VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Donald M. Van Devander

conducted by Martin W. Thomas

December 9, 2002

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Part 1: Introduction:

This interview is being conducted on December 9, 2002 at the Indian Prairie Public Library in Darien, IL. My name is Martin Thomas. I am speaking with Donald M. Van Devander. Mr. Van Devander was born on April 26, 1921, in Pulaski, PA and now lives in unincorporated Downers Grove, IL. He works at the Indian Prairie Public Library as a volunteer and learned of the Veterans History Project through Joe Popowitch, a reference librarian at this library, and who also is the coordinator of this project. Mr. Van Devander has kindly consented to be interviewed for the project. Here is his story:

Part 2: Entering the Military:

When did you enter the service?

I enlisted in the enlisted reserve corps in 1942, but did not go into active service until June of 1943.

Where were you living at the time?

At that point in time I was living in Edina, MO.

What were you doing there?

I was a student at Park college, in Parkville, MO. And as a Junior I heard of the attack on the US on December 7, and then was drafted. But then I enlisted in the Enlisted Reserve Corps so that I could finish my last year in college. Because I was a pre-med student, I thought I would be of more value in the service than not having that education.

So the military allowed you to finish college before taking you?

They did.

And you finished and got a degree from Park College?

An A.B. at Park College in 1943. June of 1943.

Your degree was in what?

Bachelor of Arts in biology, with a minor in mathematics and chemistry.

How long a period of time elapsed from your graduation until the time you entered the service?

A matter of about three weeks. I graduated the last part of May and was in the service in the first part of June.

Where were you inducted?

I was inducted in Jefferson Barracks, Jefferson, MO.

Part 3: Training:

You went immediately to basic training?

I went immediately to basic training.

What were your first days like?

Well, it was hot in Texas. I guess I was a bit scared, because I was saying, "Oh, my." Going into the service and here I was just a kid and wondering what was going to happen. But then it finally came to me, well there have been thousands and thousands of young men getting into the service, and if they were in it, I could do it too. We went through a very stiff basic training, extremely stiff training. The infiltration course was very tough, to the point that when you would crawl on the ground the stones were so hot that you had to wear gloves. It was this hot in Texas.

In basic training, what weapons did you train with?

We did not. We did not have any training with weapons. In fact we didn't even carry a weapon. Because we were in the medical area. The only thing we did do, was we went to a target practice with a rifle, probably two times. And that was just to handle a rifle, and that was it.

More like familiarization?

Familiarization of it, how to load it, how to aim, and how to shoot as close to a target as you could.

So you're saying that your basic training was not a general training, but it was specifically for people going into the medical service?

That's right. We had extreme heavy conditioning. Because so many of us were out of condition, we were in heavy conditioning. And many, many training sessions, besides hiking and physical conditioning, we had many courses related to helping people in a hospital, or in training, or whatever it might be, we might find ourselves.

What type of physical training did you get?

Long hikes. Many long hikes. Carrying heavy, very heavy packages.

Do you remember the distances of the hikes?

Oh, we would hike as many as 25-20, 25 and 30 miles in a morning, and then come back and do physical training on the running courses and infiltration courses. No hand to hand type of combat exercises.

You mentioned the infiltration course before. What was that?

The infiltration was, you would crawl on your stomach, probably 75 to 100 yards, and you had to keep your head low because there was live machine gun fire above you. And then as you went along, every once in a while a shot was let off beside you. A small explosion would be set off beside you, teaching you to keep down, so we would keep low to the ground without rising up. While these tracer bullets were going over your head.

And the medical training? Do you remember any of the courses?

No. No specific medical training, but just films that would show you how to handle things that you might come up against.

Did they teach you about specific injuries? How to apply first aid?

No.

Did you ever get that training?

I got that when I went overseas. When I got overseas and was stationed at a particular station.

How long was the basic training for you?

Seventeen weeks.

And they gave you training films on various injuries but no practical training?

No practical training at that time.

During the time from when you were inducted until the time you completed basic training, did you get any leave at all? Any passes?

The only pass we got was from the camp, Barkley, into this town of Abilene, that's all. No other leave at all.

Were you allowed to stay in Abilene overnight?

No. In fact, when you went into Abilene there were so many thousands of men of Camp Barkley, that the city of Abilene did not like soldiers. In fact, I can remember going into a store, and on the screen door there was a sign, "Soldiers and Dogs Not Allowed."

Really?

Absolutely. I was absolutely amazed.

Seems like a rather ungrateful attitude.

Well, I can imagine the fact that so many soldiers, and you know, besides the training that we had in the medics, there was tank corps, the infantry also being under training and getting ready to go overseas, and they were some pretty tough outfits. And I can imagine that the feeling of the people having hundreds of GIs coming into their community was not very acceptable. Although I went to a church there where I was well accepted. That was my second time, I went in a second time, and it happened that I went to a Methodist church on that Sunday, and some people knew my father, who had been a minister in Erie, PA. They invited me to dinner that Sunday.

Part 4: Going Overseas:

What happened after basic training?

After basic training, we boarded a train and headed for Camp Shinango.

How do you spell that?

S-H-I-N-A-N-G-O.

What did you do there?

All we did there were to change our khakis and got total winter outfits. All heavy ODs. (olive drab) And we anticipated that we were going to the European theater. And then we were transferred to Camp Shanks in New York, and we were there just a night or two, and there is where we boarded a ship. The ship was the SS John Lykes. L-Y-K-E-S. Which was a banana boat.

Why do you call it a banana boat?

Because they transported bananas from other parts of the world.

Did it smell like bananas?

No, it didn't. They had been used quite so much. And then, so when we boarded the ship we went down the east coast, and when we were down in the Caribbean area they called us down into a changing room, and we gave up our ODs and they gave us summer khakis. And there we said, "Uh-oh, we're going to the South Pacific area."

Did they confirm that, or was that just speculation?

Speculation, but we found that out when we headed for and went through the Panama Canal. And then through the Panama Canal we joined with a convoy. And that was a rather large convoy. But about three, four days out in the convoy, the ship which we were on had had a damaged driveshaft, and it broke again. And here we were, sitting ducks. We stopped.

Where were you?

Oh, three or four days out of Panama. I don't know the exact place of it, but it was, oh, four, five days out into the ocean.

Don, before we go any further on your voyage across the Pacific, a couple of questions. Do you know why they sent you east, back through Camp Shinango and Camp Shanks? Did they intend to send you to the Pacific all along, or was it a change?

I have no idea.

They never told you?

They never told us this at all.

OK. And the other question I wanted to ask was, before you actually departed for your overseas tour, did you get any leave at all?

Did not.

Had you been in contact with your family during the training and so forth?

Oh, yes. We were able to phone and also write letters. And got letters from home. But the interesting point of being on this John S. Lykes was the fact that the driveshaft broke, and we sat out in the Pacific. With one destroyer escort going around us. And there was a gentleman upstairs in the radar room who was from Hannibal, MO, who I knew. And he knew I had been on duty, security duty. And then, of course, when you went through the ship from inside to outside, you went through several layers so you couldn't see any light out. No light could be shown out onto the ocean. And about dusk, an oil tanker went by, at least a freighter of some kind. And the next morning, this friend of mine came down to me, and he said, "Don, I know you were on duty last night. Do you remember seeing that ship that went past us?" And I said "Yes." And he said, "About 500 miles ahead of us it was sunk." It was a Dutch freighter that was sunk.

You say you were four or five days out. Roughly where were you? Say, using Hawaii as a reference point.

Well, when you're down to the Panama Canal you're quite a bit south, we were going southwest towards the New Hebrides and that area, because we stopped at Haiti, so we were probably half way. I was on board ship there for 30 days before we arrived at New Hebrides, where we...

You said Haiti. Did you mean Tahiti?

No. Where is it the big black type of people live? Tahiti?

Well, Haiti is in the Caribbean.

No, it's not the Caribbean. It was…I'll have to go back and bring it.

Did you stop anywhere after you left the American continent?

No. Right straight through to the New Hebrides Islands. And, in fact, we got off at Espiritu Santos. Which was a holding area, and that is when you were assigned to the various, wherever you were going in the Pacific.

How many people were on the banana boat?

I can't tell you, but it was a big one. It was a good sized ship. I didn't like it at all.

What were the accommodations like? It was meant to carry bananas and now it's carrying people.

(laughs) All down through the holds were stacked bunks, and it was <u>hot.</u>

How many high?

Probably three or four high. Four high. And we had two meals a day. And when you went down to get your meal, you went clear down to the bottom of the hold, and it was <u>hot</u>. And the meals were terrible, and I will never forget that most of the time we had powdered eggs which were green. When they were prepared they were green. And in those 30 days, over Christmas time, I had one fresh orange. Not good meals at all. In fact, I probably lost 15 or 20 pounds.

That's quite a crossing. Now you said that your drive shaft broke, and so you were left out there with one destroyer…

Escort. Escort destroyer. A very, very small ship. It just circled quite a distance around us, until they got the drive shaft re-welded, or fixed. That ship had been hit once before, somewhere. Hit by a shell somewhere, and had broken the driveshaft. At least that was the story they told us. We know that it had been, because when it turned over you could hear it thump, thump, thump, thump. And on this particular night it broke.

And so it was repaired without having any other parts brought out from another place?

Correct. That's right.

You said it took 30 days to get to New Hebrides Islands. Did that include your stop for the driveshaft repairs?

Yes. It totaled about 30 days. Yes.

In the New Hebrides Islands, how long were you there waiting to be assigned out?

We were only there probably less than a week. And then a group of us were picked up by the USS Rixsy. R-I-X-S-Y. And had the best meals that we ever had eaten (laughs) in those 30 days, and in fact as good as we had had on land in the Army base.

How do you account for the fact that two US ships, one with terrible food and one with good food?

Undoubtedly, one was not a service ship like the Rixsy, which was a Navy ship. The other one was probably just brought in as a transport, purchased or rented or whatever by the US military to transport. It was just a US transport. But it was not a military ship, as such. It was probably, undoubtedly rented, maybe they bought it, I don't know. It was not a US ship like the Rixsy, which was a Navy ship.

Who provided the cooks for the Rixsy?

They were Navy personnel. All Navy personnel. We were a small contingent on the Rixsy.

How about on the USS John Lykes? Were those Navy cooks also? Army?

No. We don't know who they were. Probably Army personnel.

What would be an example of a meal that you would have on the Rixsy?

We had salads. We had good meat, whatever meat we had. We had fruit. We had fruit juices. We had good bakery goods. I'll never forget eating (laughs) I almost bloated myself on the first meal. (both laugh)

How long were you on the Rixsy?

We were only on the Rixsy three or four days. They took us directly from the New Hebrides to Guadalcanal.

Part 5: Experiences:

What was the month and year that you arrived at Guadalcanal?

Guadalcanal, I arrived there in February, as I recall. (checks papers) Here we are. I departed from the US on December the 20th, and I arrived the 22nd of January in 1944. And the group I was with on the Rixsy, and we were dropped off at Guadalcanal, was a replacement group for many of the members of the 48th Station Hospital. A lot of these people had been overseas many, many months, and most of us were their replacements. Particularly in surgery, I was replacement with three other men for three there that were getting ready to come back. We had no female nurses on Guadalcanal. And that's where I got my real training as a medical technician. Surgical technician, not medical. Surgical technician.

When you say you got training, was this on the job training?

On the job. The head enlisted men would train us in, first of all, showing us what we were to do. How we were to prepare packs of material such as instruments and gauzes and saturated gauze, saturated with Vaseline for burn cases. We were trained, and we had the lower jobs, of course, learning all of this, and how to take care of this surgical unit. We had three operating rooms in this particular facility. And they were training us, and then we would go in as what they called "dirty nurses." We had not scrubbed up, with sterile gloves and so on. So we did all the things, such as pick things off the floor, such as if they would drop something on the floor, or we would bring in packets of materials which they would need, but we could not open them because, we could open them to a point, and the person who was the sterile nurse would take them out and put them on the operating table.

And this was with the 48th Station Hospital?

48th Station Hospital.

Where was that, specifically?

On Guadalcanal.

On the island?

On the island of Guadalcanal. It was not far from...what was the big field that was bombed? Was that Henderson? There were two of them. One was in Hawaii that was bombed, and then there was one at Guadalcanal. And you could still see where all the palm trees were just leveled or burned where there had been the fight for Guadalcanal. We came in after that.

When you arrived and started your stint with the 48th Station Hospital, what was going on there on the island? Was there heavy fighting?

No. There was no fighting at that time. We were there as sort of a secondary area for those men who were further up in the islands, closer to Japan, that had injuries. Some of them came back by helicopter. Most of them came back by hospital ship.

So, was Guadalcanal secure?

Yes.

There was no more fighting on that specific island?

That's right.

Don, how long were you with the 48th Station Hospital?

Exactly one year.

So, from about February of '44 until February of '45?

Just awfully close to one year. Because we got there in January, about the first part of February, I guess, and we transferred. And because the troops going north are going towards Japan, were moving up closer island by island, they moved us closer to the area of where there was need for medical treatment. So they took our 48th Station Hospital and another station hospital, which I do not know the name, and we became a larger hospital and we were called a numbered general hospital, the 374th numbered General Hospital. And these facilities had been built by the Seabees, both on Guadalcanal and on Tinian. They built rows of surgical wards and medical wards.

Where you were first, at the 48th Station Hospital, what kind of facilities did you have? A series of tents? Hard sided buildings?

These were all hard sided buildings.

How big was your hospital, as far as the personnel that worked there?

Personnel, to be exact I'm not sure, but there had to be in the neighborhood of 150 to 175 personnel.

And how many beds did you have there?

That I don't remember.

Do you know roughly how many patients you would have at any given time?

Oh, yes, we could have as many as 75 to 100 patients, on the medical and the surgical wards. There were two divisions. A lot of the men who were serviced there were also men who were on the island at that time, in different units.

The patients, when you treated them there, did most of them need surgery?

Many of them needed surgery, in the surgical units that they came in, because we were doing two things. One, we were getting them ready. We were giving them surgical treatment so they could either get back to their unit, or if their surgery was such that they needed to leave and go to the States, they would then go on a hospital ship, or if they were in cases of which we have several, were very rough cases, tough cases, we would get them ready and put them on a plane, and they would be flown back to Hawaii.

What was the flying time from there to Hawaii?

Don't know. I don't know. I don't know what that time would be.

During the year you were with the 48th Station Hospital, did it always stay at the same place, or did you say it moved forward to another location?

No. It stayed. It was a permanent installation at that point.

Do you have any idea how many men you treated during the time that you were with the 48th?

No, but I do at the general hospital. Yes, I do, because we kept records. We continued the records from one to the other. We treated in surgery in the neighborhood of 2200 men. With all types of… this was just in the surgical portion of the hospital. Not the medical ward where like there was dentistry, and there was x-ray.

But you were specifically a surgical...

Surgical Technician.

What were your specific duties as a surgical tech, once you got the on the job training?

I became a scrub nurse, worked right at the operating table with the doctors. The doctors we had, most of them at that time, were from Northwestern University. We had some others from some other universities; Captain Lau was from Pennsylvania. But I would hand instruments to the surgeons, I would prepare threading of needles for suturing, I would use sterile gauze where they would need to have blood soaked up so they could go and see where they had to clamp off a bleeder. Then, near the end of that year I was learning how to do skin grafts with one of the doctors where we did pinch type skin grafts, and then the other type of skin grafts, we would use a dermatome which would slice off a very, very thin layer of skin and then put it on skin. I learned to do that. And then hand it over to the physician who would then tack it down where it was. And then I had learned by that time how to bandage, put compression bandages on and then bandage the wound. Also I learned, something unusual happened at one time. We had a young man come in, and he had been shot, and his knee was broken, and his lower leg was broken, but a bullet went up into his thigh, and they thought for sure he was going to pass away. And when he came in, he had a splint. It was a different kind of splint. It was a splint for the leg. It went clear up to the groin, and it kept the leg in place. The surgeon had to go in and find out why this man had so much pain and so much fever. So when they took the splint off, I had to hold the man's foot and leg in place so it would not move at all, since it was a broken leg. And they went in and went up the canal where the bullet had gone, and they found out by cutting and going in there that there was a plug of, a hunk of muscle that had turned gangrenous. And when they pulled that plug out, the odor was such that it almost caused me to vomit. It did save the man's life, but here I was holding this man's foot in traction for a matter of somewhere in the neighborhood of 25 minutes without being able to move. And they got the bullet out and the man did live. But when I finished, then they had to take me into a physical therapist where they massaged my hands (both laugh) so I could get my fingers working again.

You said the problem was a gangrenous plug. How old was the wound?

How old was the wound? He had been flown in. He hadn't been there very long from where he

had been flown in where he had been shot, but I don't remember from where he came, but he had come (to) us very shortly after he had been shot, somewhere further up at one of the islands, further towards Japan.

So, most of the surgeries that you assisted in, 2200 of them, were combat injuries?

I would say probably two thirds of them were combat. A lot of them were for those people who were on the island, where there were accidents. For example, a man fell off of a telephone pole which happened to be made of a coconut trunk, and the coconut trunk rotted from the inside. And this telephone lineman got up on it, and it broke and he fell and lit on his head on a 55 gallon drum, steel drum. And it cracked his skull, and in fact depressed part of his skull, and we had to go in and help pull out that. The doctors saved his life, too, because he was near dead when they were able to remove those pieces of bone in his head. And then they sent him back to the States immediately, and they were going to put in some kind of a plate. I don't remember the type of plate, but a metal plate would be put in his head.

You said roughly two thirds were combat wounds and the other third were various mishaps. Of the combat injuries, what would be the most typical injury that you would treat?

Gunshot wounds.

More gunshot wounds than artillery and mortars?

Mortars. Gunshot. (pauses to think) Burns.

How would they incur a burn in combat?

I don't know how they would. I don't know that. I would guess the major portion of our burn wounds were from right on the island, where the guys worked around incinerators which exploded. I can't remember all those. I wish I had kept my records.

Were you treating only US Army personnel?

On Guadalcanal, we treated mostly Army personnel. On Tinian, we treated US Air Corps, US Army, US Navy. Because the Navy had only a very small clinic.

When you worked at (the two hospitals) were you part of a team? Did you always work with the same doctors, or just whoever happens to be there?

We had a team of doctors. A core team of doctors. It was Colonel Wilson, who was the head man, head surgeon, head doctor and surgeon. And Colonel Douglas and Captain Lau.

Excuse me, how do you spell Lau?

L-A-U. He was a fine doctor. Dr. Hammet, who was an orthopedic surgeon. This was the major core group that we worked with. In fact, we went on to Tinian with them, and it was an expanded number of surgeons we worked with.

What ethnic background was Captain Lau?

He was Caucasian. He was not an Oriental. All of the men in our surgical unit were Caucasians. U.S. men.

So you tended to work for the same surgeons, day after day?

That's right.

You were part of a team?

That's correct. There were eight or nine enlisted men. And then there were generally between four and six surgeons that we worked with. Once in a while there was a change. A new man came in and another one left. For example, Captain Lau came in for awhile, and he was learning what was going on in the specific area, and then he was moved on to somewhere else to take charge probably in some other hospital or some other unit.

In your kind of work, how many hours a day were you on duty?

We were on call 24 hours a day.

<u>On call</u> 24 hours a day?

On call 24 hours a day. We had two teams which, generally we would be seven to ten hours a day on duty. But then, we knew, any big case came in, for example, suppose they had to have two or three surgical rooms at a time, they would call all of us in.

Did they have that situation where a lot of casualties would come in at the same time.

Yes, but we had more of that type of thing happen when there was accidents on the island. On Guadalcanal. For example, there was a big wreck where a big truck hit another jeep or something, I don't remember what vehicle, but they brought five or six men in and one, his hand had to be removed, and broken bones and so on.

Were your living quarters adjacent to the hospital?

We were on the same grounds. We could walk to it. We did not have transportation to and from.

You were on duty seven to ten hours a day. Was there anything to do when you weren't on duty? What did you do for recreation?

Swimming. We were right on the ocean. The ocean was beautifully clear. And that's mainly what we would do. There was some volleyball games, but other than that, that's what we did.

No town to go to?

Not on Guadalcanal.

What kind of building were you living in? Were you living in tents or in a barracks building?

That time it was a hard shelled building which had been built by the Seabees.

It was not a Quonset hut?

No.

What was your rank at that time?

When I left there I became a Technical Sergeant. T. Tech Sergeant.

Four, or five?

Three.

Tech Sergeant Three. That was when you were with the 48th?

Right at the end of that was when I received it, because when the people who had been there, and were waiting to go home, I then was put in charge of surgery. Enlisted man in surgery.

How did your responsibilities change once you were in charge of surgery?

I had to assign men and make sure that they were covering all the time units. I then taught the men how to clean autoclaves, make packs, have all the instruments ready, how they were stored, getting the medical supplies from our medical supply unit, teach the new men who were coming in, giving them their assignments, keeping record of all the work we did as enlisted men, which was also attached to the form which the doctors signed.

Did Guadalcanal come under attack at any time while you were on the island?

No.

You moved from Guadalcanal to Tinian when?

About February, 1945.

How did you get from Guadalcanal to Tinian?

That's when went on the- I'm trying to remember- I don't remember the name of the ship, but we were transported by ship.

How long did that take?

Oh, that only took us three or four days.

Any problems?

No. None whatsoever.

And how did life change for you when you got to Tinian? (tape ends)

We just ran out of tape, and when we did, Don, I had asked you how your life changed from your duties on Guadalcanal when you moved to Tinian. And your answer was?

I became busier. Because it was a bigger hospital, a bigger surgical unit, and because we were

getting more casualties, or at least injured personnel who came back, who were flying B-29s or who were in B-29s, crews, and also there was a Navy base there, a small Navy unit that had a small, very small clinic, hospital, and they couldn't take care of things that we did because of the facilities and the personnel that we had.

What is the difference between a station hospital and a numbered hospital?

A numbered hospital is much bigger. At least twice as big, because we were two station hospitals combined to make the 374th General Hospital, numbered General Hospital.

Do you know how they get the name numbered hospital? I mean, the station hospital had a number (also).

They just gave it a number. 374th. 374th General Hospital. Much larger staff of personnel as far as surgeons, physicians, and we had female nurses at this time we worked with.

They were military personnel, the nurses?

That's correct. They were military personnel.

Do you know why they had them at Tinian but not at Guadalcanal?

They didn't bring them in on Guadalcanal until just before we left Guadalcanal, we had a contingency of female nurses and then we moved out. I don't know. I don't know if they had enough nurses. I don't know if they had well enough trained. But we did all the work of the female nurses while we were on Guadalcanal, until we received this other group.

How long was your tour of duty at Tinian?

Tinian was just about a year. Not quite a year. Almost a year.

So, any interesting experiences during your tour of duty on Tinian that you would like to share?

We had many, many interesting things happen there. We had many patients come from off the hospital ships in which we would get them ready to go back to their units or would go on to the States, to Hawaii, or to the US to be taken care of. The fact that there were two large B-29 groups, I guess they called them wings, of planes situated on Tinian, we found that from the hospital area I could look down on to west field and watch the 29s take off as they would fly towards Japan with loads of bombs, or in the last months, loaded with mines which they laid in Tokyo harbor. And that was about a 16 hour trip, when they left Tinian, and back. At one time I saw one plane which was loaded with mines, did not make it completely off the runway, which was, went off of a cliff over the water, but it hit, and it burned the plane completely up, and the fact that I was in surgery, they used a facility right close to us as a morgue, and it was my lot to draw to help to embalm these, that was 11 or 13, I think it was 13 men in the crew. And here were these men with their hands burned off, or feet burned off, burned completely to the point where the only reason they knew who they were was either their dog tag was burned into their skin on their chest or they knew where they were when they were taken out of plane when they couldn't get out of the plane, their location. And that was probably the most sickening thing I have ever done in my life. If you've ever smelled burned flesh, you will never forget it. It stays

with you for many, many months. And so we did. We prepared them for burial and to send back to the States or to whatever burial grounds.

Any other experiences?

Then, about two or three weeks before the end of the war, one day the colonel, Colonel Wilson came to me and said, "Please take your men out of the surgery. You're not to be here today. Take yourselves over to the PX or wherever, but stay close where we could get in touch with you." Well, we didn't know what was going on, and just previous to that, about a week previous to that, officers from the West Wing came up and said, "We would like to lay a bet with you people." They said, "We will any amount of money, and a hundred to one, that the war would be over in ten days to several weeks." We knew then that something was going to happen. We didn't know what, but we didn't take their bets. But then when the day came that the colonel told us to move out of surgery, we didn't know what was going to happen, but later we found out that the crew of the Enola Gay had been brought up. And the Enola Gay was the plane which flew from West Field to Japan to drop the first atomic bomb. And these men were there to be tested to see if they were radioactive. They would let nobody there but the radiologist in the surgical unit, and the commander, the chief surgeon of the hospital. We didn't find this out until several weeks later, who they were, even though we had heard that the bomb had been dropped, the first bomb had been dropped. From then there was very little going on as far as taking care of people, but who were going up to Japan, because they were waiting to see whether, how Japan would respond. Then I was coming back from the service, many people, particularly in later years, were talking about the bombing of Japan. They would ask, particularly those who were much younger, and had nothing to do with any wars, had never been in any wars, they'd say, "How can you live with the fact that the bomb was dropped?" And they thought it was the most inhumane thing that could happen. And I said to the people I talked with, and in fact I even wrote Colonel Tibbits, the one who dropped the bomb, a letter telling him how much I was pleased and how men in our units and all the servicemen I knew were glad that it happened, because we, as medical personnel, were being trained to go into Japan, and we would have been going into Japan, and you can imagine what people who were going to be invaded, what they were going to do. They would fight for their country and their land. And we knew that our lives were saved because we did not have to go into Japan. We figured that there would have been hundreds and hundreds of thousands of servicemen that would have been killed if they had to go into Japan.

Besides the crew of the Enola Gay, were there any other (pause)

Members of the crew that were in there?

No, for example the USS Indianapolis that delivered the bomb, I understand it was sunk and there were a lot of survivors in the water for several days. Were any of those survivors eventually brought to your hospital?

No. Not to my knowledge. The persons that we got were those people who were flying the crews, for example, one American Indian young man who was a tail gunner came in, and their ship had been hit. Holes through their fuselage, holes through the tail, and he had had a very, very bad cut on his scalp. It was my job to prep him by shaving his scalp, get him ready for surgery to get it sewed up. But the B-29s, it was amazing the hits that they would take. The

holes through them, and they were able to come back, and even with only two motors, still were able to come back, because they were props. Prop planes.

Well, Don, we've talked about all your duties. I have some personal questions for you. For example, were you able to stay in touch with your family during your two years on the islands?

Yes.

And how did you communicate?

That was all by mail. No telephone calls, whatever. All by mail.

Did they ever send you any packages?

Oh, yes.

What, for example, did you get in your packages?

Sometimes I would get packages of cookies. Very little else, because we did not ask for anything. Christmas cards and the like, but very little else, because I, for a fact said no use sending anything, everything taken care of, didn't need anything, really.

We talked about how you entertained yourself when you were off duty. You mentioned swimming and volleyball. Did you ever have any entertainment, any USO shows come in?

Oh, yes! Oh, yes! We had Gene Autry. We saw Gene Autry in person at one of the, I'm trying to remember where it was. We had Bob Hope. I saw Bob Hope. Some female actresses and I don't remember their names. Entertaining people.

One other veteran I interviewed mentioned Diana Lind. Was she one of them?

No. That doesn't ring a bell. Who was the one who worked with Gene Autry? Andy Devine. We saw him. A number of good orchestra bands came with them. That's all I can remember.

Well, we talked about the grim part of your tour and now we're talking about the off duty entertainment. In that light, do you have any humorous or unusual events that you want to share? Anything happen that made you smile at the time?

Hmm. No, I can't think of anything right off the bat. A lot of them that were not. (pause) My brother, who I had not seen for two years, he was younger than I am, was in the Navy. In the Navy Air Corps. And he came over to Guam, which was 40 miles away from Tinian. And they asked him if he wanted to stay at Guam or wanted to go to Tinian. He said, "I would like to go up to Tinian because my brother is there." He came, so I got a flight down to Guam, saw my brother, and then several weeks later he came to Tinian. And that was near the end of the war, and while he was in Tinian at the Naval unit in Tinian, he was in the gunnery department, armory division with (pause)

They armed the planes?

Armed planes, small planes, the Navy planes. And he was also a pretty good woodworker. And

as he was doing some woodworking for something, he was using a jointer and the piece of wood flew out of his hand and he cut off the tips of his finger. Well, they called me and told me he was there, so I got a ride down to where he was, and he didn't take anesthetic very well. He was quite sick. Nobody was really taking care of him when I got in, and I was the one who really took care of him for that whole night, and then went back. And not much longer after that I came home, and he came home later. But he is the one who, with my background in pre-med and through surgical work in the service, he is the one who became a physician and surgeon. (both laugh) After he came out of the service he went to med school, and I went on into education and became a school superintendent.

I guess we can pretty much go to that point after you got out of the service, but first let's get you home. You were there in Tinian until January of '46, so you were there for several months after the war formally ended. What did they have you doing after that?

My responsibility was to close surgery. That meant taking inventory of the surgical equipment that we had, getting it ready to pack and be shipped back wherever they were going to ship it, whether it was Hawaii or to the States. And that took quite a while because we had lots and lots of equipment in surgery.

Part 6: Return to the US and discharge:

So, how did you get back to the States?

I came back to the States on a baby aircraft carrier. I don't even remember the name of it. And I came back to California.

Where were you discharged?

California, and then we got on a train, went to Jefferson Barracks. Back to Jefferson Barracks, St. Louis, MO.

And that's where you were discharged?

I was discharged from there.

When were you discharged?

Let's see. Was it February? (checks records) January 31st of 1946.

Part 7: After Service:

Don, what did you do in the days and weeks right after you got out of the service?

Right after that, I decided to try to go back to med school. Trying to get into med school. But I did not. But I went back to Park College for the rest of that semester, and that year. The whole next school year. And I was picking up courses that I had wanted to take, like embryology and some additional science courses.

Was this supported by the GI bill?

The first part of it was not. When I went back to the University of Kansas to get a masters, it was. But I got married in May of 1946.

Was this somebody you had known before you went overseas?

Yes. We had met when we went away to college.

So I imagine you had a lot of correspondence with your college sweetheart while you were overseas.

Yes, a lot of correspondence.

Were you engaged when you were overseas?

No. No. The understanding was that we would be engaged, but we were not.

And when did you get married?

May 25th, 1946.

So you were a married student at the University of Kansas.

For two years. Where I earned a masters degree in zoology. And I also taught at the University of Kansas while I was there. I was an instructor in the biology department. And right after that, then I became a teacher in junior high school in Kansas City, KS. And while I was teaching I earned another master's degree in education. And after about four years of teaching I went back to the University of Missouri and earned my doctorate in education. And while I was earning my doctorate, I also was a school superintendent.

Were you on the GI bill through all those times, through the doctorate?

No, just my master's.

The doctorate was not paid by the GI bill?

That is correct. No, it was on my own.

Then, you had children?

I have two children.

And when did you move back to this area?

Oh my. Moved around and moved around. I became a teacher in Kansas City, KS. And then I became, I became the superintendent in a small district in Kansas City North, which was an unincorporated area, until about 1955, '56. And then I was hired as the, oh yeah, and then I went to Oak Park, IL, as a principal for a year. And from there I went to Overland Park, KS, where I became the superintendent. Was there for four years. And that's when, partially, I was earning my doctorate. And I earned that, and I finished that in 1963. 1961, excuse me. And then I went from Kansas, I was teaching in Kansas. Excuse me, while I was superintendent at Overland Park, KS, then I applied for position as Superintendent of Schools in Waukegan, IL. And I was

in Waukegan as a superintendent for five years, and then I went from Waukegan, I went to Munster, IN, for three years. And then I was hired as a superintendent at Hillside, IL, the elementary school system there. I was there for 18 years as the superintendent, and then retired in 1992. I've been retired for over ten years.

Don, have you ever had any contact since the war with any of your wartime buddies?

I did. I kept in contact with a number of them for about 15 or 20 years. And then a couple of them passed away. I've been the fortunate one that's been living, and I have not had any contact with any of them for the past 20 years.

Any contact other than written communication? Did you ever get back together?

Yes. It happened that while I was a school superintendent in Kansas City North, a young man came in as doctor of osteopathy, and he was my partner who worked with me in surgery, the man under me, Dr. Legg, L-E-G-G. And I knew him for the two or three years I was there. And then, another man whose name was Jack Chapin, lived out in Montana, we kept good contact with each other in writing. And then one year he and his wife came through this area, vacationing in their motor home, and I went down to visit them where they parked here.

Have you ever joined a veterans' organization?

I have never been in a veterans' organization, no.

Don, what was your rank when you were discharged?

Tech Sergeant three.

Were you awarded any medals or citations?

Only the Good Conduct Medal. But I was eligible to wear the Victory Ribbon of the Asiatic Pacific Theater. And four overseas bars for service.

Part 8: Conclusion:

How do you feel that your wartime service and those experiences affected your life?

I think I became more service oriented towards other humans, and really found out how much, became more sympathetic with those who were injured and who were not only not seriously injured, but those who were extremely seriously injured, and who even passed away. And also I found out that I could take responsibilities and could do almost anything I really wanted to if I set my mind to it.

Is there anything that we haven't covered in this interview that you would like to express before we go off record?

Yes. Yes. The fact that I was privileged to be a member of the military service, even though I was scared to heck going into it, but found out that I could do my job and live with it, and went overseas and was not afraid or scared at all, and that I was doing something that I was able to do for my country, and that I had the honor and privilege of doing it. In a service type, in fact, of

helping people to regain their health, rather than killing people. I am not against a war of this type if it's necessary, but I don't want to go through a war again if I can help it.

Well, thank you, and we are going off record.