

## ALTON HANRATH

This is a portion of the Oral Histories of Northwest Missouri in the 1940s Program. The Nodaway County Historical Society is sponsoring this program in partnership with the National Humanities Counsel and with the endowment of the National Humanities Counsel. Today is April 2, 2009 and we are here today to interview Alton Hanrath. We're in his home and the interviewer is Joni Amthor and the assisting is Margaret Kelley. Alton's birthday is November 20. He was born in 1916. He has served in the Army and he was a T-4. He's going to tell us the story about his life in World War II and the 1940s.

Amthor: Alton, can you tell us a little bit about where and when you were born, who your parents were, what their occupations were and if you had any brothers and sisters?

Hanrath: Well, I was born about – on a farm about 3 ½ miles further south of here, but I grew up in this – I was only 1 so I grew up on this farmstead. That is where I spent all of my life until the time that I went into the service.

Amthor: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

Hanrath: I had 2 sisters and I had one brother that was deceased.

Amthor: Could you tell us what life was like living on the farm before you went into the service?

Hanrath: Well, I had gone through high school and graduated in 1934. Then I did have four years of college at Tarkio College. I graduated there in 1938. Now, I worked for two years for a veterinary and after that I took part in the Pilots Training Program and from there I went into the service.

Amthor: Okay. Now, what year was that? Did you enlist?

Hanrath: I volunteered. That was back in the days of the draft, of course and my number was fairly high. I was going to be drafted before too long, so I just volunteered ahead of my draft date.

Amthor: Okay. And you said you went into the Army?

Hanrath: Yes, I was sent to Fort Leavenworth and from there they assigned us to Fort Riley, Camp Funston, actually, which is a part of the Fort Riley Reservation.

Amthor: Can you tell us a little bit about that - how training was like and that type of thing?

Hanrath: Well, even though a lot of us was farm boys and grew up around horses, we weren't exposed, of course, to riding as they do in the Cavalry, so it was a new

experience for most of us. So we spent thirty days in just, I suppose you'd say, boot training for the Cavalry. We did go on maneuvers, then, in August of '41. We took part in maneuvers to test whether or not there was a place for the Cavalry. The goal was to see whether or not the Cavalry could keep up with Armor. And so we went on maneuvers down into Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas. The answer, of course, to the question whether or not we could keep up with the army, we couldn't. At the end of 6 weeks we had 1500 head of horses in the hospital, so we come back, I suppose you'd say, with a lot of, not battle scars, but a lot of maneuver scars. And we went back to our regular home in Camp Funston.

Amthor: How were the horses trained? Did you have a favorite horse? Did you have a horse?

Hanrath: We were assigned horses and most of the time we kept our horses throughout all our training. There was short time when one of the officers took my horse, so I had to have another one. But he soon gave him back to me. So Irish Indian was my horse's name.

Amthor: Irish Indian?

Hanrath: Yes.

Amthor: That was interesting.

Hanrath: Uh-huh. You become attached to your horse just like you do to pets. So I've often said I'd like to meet up with Irish Indian again sometime.

Amthor: So what happened to the horses? Were they decommissioned? Or, after, when didn't find out...?

Hanrath: When they decommissioned the Cavalry, they sold some of the horses. They turned a lot of them out on the pasture, and a few of them, just like Old Chief, they kept on the reservation and took care of them. Old Chief turned out to be the last horse in the Cavalry.

Amthor: Wow. Can you tell us more about your actual service? Did you go overseas?

Hanrath: From the Cavalry days we were made into the 9<sup>th</sup> Armored Division and we took training there, then, for a little over a year, we started out at Fort Riley and then we went on maneuvers out at Camp Ibis in California out on the Mojave Desert and we spent 6 months or so out there. Then a part of the 9<sup>th</sup> Armored was siphoned up and made into the 776<sup>th</sup> Amphibious Tank Battalion and I was a part of that. So, from Camp Ibis, we went to Fort Ord in California and that's where we had our training as Amphibian people. And from there then we went overseas, first to Hawaii. We were there 2 or 3 months. And then we made the landings in Leyte, and then, later on, the landings in Okinawa.

Amthor: So what did you do when you landed on those islands?

Hanrath: On the landings?

Amthor: Yes.

Hanrath: We were among the first wave of people that went ashore and we furnished fire support for the troops. Our tanks had 75 millimeter Howitzers and we furnished the power support until the heavier artillery could get ashore. We sat under the guns of those battleships and cruisers and that is an experience in itself. I can always remember that day in Leyte. I don't think I ever had a headache as bad as I had sitting under the guns of those battleships and those 16 inchers when they go off. They make the air just vibrate. So it does cause headaches. I can swear to that. And then we were on Leyte. And, incidentally, we were there when MacArthur made his famous return to the Philippines. That was not very far from the spot where they were bivouacked. Then Leyte was declared secure on Christmas Day in '41. From there on we made preparations for the landings on Okinawa and that came on April 1st, then, 1945.

Amthor: So, were there any major battles other than just the landings that you participated in?

Hanrath: After the original landing, we usually returned back to the beaches. And we only did, you know, mild support, furnished some guard posts men, and that was – sometimes we were called upon to do maintenance for other tank companies which took us to the front lines, but mostly we were just there to do maintenance for them. So, it was there that we were when they dropped the bomb, the atom bomb. We were in training for making a landing zone for the homeland of Japan. We'd already had our assignment. We were to make the landing on the southern island of Japan, Kyushu. That was scheduled, I think, to come in November of '45. Of course, dropping the atom bomb changed all of that.

Amthor: Could you tell us what that was like after the bomb was dropped?

Hanrath: I think every gun on the island of Okinawa went off when they dropped the bomb because they knew what the implications were. So it was a relief for the men that were there for the landings on the homeland were believed to be very costly. They estimated that we'd lose a million men, maybe. So it was a relief to the men that were scheduled to be on the homeland.

Amthor: Were you close enough that you could get radiation from the bombing?

Hanrath: No, I didn't hear of any. On Okinawa we were roughly 350 miles from Japan. So I didn't hear of any radiation that we received.

Amthor: Now, were you close enough to see the surrender on the Missouri when they were signing the contracts?

Hanrath: No, I don't think, to my knowledge, we didn't have any units that were present. That was largely naval personnel that were able to do that with – of course, they had a big fly-over of the Air Force II on that occasion.

Amthor: Now, where did you stay between landings? Were you on ships? Is that where you bunked or...

Hanrath: No, we were on the beaches. We bivouacked close to the beaches. As I say, did mostly maintenance there. We were right next to a naval operations base, so we interacted with them to some degree. And we were close enough that we were witness to some of the kamakaze attacks that proved to be very costly. We just walked the beaches every morning and there was always a lot of things that float ashore and that was evident, of course, of the ships that had been sunk.

Amthor: Let's back up a little bit. Where were you when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

Hanrath: I was in Fort Riley and I remember the day very well. It was on a Sunday and we were lounging around in our barracks when the report came over the radio. And immediately on Monday morning, why, the whole camp was alerted, some additional guard posts were established, and for the first day or so we went to our regular duty programs, but within 3 or 4, or maybe it was 5 days of Pearl Harbor, they shipped us to Arizona to do guard duty there and that's what took us to Phoenix and then later on our squadron went on to Yuma. And we pulled guard duty then on bridges, railroad bridges, power installations, irrigation dams, and things like that. I was also on a patrol to the border, to the Mexican border. It was largely just guard duty down there.

Amthor: How did they – was there very much activity along the Mexican border? How did the Mexican government look at this?

Hanrath: There were a lot of Japanese, of course, in the Imperial Valley of California, and also in parts of Mexico. The Mexican government had issued an order for all Japanese to report to the interior. The Mexican government was afraid that rather than report to the interior that they would cross over into the U.S. So that's the reason they sent some of us down to the border to guard against that. Incidentally, we didn't see any Japanese.

Amthor: Did you have to deal with any of the interment camps? Was there any of the Japanese interment camps?

Hanrath: No, no. We didn't have any direct involvement with any Japanese while we were at Yuma.

Amthor: Would you remember any of the propaganda or the news that was being said about the war about the Japanese or the Germans?

Hanrath: Yes, we were briefed on the kind of people that the Japanese were and the Japanese war effort, and all of that. Yes. Some of it seemed to be propaganda, of course, and as it always happens, it was over-played. Most of the Japanese – I spoke with those that were in the interior valley. They were peaceful people – largely gardeners. I can always remember when we pulled guard duty on the bridges; it was just a common occurrence for them to throw off some of their produce, watermelons and muskmelons, and so on, to us while we were on guard duty. So we kind of learned to respect the Japanese that were part of those that were in the Imperial Valley. One of the interesting stories, too, after we'd been in Yuma for awhile, we had retreat one evening and one of our commanding officers, I've forgot his rank now, but, anyway, he had been back to Washington and he said that he had been in a conference in which General MacArthur had called for a lot of Cavalry. That was in a time when the Japanese were overrunning many of the Pacific Islands. MacArthur wanted a lot of Cavalry. He said as soon as shipping was available we would be on our way. Two weeks later they shipped us back to Fort Riley and made us into an Armored Division.

Amthor: Changed their minds. Then, on your sheet of paper, you said something about scouting. Did you get some special training in scouting?

Hanrath: Yes, when I was in the Cavalry, I was in the group that took training as a scout and that was- part of the Cavalry duty was to scout out the enemy positions and so on, so I had training in that.

Amthor: Did you get to utilize any of that when you were overseas?

Hanrath: No.

Amthor: How about friendships? Did you form a lot of camaraderie with your fellow army platoons men?

Hanrath: Yes, that's a natural thing. You learn to trust those that you are serving with and I had a number of contacts that I kept in contact with after service days. So it's a special kind of friendship, camaraderie. You have to depend on your buddies.

Amthor: Now, did you do a lot of communication home? Did you write letters? Were you married at the time or did you get married later?

Hanrath: I married while I was in the service. In fact, it was just shortly before we went overseas. So I wrote a lot of letters. The correspondence was by E mail if people can remember what E-mail was back in those days. So I did write quite often.

Amthor: Did you ever try to tell your wife where you were?

Hanrath: We weren't allowed, for a long period of time, we weren't allowed to tell where we were. For example, even when we were in Hawaii, we could not make mention of the rainbow, and I never did figure that out why, but apparently there's something

different about the rainbows in Hawaii. We couldn't mention rainbows and we couldn't tell, of course, where we were. But after so long a time, why then they relented on that.

Amthor: Did you ever listen to Tokyo Rose when you – on the radio- when you were in service? Tokyo Rose -

Hanrath: No, I don't think I ever heard her. There weren't too many radios available to us, of course. They had them in the communications part, but, as individuals, we didn't have radios.

Amthor: How about entertainment? Did you ever have the USO or the Red Cross come visit you?

Hanrath: We had the USO visits while we were in the stateside. But overseas, I don't think we ever had any shows.

Amthor: Were any of the people of the USO- were any of them movie stars or famous people?

Hanrath: While we were at Camp Ibis, we did have some USO shows that had some of the more famous people, but I've even forgotten who they were now. I mean, they weren't just the real top stars, you know, but we did have people that were from Hollywood. Of course, that was always a bright spot in any GI's life.

Amthor: When they dropped the atomic bomb, how did you feel about that? Did you agree with Truman that that was necessary?

Hanrath: Well, as a GI, why, we thought it was a life saver. I can always remember that 50 years after the landings on Okinawa, there was an anniversary observance in Lincoln in which then Senator Exon spoke. He spoke about Truman's agony over whether or not to drop the bomb. But, of course, he said he finally decided that it was the thing to do and I think without an exception, nearly everybody said, "Thank God for President Truman."

Amthor: Now, not long after the war was over, did you get to come home as soon as the war was over, or did you have to stay there and do some cleanup?

Hanrath: Yes, no, I got home fairly early 'cause they had a system of points. You got so many points for ranks of service, for being married, and so on, and my points were rather high, so I was among the first of my unit to come home.

Amthor: How was that? Did you have a lot of celebration when you got home?

Hanrath: Well, yes, we were shipped back to Fort Lewis, and of course, we had to wait several days for transportation to get back to Fort Leavenworth to be discharged. So I met my family in Kansas City then. We didn't have any big family celebration and I had

spent – I had turned into a hospital before I came home, so- I wanted to be sure that if I had any service-connected disabilities that it would be on my record at least. So I spent several days in the hospital at Fort Leavenworth before I came on home. Then I met my wife in Kansas City again. So we didn't have any big celebration. It was just a nice family reunion. I got to see my son that was 11 months old for the first time and, so, it was a happy occasion.

Amthor: How did you adjust back to civilian life?

Hanrath: I didn't find it difficult. I felt I adjusted normally. I didn't think I had any war-connected experiences to cause me to have any big concerns. So, I think it was just a natural conversion to civilian life again.

Amthor: Did you join the American Legion or the VFW?

Hanrath: I didn't – no, I didn't and that's been a regret in my life that I didn't because I think they are worthy organizations and they do support so many of the veteran's causes, so I guess I just wasn't a joiner at heart and I was more interested in getting on with other things, I guess. But they are worthy organizations.

Amthor: Did you take advantage of the GI Bill when you got home?

Hanrath: No, I didn't. I had already had my four years of college, so I didn't have any reason to go beyond that at the time.

Amthor: Are you proud to be a veteran of World War II?

Hanrath: Well, yes, I always feel good about my service days. Those were some of the proud years of my life to be able to serve.

Amthor: Now, looking back, what was probably the highlight of that service? What was the thing that really means the most to you?

Hanrath: Well, I suppose just being able to meet all the requirements that the service demanded and to have taken part in some of the more difficult assignments that the war brought, and to be able to say that you were a part of winning the war is a bit of satisfaction.

Amthor: Did you – say something about the war, World War II, and the economy at that time and compare it to what the war is today, what differences could you tell us about that – if you compare the two wars?

Hanrath: It's rather difficult, I think, to compare the two times – they are so different. The types of service are different than they were back in those days. I think that there is more effort now than there was back in our days to serve the servicemen that come back. It is a greater - I think it's a greater adjustment now than it was back in my day.

Amthor: Do you think there was a concern about the spread of Communism?

Hanrath: Well, yes, that is a concern that was a concern for a good many years. I think that we were relieved when the cold war was once over. There are other worries that take the place of that now. (Phone ringing) I can just ignore it.

Amthor: How about polio? Was there a threat of polio after the war?

Hanrath: Oh, I don't recall that there was any epidemic of it. There may have been and I wasn't aware of it, but I guess I just wasn't aware of it. It was something that we needed to cure anyway. The discovery of the vaccine to prevent polio, of course, was a major thing that came a little bit later.

Amthor: Now, is there anything that you would like to tell us about the war or during that time period that you would like to share with us that we didn't cover - maybe a special story or something that stands out in your mind that was important to you?

Hanrath: I think there is so much difference in the public's attitude toward war. World War II found the public very much in support of the war and we were treated very well as GIs and when we came home. And that was in direct contrast to what the boys, for example, experienced when they came home from Vietnam. And I think that the conditions and people's attitude toward war hasn't changed that much and I think it's still a concern today. The fact that we have a volunteer army makes changes so much that we don't hear much talk about drafting people today, but I wonder whether or not the time is coming when we may have to resort to that. So, I am personally disappointed that the public has taken an anti-war attitude. It is – there may be better ways of solving disputes, but they haven't occurred to us yet.

Amthor: Margaret, do you have any question that you'd like to ask? Okay, I think we're finished. I really appreciate having the opportunity to talk to you today. We've enjoyed your story.

Hanrath: Well, it's nice to talk to you.