really don't know. Probably for a good half-hour.

A pretty intense half-hour.

Oh, yeah. Yeah.

On the Battle for Rheinberg, we took 179 POW's. There were 81 enemies killed, 75 enemies wounded. We knocked out six 88mm guns, five 20mm guns, thirty-three small arms were captured, and five vehicles were knocked out.

And you earned the bronze star for your performance.

Yes.

Then we had all sorts of things happen. Some were funny.

We were in another part of Germany before we got to Rheinberg. And we got a call on my radio. It said, "When you get to the junction, the first three half-tracks stop there and put your 50 caliber guns on the church steeple." There's a German lookout in the church steeple, and he's the guy telling them where to lob these mortars to hit us. So the three of us did that. We cut the top of the steeple off, and I saw the guy fall out of it.

So you did see him.

Yes. That was just one of the things. It's just something that stays in your mind. And I look sometimes at where I was. We were in hand-to-hand combat in a small town. Two friends and I were in this house, and what we didn't know was the next house has four or five Germans in it.

Right next door to where you were staying.

Right. And the houses were from here to this next table apart. And the Germans opened their window and threw a German hand grenade through our window. Fortunately we weren't in that room at that time.

What town was that in?

I really don't know. We moved so fast and were going all over the place. That was just one thing.

One of my friends was in another bedroom looking around, and another hand grenade came through the window. He picked it up and threw it back! They had sticks on theirs.

Sticks?

Yes. Our hand grenades had pins you'd pull and throw them. They had them on sticks so they could get more leverage. They were much better than ours. So he picked it up and threw it back into their window and that took care of that.

That took care of that problem.

That was just one little incident. I'm trying to think of something else that was kind of interesting.

This is all in Germany in 1945.

All in Germany.

One of the hard things was, when it was cold out we'd have to take some kind of soluble white paint and stripe our half-tracks because they were green and stood out in the snow. We'd do that in the morning before we'd leave to go somewhere. And the next morning the sun would be out …

And you'd have to take the white paint off!

Big government. That's the beginning of big government.

Tell me about the hand-to-hand combat you were in.

That was right in that town where these guys were throwing these things out the window.

Did they surprise you? Did you surprise them?

I really think we surprised each other. They were probably expecting us, but they didn't expect us to be looking out the window right into their place and vice versa. We were as shocked as they were.

We don't always ride in our tracks. We sometimes dismount. They were vehicles to get us where we were going. We've been in areas where I really don't know how many people we could have killed or wounded. But we'd advance toward a group of barns or something like that and you'd get fired back from and you'd know there was somebody in there.

So what really happened that got me out of the Army was that we were one place in Germany. And my friend and I were going to knock out a German tank. We could hear the big … [lugs] going over the sprockets.

Did they have a different sound than our tanks?

Yes. They'd go: clunk, clunk, clunk, clunk. The things going over 'em. We could hear them coming. So my friend and I got our bazooka out of the half-track and we ran over into this orchard. We were a little ways from a big barn, right near the edge of this road. We layed flat in the ditch and waited until they went by. Then we fired …[our] bazooka. I admit none of us had that much bazooka training, really, but we knew the nomenclature and what to do. So my friend said, "Here we go." So he pulled the trigger and I was pretty close to the back end. The back flash from the bazooka took my eyebrows off and my little moustache. That's what you call "up close." And he hit the right spot. He hit right where their radiator was. Anywhere else on those big German tanks you couldn't do much.

Well, the next thing you know smoke starts pouring out. We left our bazooka there and ran as fast as we could because the Germans were coming out of this tank. And I think only two or three of them came out – there's usually four or five.

Was it just you and your buddy there?

Yes.

So we ran toward this big barn. We didn't want to go in it. The first thing we did wrong was we saw this foxhole and we jumped in it, and landed on a dead German soldier. So we got out of there fast. And as we're running from there, one of the Germans who got out of the tank had a machine gun and hit my friend in the leg. So I had to help my friend go from there to another foxhole. And I found one right next to this barn.

Were you carrying him or were helping him walk?

Helping him walk. Anyway, the tank was burning and the munitions started exploding in the tank. And that threw up huge flumes of black smoke. Well, the Germans saw that, so they sent six more tanks – or more. And we're in this foxhole and you could hear them coming. In fact, we were just close enough that I could hear them talking in the turrets of their tanks one to the other in German. They finally came up to

the tank that was burning. Three of them turned their guns on this barn and let go a volley of fire. They just blew practically the whole side of this barn out.

So they thought you ran in there.

Yes. But we're in this foxhole. But suddenly the building collapsed. And if this is our foxhole, the roof came down like this.

Into your foxhole or above it?

Just above it. And we couldn't get out of our foxhole. And the eaves are this long and stuck in the foxhole.

So you're really pinned in there with no way out.

Yes. We couldn't get out. Because we could hear the Germans talking we didn't have any yearning to go out. In the meantime it's raining and all the water is running down this roof and right into our hole. I was taking my helmet, and I fished out with my bayonet a little piece of dirt where I could go real hard and get a little bit of water out.

Bail out the foxhole a little bit without being noticed.

Right. We were probably standing in water, if we stood up, between our ankles and our knees. That's how fast the water was coming in. And I took my friend's – he had a sweater on something like this. And I wrapped up his leg in … [his sweater].

We just kept hearing the Germans talking out there, yelling out there to do this and that. So we couldn't leave. In the meantime we couldn't leave because the roof had us pinned in. We didn't have a shovel.

So we stayed in there for 29 hours. That was the next morning. Then we heard some noise. I had a little area where I could see out a little bit, but that was all. And it was some American trucks with some infantry guys in it. So I started yelling as loud as I could and they finally came over and we were rescued by some guys from the 7th Army who were on an offensive going the other way.

So they dug us out.

How was your friend?

My friend wasn't very well. He lost quite a bit of blood. I wasn't really well, either, but I didn't know it. I caught pneumonia sitting in that water.

Was this still winter?

No. It was the spring.

So I remember when they pulled us out – it took them 20 minutes to dig us out – and when they got us out they called a medic in. The medics came up with a jeep and the last I remember they put me and my friend in the back seat, and my head was laying over

the spare tire. I don't know where we went, but we were in a forward Army hospital. I remember there was a major in that place – because he had a gold star on his helmet. He said, "How do you feel, young man." I said, "I'm not sure, but I don't feel good at all." He said, "Well, I can tell you why. You contracted pneumonia. Have you ever had problems with your lungs?" I said, "Yes, when I was younger." So he had a medic come over and put PX4 on my forehead. Every four hours I had to get penicillin. So they took me out of this hospital and they brought me to an airfield. And they flew me to England. So I was in a hospital in England for 49 days recovering from this.

And I also had – when they fired those 88's at the barn, they used some thermite grenades. I don't know if you know what those are.

Thermite would mean heat.

Yes. They're like metal. And they used them. I didn't even know it, but it hit my one arm and hand.

So you were burned.

I was burned and that also had to be taken care of. So that's how I got to England, and that's how I got away from the business of the war.

So you were there for 49 days. You got over the pneumonia and they took care of the burns. Did your family know anything about what was happening? Did they know you had been wounded?

No. You weren't allowed to put that in a letter.

Were you allowed to correspond with them?

Oh, I did write them some letters finally. But I couldn't write when I first got to the hospital. I was so sick. That's the only time in my life I ever felt so sick – if I'd had died it would have been okay!

So when you would write letters, who would go through the letters – who would censor the letters?

Oh, they had a censor that went through them.

Were letters from home to you censored?

No, just going home.

After I got out of the hospital, I had lost I think 8 pounds. They sent me to Scotland. Some officer came in and said, "Your orders are being cut this evening, and tomorrow morning you'll be leaving here. We're going to put you on a train and you're going to go to Glasgow, Scotland. When you get there, keep those orders with you and somebody will meet you." Well, that all worked out and I got to Glasgow and they met

me. And they put me in a port management outfit. I guess I was there about maybe two weeks and they told me to guard some prisoners in my spare time. So I did that.

And I finally got orders and we got on a ship and went toward the Panama Canal. After we're in the Panama Canal, the captain on the ship announced that the war with Japan was coming to somewhat of a close. And there were 13 American troop ships headed toward Japan as he was speaking. He said out of the 13, eight would be diverted back to San Francisco. The rest would go on to Japan. I was on one of the five that was going to go to Japan.

So you went from the European theater, down through the Panama Canal. And you came back through the Panama Canal and on to Japan. And what year was this?

I have to look that up.

Do you remember how old you were?

No.

Can I go back on something?

One of the battles we were in at the edge of Holland near Roermond, we got beat up quite a bit. Many of our half-tracks and tanks were knocked out. So they put what was left of our outfit in trucks and took us to this little town called Simpelveld, by Valkenburg in the Netherlands. And we were expected to sleep in Dutch barns. And Dutch barns are really clean. And all these places are four walls around a courtyard in the middle for animals. So I said to a friend of mine, "Let's go for a walk." We had the afternoon free. So walked down some of these lanes and a woman came out of her house with what looked like a huge pizza. What it was, was an apricot pie. And she put it on her cobblestone fence to cool. And that's when I came walking along. And because I knew a little bit of Dutch from my grandmother and mother, I said to this lady, "Smoklek (smells good)." She put the pie down and ran around the gate; she came out and gave me the biggest kiss you ever saw. And they insisted I stay there.

What had you said to her – in English?

It's very good – ought to be good. She knew what that was. So I told her my name; she asked "Vu ist der namen?" I said, "Vander Meer." I had a little handle on that stuff.

So my friend and I went down to the mess truck. Whether we stole it or just acquired it somehow, we took some coffee and some sugar and flour and brought it up to her house. My friend had another assignment he had to do so he couldn't stay with me. But I asked my lieutenant if he minded if I stayed in this house; these people really liked me and I liked them. He said, "Get all you can, Howard. Do they have another room for me?"

So I stayed with them for a week and a half. And I was their warden. They had these shutters they closed at night so the Germans couldn't see lights from their airplanes. So they closed the shutters at 5 or 6:00. And at night I was teaching them to sing *Red*

Sails in the Sunset, I'll Take You Home Again Kathleen. And they're trying to teach me the Dutch national anthem, and I learned how to do that.

The Germans were shooting rockets from somewhere in German. And they were going over this town headed toward Liege, Belgium. And you could hear them coming. They'd make a certain racket. And I was their watchdog. So when I'd hear one of them I'd go by their front door and make sure I could hear them. I'd say, "fliga bomb." And the whole family would go down in the cellar.

What was that mean, what you said?

It meant flying rocket. And as long as you can hear the engine you're okay, because it isn't going to fall. Only once did one fall. I heard it sputter and die out. It landed on the far end of the town and took out about a half a block of buildings and so on. So I was their watch dog. And, would you believe, I still communicate with their great, great grandchildren by email?

Really.

Yes. Isn't that amazing? That's a sign of the times.

That's a great story. Were you a private at this time?

I was a T5. That's as high as I got. You see, when you were in combat you didn't see anybody volunteering to be a first or second lieutenant because in the armored infantry you lead your platoon. You don't stand in the back. It's like when I made application for my bronze star. I had a letter back saying there were certain facts they were relying on – the fact that it was not signed or authorized by a brigadier general or higher might have invalidated my claim. I wrote them back and said where I was in Germany you couldn't find a general anywhere near the combat troops. They were usually 50 to 100 miles behind. And they were. I got another letter from somebody else. I guess he got embarrassed. It said, "Your wish has been granted."

So anyway, that was just a side issue.

Do you remember the ship you were on?

That was the Sea Bass. It had 1200 troops on it.

Was that another passenger ship that had been converted?

No. This was a freighter, and they converted it.

Do you know how long that trip took? That was a long trip.

I think it took eight days. We had days that we never saw a thing. One day somebody saw a bird and I thought the ship was going to tip …

So many ran to see it!

That's a fact.

What was it like on that ship when you were going through? What were your meals like?

The meals weren't all that bad. We didn't go to Japan direct. First we had to stop in New Guinea to get some water – we ran out of water. And from there we went to the Philippines. And that's where I ate pineapple sliced, diced, squeezed, whole, halved …

A lot of pineapple.

I swore I'd never eat it again! Now I like it – 30 years afterward.

How did you spend your time on the ship? Did you have duties?

Yes, we did.

What were your duties while you were there?

I was assigned to a gun turret. They had gun turrets mounted on these freighters. That was kind of a nice duty, because the Pacific was big enough – you didn't find a submarine every block. So I had it pretty easy. I would play cards with guys, and we'd kill time that way. Or write letters home and hope we'd get somewhere where we could mail them.

That was a long journey.

So when I got to Japan I was assigned to Kure, Japan. Kure is part of a naval base. And to my surprise, I took a walk one day and there was a dry dock which was empty, and laying like timbers were two-man submarines. They were called kamikaze submarines – the guy drives it in …

The same idea as the planes – the subs.

Right.

And in Kure there was a railroad track going through the place. If you wanted to take a long walk you had to go under a viaduct. And on this side of the viaduct where I was there were Ottis elevators, Westinghouse things – a lot of American things going on. And when you went into this viaduct you go back a hundred years. You see a woman pulling a cart with human waste. And they're going up to the hills to spread that around on their crops. And the man walks behind puffing a marijuana cigarette.

It's a country of fantastic contrasts. There's a lot of beautiful things, too.

So one day my friend and I decided – we had heard about some of these islands. He had commandeered a yacht and we went over to this island and had a Japanese [man] steering the boat who couldn't speak English. So he took us to this warehouse and we both went in. And the … [pilot] took some Japanese newspapers and lit them on fire for

some torches. We got in there and the whole place is filled with mines! Talk about funny things!

What was the reaction of the Japanese people when they would see you walking around the streets?

I would say generally a spirit of resentment. Some were friendly, but very few. This was not where the atomic bomb was dropped.

And speaking of the atomic bomb, my same friend with whom I went to this island, one day said "Howard, let's steal a jeep and we'll go to Hiroshima." We didn't know anything about what radiation was or anything. It was just a bomb. So we went there. And somewhere I have some pictures I took, and those are the ones I can't find. All that's sticking out of the ground is pipe about …[two feet] high.

Just about a foot high.

A foot to two feet high. Everything else was just leveled. Because they used very light material. Whether it was tall buildings – like 15 stories high – they imploded with the bomb and everything went down with it. There was nothing left standing.

We were there exactly two weeks before Major Sikorsky, the inventor of the helicopter, came to Hiroshima to look at it on behalf of the United States. That's how early we saw it.

So that was sort of an interesting thing.

And then when I took the Honor Flight on the 7th of July, they took us to the Air and Space Museum. And I saw the Enola Gay. That was very meaningful to me because I could tie it in to what I had seen. So that was very interesting.

So the time you spent in Japan. How long were you there?

I'll try to dig that up for you.

Was it months?

We were there probably about six months.

And had an Army base been established?

We were living in a warehouse. The function of our unit – I got the job of being a teletype operator. Ships would come into the harbor – American ships with supplies – and we had a quartermaster corps who would go out and unload the ships. What I would do was receive and send teletypes to Hawaii and places like that getting tracking on what ships were coming. So the quartermaster could make plans to build something to house what they would receive. I did that for I would say 85% of my time in Japan.

There are some very pretty parts of Japan, too. Quite nice. But I never could handle the language.

It's a little different than what we're accustomed to. So you were there for six months.

I would say six months.

Then what?

Then I went home.

Returning to the United States and Discharge

You were discharged?

We came back to San Francisco, got on a train and they took us to Camp McCoy, Wisconsin.

And that's where …

That's where I was discharged from. And a couple of my friends who had been with me from the time I left Scotland, we were so anxious to get home we hired a cab at Camp McCoy. The three of us with our duffel bags got into this small cab and went to Union Station! I called my parents to meet me.

Wow! So how long had you been gone? How long were you in Germany and Japan altogether?

Well I was in the service for 28 months. So you might as well say 22 months.

So close to two years you were gone. That trip home from Japan must have been a lot more fun than the trip out.

Yes.

What ship did you take from Japan?

I don't know what ship it was.

Do you remember anything about how many men were on it or what type of ship it was?

I remember it had 600 people on it.

That was smaller.

Yes, it was. We went back on a Navy transport. The other one was a cargo conversion.

So how did it feel when you got back to American soil?

I could have kissed the ground! I really could have.

I understand.

From just what I've told you, you can see I've gotten around quite a bit. I've had innumerable times I was shocked. Like when my lieutenant got killed by that mortar round. What it did to me is this.

When I was on the Honor Flight on the 7th, I thought there would be all vets there. It wasn't. It was just the public. There were 40-some people. But I said to a couple of the vets, "I have a hard question for you: Have you ever asked yourself, as I have, what would I be like if I hadn't been in the Army?" That's the question nobody can answer.

Right. Because what you went through shaped who you are.

Yes.

I had a fellow ask me one time: "I understand you're a fund raiser for a ministry." I said, "No, I'm not." "Well, I saw your name on a letterhead." I said, "Well, yes. But I'm not a fund raiser. I couldn't raise a dime." He asked, "Well, what's your name on there for?" I said because I was on the Board. I said what I was, was a relationship builder. I build relationships with people. And you'd be surprised how many people end up saying, "Is there some way I can help, Howard?" Now, whether you call that fund raising or relationship building, I'll call that relationship building any time.

So, let's see. When you came back to the States, did you go to Hawaii first?

No.

It was straight to California?

Yes.

How long were you in California? Was it long enough to get on a train?

It was a very short time – probably just to get organized to get on a train. We didn't billet or anything.

So you got to Wisconsin. You called your parents. They had no idea you were coming home.

No.

So you called them from Wisconsin – you didn't go directly home first. They must have been thrilled to hear your voice.

They sure were!

Did they meet you at the station?

They met me at Union Station.

Return to Civilian Life

What do you remember of that reunion?

Not all that much, really. It's a busy place around there. All I know is we took our bags out of that taxi cab and went inside the train station doors. My two friends smoked all the time – I did too, a little bit but never a lot. And we just waited for my parents to show up. So I just stayed by the door, figuring if they pulled up I would recognize their car. It was the usual thing. You wrap your arms around each other and say it's so good to be home. And it really was!

Did people come over to the house when you got home, or was it just a quiet homecoming?

Within a day or two they started coming over. You see, all my brothers and sisters were older than I am.

Right. You were the baby.

The baby of the family, and spoiled.

It was interesting. In fact, when I think of my life and all the places I've been, how many people have done where I've been and done what I've done.

You circled the globe.

Right. Just about. And I've met some of the most interesting people. It's just amazing.

My wife and I went up to Expo in Canada. We were staying in a very good hotel. We pressed a button for the elevator and it wasn't supposed to stop, but it did. The Princess of Greece was on that elevator and her car was parked out in front. So Betty and I got on the elevator. I turned around and asked her if I could take her picture when she got to her car. She said yes, I could. So I have a picture of the Princess of Greece.

What did you eat when you got home? Was there anything special that you hadn't had?

I don't remember.

Did you go to school? Did you go back to school on the GI Bill?

Yes. I went to school under the GI Bill. That was another strange story.

My father had had a debilitating stroke – something like I had. He had that when I was seven years old. And he never really recovered. He walked with a limp and some other problems. Up until that time my parents were not poor, but they weren't rich either. They were middle class. And my father, which my wife says I'm patterned after so much – my wife says my father could talk to a barber pole as long as it kept turning. She says so does Howard. And that's the joy of life.

Then I had to get a job. And I was out looking for a part-time job and they called me for Northwestern. And I went to Northwestern …

Northwestern University?

Yes.

And what were you studying there?

Psychology, and I forget what the other thing was. Anyhow, because I was working one and sometimes two side jobs I got pretty sleepy in class. One time I fell asleep, and I was in the back row – we were seated in alphabetical order so I'm always in the back. And this professor, "Would somebody wake up that gentleman in the corner? I have an important question to ask him." And I never liked this guy. From the moment I saw him I knew we couldn't possibly get along. And he said, "Mr. Vander Meer, we'll continue with where we left off last week. I need you to give me a complete description of how you would define sales. Can you do that?" I said, "Sure. Sales is creating a desire." "That's not what I'm looking for." I said, "I don't know a better way to describe it. Do you?" And after the class was quieting down a little bit – some kids stay around a little bit to get their books and notes together – he came over to my desk and said, "I just want you to know you're going to get a failing grade here." I said, "Why, because of my answer?" He said, "Yes. You're going to get a failing grade." I said, "That won't happen." He said, "What makes you think so?" I said, "Because I'm through." I picked up my books, walked around him and left Northwestern. That's where I learned all my psychology – how to exit a room like that.

So after you left that room what did you do? Did you start working somewhere else?

I started working a little longer on two of my part-time jobs. Then I went downtown one day to answer an ad in the paper. I had to go to the offices of the Metropolitan Trust Company. I thought maybe they needed a kid in the mailroom. So I went there. And I got interviewed by a fellow who was their comptroller. He asked me a whole lot of questions – questions you wouldn't ask now. He asked if I went to church.

They can't ask that now.

He asked me all sorts of personal questions. Then said, "All right, we're going to give you the job. I wrote down instructions about where it is. You're going to have to go to South Chicago. I want you to report there at 8:30 in the morning, tomorrow."

Well, I went back home. My parents were glad I got a job.

I got on a street car, transferred three times, got down to 101st and Commercial Avenue – across the railroad track. It looked so creepy. Here's this goofy looking slip with sunken barges sticking up. And the characters hanging around the corner – I wouldn't want to meet them at night. So I got disgusted, turned around and went back home.

The next morning my phone rang and he talked to my mother. He said, "Is there something wrong with Howard Vander Meer? Is he ill?" My mother said, "No. He's standing right here. Do you want to talk to him?" So I talked to him. He asked, "Why weren't you there?" I said I lost my way, so I went home. He said, "Tomorrow morning you take a cab down there and make sure you're there at 8:30." I said, "Yes, sir."

So I went there. I took a cab. And the office was a two-car garage. There was a superintendent who ran the whole schemer. There was a clerk by the name of Bob McNally. He did everything else. I was assigned the job of going out with a clipboard and writing car numbers down on it, then running back to the office and pulling the weigh bills before they went to the dumper. I had to do it sometimes at night and sometimes in the daytime.

The superintendent sort of took a shine to me. He asked if I knew how to do payroll. I said, yes I could do that. I had never done that in my life! So they day to make the payroll came up and I asked to see the old payroll sheet. And I figured it all out by myself, and I became the payroll clerk.

Finally – I don't remember the date – a fellow came into the office. We had a stove in the office for heat. This guy came in with a homburg hat. He said, "My name is Leo Geisel." No, he didn't tell me his name. He said he was there representing some potential buyers of the company, and would I mind if he took a look in the office. I said "No," and let him in. He said, "Now, what's your ambition? What would you like to be?" I said, "I'm going to be president of the company." "Are you sure?" I said, "Yes." He said, "I'm Leo Geisel. And I'm the new president."

Another crack I fell through!

So it sounds like you got back and, although the school didn't work out the way you would have liked, you got into a job.

Yes. And I also took other courses, like freight traffic management, transportation, and things that were really dear to me.

And where did you take those?

Freight traffic management – that was on Franklin Street somewhere.

Was this on the GI Bill also?

No. This was a technical school. So I learned as much as I could about things like that. And 21 years later I succeeded Mr. Geisel. And he was so kind to me. He used to sit at the Athletic Club playing cards. That was his forte. Way back then he was making $69,000 a year.

Which was a big deal.

He called me up one time. "Howard, I have to meet you." I asked where to meet him and he said, "At the Athletic Club." And he tried to get me to play with some old cronies.

So I succeeded him.

He was very good before that. He let me diversify the company. He asked me if I knew what diversification was. I said sure I did, but I couldn't think off hand how I would substitute something for 7 million tons of coal. Coal was going downhill. That was the time when the EPA was coming out. We went through a lot of bloody messes with EPA restrictions.

So finally, while he was still president, one of the directors whose coal company I worked with, he took a shine to me and told Mr. Geisel, "Why don't you put Howard Vander Meer on your Board? He's the guy who knows everything about this business." So I got on the Board. And it was just a few years later when he retired.

So I diversified our company into bentonite clay, specialty cokes, meals and feeds. Finally I got word from the chairman of Peabody Coal Company who also took a shine to me. He told me to come to St. Louis, that he had some information.

I went in to see him and he said, "Howard, I've got some news for you. Peabody Coal is going to be sold. There's a large conglomerate in England that's going to take over Peabody Coal Company. And they said we have to divest everything we have except the coal mines. Which means rail and water. You know my attorneys and my bookkeepers. I'm going to send a memo to each of these people to expect Howard Vander Meer to call. And you get anything you need. They'll be there for you." This was in 1998.

As it happened, I went to Ernst and Whinney and had them change over our pension plan into an individual plan. And that took about a year – just about the time when we were going to sell the company. So I got that done.

Then the Board decided to go to either Goldman Sachs or Bear Stearns to sell the company. And they couldn't sell it. So the guy from Peabody says, "Howard, can you sell it?" I said, yes I'd sell it for him. I didn't know if I could, but I'd sure give it a good try because I knew all the people in the business. So I sold it to our biggest customers. When it got through I had to go back to Peabody for some reason. I was talking to the attorney and … [the chairman of Peabody] walks in and says, "Howard, how did you swing that deal." I said, "They're our biggest customer." He said, "How much are you going to charge us for selling it?" I said, "Probably about $90,000." Just like that – it came out of my mouth; I couldn't stop it! He said, "Okay. That's a deal."

Well it sounds like you were able to make that transition successfully from military into private life.

Yes. I did.

Did you maintain contact with anybody you met in the Army?

I maintained contact with two people: one in Green Bay and another in Grand Rapids. My friend in Grand Rapids died on the operating table. He had an operation and the doctor made some kind of mistake, so his widow told me. And the fellow in Green Bay – or Elcho, Wisconsin – he died of natural causes. So I really don't have anybody I know who I was in the service with.

Do you belong to any veteran's organizations?

No, but I support the Paralyzed Veterans. I support VFW. I support most of these veterans organization with money, but I don't belong to the organization.

Lasting Impressions

How did your experiences in the military affect the way you think about the military, or the way you think about life in general?

Well, it made me mature. That's the bottom line. When you see people getting killed, and when you see people shooting at you, you start thinking a little differently than before. And I would say I matured 1,000 years in 22 months. I sometimes think – I remember when I killed a couple of Germans. That didn't bother me, but it's always in the back of my library that I did that: Was that the right thing to do? Then I have to justify it by thinking: Well, if I didn't they'd do it to me. So that makes the suffering a little less difficult. But I would say I matured a whole lot. Like my father.

Now I'm glad to say I'm like my father. I love to talk. I love to meet people. I recently gave a speech to the high schoolers in our church. I told them: You're all going to go to college, I guess. But if you really want to be successful, you have to practice the art of getting along with people. I said: I'm the laziest person I know. But I've managed to befriend people who will help me do what I have to do. And if there's one thing I remember about all the things I've learned, and all the things I've forgotten, it was one thing: Never be afraid to say to a person, "How do you do that?" Even if the person you're talking to has some proprietary things that he doesn't tell people, he'd be glad to share with you. I said: You have to realize what you have in you. If somebody asked you what you were doing, you'd answer them. You'd say it with some pride: This is the way I did it. That's the way I learned so I could do it. That was the median of my success – long and short; nothing more, nothing less.

Now all these kids who graduated this past June, my wife and I had to go to six graduation parties! So I must have made an impression!

Is there anything else we haven't covered in this interview that you'd like to say before we finish?

I play a little bit of golf. I'm not a good golfer. I used to tell my big customers when I had them in from Canada, I'd say: I have to play company golf – I have to let you win. They didn't know I was playing my heart out trying to beat them!

… I like sailing on my sail boat. We used to have a condominium in Spring Lake, Michigan, near Grand Haven. And I'd like to go out on Lake Michigan and take a friend or two along. And when I had it over by McCormick Place, that was one of the most memorable times of my life. I'm out at 6:00 at night. The sun is starting to go down. There's no noise from the motor – just the waves lapping against the boat. And that beautiful skyline here and beautiful clouds over here. You couldn't find anything more beautiful than that.

Okay. If you don't have anything else to add, we're going to go off record with this. Thank you for sharing your story.

You've probably had better stories than mine.

Everyone's story is different.