

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

YSU World War II - CBI

China-Burma-India Theater

O.H. 1429

WILLIAM PENNEY

Interviewed

by

Dave Glunt

on

October 9, 1991

WILLIAM VERNON PENNEY

Born to Daniel and Manella Penney on May 17, 1923 in Youngstown, Ohio, Mr. Penney has lived a life based on service to his community. An extremely private individual, Mr. Penney graduated from South High School in Youngstown before entering the U.S. Army in February of 1943.

With his enlistment, Mr. Penney was assigned to the 124th Cavalry Regiment. With the creation of the Mars Task Force, he was sent with his unit to Burma to take part in the offensives to retake North Burma. It was during this period that he was wounded and shipped to a watch repair unit where he was to finish out his experienced in the CBI.

With his discharge in February of 1946, Mr. Penney returned home. After "loafing for a couple of months" he became employed with U.S. Steel. Following a number of years of employment with U.S. Steel, Mr. Penney moved on to Robertson Heating Supply Company and remained in their employ until June of 1973. With his departure from Robertson, Mr. Penney entered into a nineteen year period of public service during which he served as a deputy with the Trumbull County Sheriff's Department and as Assistant Police Chief in Lordstown. Following his retirement in August of 1989, Mr. Penney entered into service as a Lordstown Village Councilman; a post he holds today.

Residing in Lordstown with his wife of 42 years, Mr. Penney is a member of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Warren and a member of the Lordstown chapter of the veterans of Foreign Wars.

--Dave Glunt

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INTERVIEWEE: WILLIAM PENNEY
INTERVIEWER: Dave Glunt
SUBJECT: Chine-Burma-India Theater
DATE: October 9, 1991

G: This is an interview with William Penney for the Youngstown State University Veterans of the CBI Project by Dave Glunt at Mr. Penney's home, 4245 Tod Avenue, S.W. Warren, Ohio, on October 9, 1991, at approximately 3:45 p.m.

Tell me about your work experiences and your experience in the military.

P: I worked for Packard Electric doing assembly line work.

G: Assembly line work?

P: Yes.

G: When did you enter the service?

P: February 1, 1943.

G: How did you enter? Did you enlist or did you draft?

P: I volunteered to be drafted. That was the way it went.

G: That was the way it went?

P: Yes. I wasn't called up so I volunteered to be drafted before I was called.

G: Was there any particular reason other than the lottery?

P: Yes. All the rest of the guys I ran around with were going into the Army or the Navy.

G: What were your thoughts on the Germans, the Japanese, the Italians?

P: Well, at that time, after Pearl Harbor, there was a lot of Americanism, serve your country, this type of stuff.

G: When you entered what was your training like exactly?

P: I trained in Fort Riley, Kansas, in the mechanized cavalry. That was basic training. When I was through with basic training, I was transferred down to Fort Brown, Texas, to the 124th Cavalry Regiment, which was the last line horse cavalry in the United States Army trained for combat.

G: How was that? What interesting things happened while you were with that unit?

P: Well, aside from my horseback drilling, we put on a lot of horse shows in the state of Texas, Louisiana, and Florida.

G: Did you run into any big names or anyone with great prominence?

P: No.

G: When you did these shows, were they government tasks, or were they for public viewing?

P: No, they were sponsored by the government for the general public.

G: How long were you with them?

P: I served all the time I went to Burma with them.

G: They went to Burma also?

P: Oh, yes. [We] went to India first and then on down to Burma.

G: What were your tasks in India?

P: More training in India, and there was a stage in India. [It was] - a staging area for the different groups to get together and open the Burma road, which the Japanese had taken over.

G: So, basically you were working in repairing it, or more or less providing security as it was being worked on?

P: No, the Japanese had, it was already built. The Japanese had control of it and it was our job to go down there and retake the Burma road is what it amounted to.

G: Under whose leadership primarily was your unit? Was it under Wingate or Stilwell?

P: No, that was shortly after Stilwell. I'd have to get that book to remember now who that was. Like I say, I'll give you the book. I'll loan it to you if you want to read it over. That gives the entire history of the 124th Cavalry.

G: Were you at any time mixed up with General Merrill?

P: Yes, that was it, Merrill Marauders, is what they were called.

G: Did you have any activities outside of the Burma road? Like Myitkyina? There was a big operation in 1944. Did you take part in that?

P: Right.

G: What exactly was it like? Just your daily trod, I would guess.

P: Well, we were flown in from New Deli, India, into Myitkyina. While they were landing the planes, they were bombing the airfield. What we did, when we flew in, was we stayed together as a group in one area. There were probably fifteen to twenty different areas where the plane load of soldiers came, and it ended up [that] you stayed in that group. One bomb hit the middle of one group. I don't know how many men were killed when that shell hit that area.

G: It was just a mix up in communications then?

P: Right.

G: What did you do after that? How did you move out?

P: Then we moved out. They flew in mules and we were issued pack mules to pack our supplies, ammunition, and 37mm cannon, to start for Myitkyina and go down towards Mandilay on the Burma road.

G: How was the trip?

P: The trip was rough.

G: I've heard quite a bit about the horse supply commission. Was that unit operated to you?

P: Well, they tried to supply us, but [there were] so many at this time. The Americans and the Chinese were friendly, legally, I'd guess you'd call it. We could never get along with the Chinese because they would drop us supplies, and if they landed on the wrong side of a mountain, the Chinese troops would run in and grab it and we'd be without. They'd even drop bales of hay for the mules, just about everything we needed they air dropped.

G: Now when you say you didn't get along very well with the Chinese, what else occurred? Were there any contacts that you were in with the Chinese, where perhaps things turned into a brawl where you had to be separated? Anything to that extent?

P: No, we usually stayed away from each other, but there were threats that we'd shoot any Chinese that would take our rations. If that happened more than once, then they would get it.

G: Whenever they flew in?

P: Yes.

G: Would they ever come into your encampment?

P: No. They stayed where they belonged and we stayed where we belonged, except when they dropped supplies and the Chinese would run and get it. This was the Chinese Army.

G: What about the Chinese people? Did you come into any contact with them?

P: Very little contact with them.

G: What exactly was your job when you were with your unit? What branch: infantry, artillery?

P: No, it was the cavalry.

G: You were actually mounted at this time?

P: No, we had mules when we went there. We weren't mounted, but we led pack mules.

G: You were also supposed to be infantry if you had to, correct?

P: No, we weren't in the infantry. We were still in the cavalry, in the 124th Cavalry Regiment. Instead of horse we had pack mules.

G: I just assumed that you had been drawn off some time during the campaign as infantry.

P: No.

G: Did you have any thought whenever you went over to Burma? I mean, what were your thoughts of your task at hand? It wasn't something in the mind of American people, perhaps at this time.

P: Well, the American people knew very little about the goings on in Burma because there was so much going on in Europe and that's where all the news was going to. We were more or less the forgotten soldiers. That's what we considered, at the time, the forgotten soldiers. You never saw anything in the newspapers about us or anything else.

G: Did it hurt the morale of anybody?

P: A little bit. Some of the guys thought about it, but it was no big thing.

G: What was your daily life like?

P: My daily life. Well, we were in Myitkyina before we took off down the Burma road every night. They would bomb the camp. So, we'd hear the airplanes coming over, we'd jump in the foxholes and wait until they left. Then get up, went back into the tents and went back to sleep. Once every night they came over.

G: What about whenever you were out working?

P: Well, working was more or less training. We were never harassed by the enemy in Myitkyina, except by air at night.

G: Did you run into any big names while you were over there?

P: No.

G: Whenever you came back, what kind of experience was that? When did you come back?

P: I came back in February, 1946. I was in service exactly three years and one day.

G: When you came back from Burma, did you spend any free time?

P: No, I was wounded in Burma.

G: You were wounded?

P: Yes.

G: Did you spend time in a Burmese hospital, or were you shipped Stateside?

P: No, I was shipped back to India.

G: What was that like?

P: There was a field hospital in India where they flew all the wounded back. I got hit by shrapnel from a mortar in my left leg and left hand. In fact, I had a piece of shrapnel go in my wrist and then out. What happened was that it blew away a portion of the bone so they took care of that and sewed that up. I had no use of my little finger on my left hand so they cut that off as you can tell here.

G: How was the treatment in the hospital?

P: Excellent.

G: Really?

P: Yes.

G: Because this was so far behind?

P: Right.

G: After you got out of the hospital, what occurred?

P: They put me in an Army maintenance unit. It was just a small unit, they just wanted to put me in some place because most of the action in Burma was over at the time, so they put me in this quarter master media maintenance outfit. I was assigned, of all things, to a watch maker to learn to repair watches.

G: That sounds rather interesting.

P: It was different. They had a watch makers outfit there in this ordinance outfit of all things.

G: Whose watches did you repair?

P: They were all GI watches. Army issued watches.

G: I thought maybe they would be General owned.

P: No. Most of the officers had issued watches. This was just a

watch repair outfit.

G: How long did you stay with that?

P: I really don't remember now. It was just a few months.

G: And then onto. . .?

P: Then I got shipped back to the United States, and at that time we had to have so many points to get out, I don't remember how many, and I found my time was up, so I was shipped back home.

G: With the point system, is it ever on your mind why you were in Burma in the grape field?

P: Well, everybody was looking forward to when they gathered enough points to go home, naturally.

G: But did that ever pop into your mind if for some reason you were in danger? Did it effect your performance?

P: No. We knew we had to be there.

G: What were your thoughts with the end of the war? Where exactly were you?

P: [I was] happy to get home.

G: Was there any animosity towards the Japanese?

P: By me, no. By other people, yes. I realized that the ordinary Japanese were serving their country the same as I was, so there was no real animosity. In fact, in my opinion, there were more atrocities by the Germans than there was by the Japanese.

G: Did you come into any contact with patricides by Americans or Chinese? Anything that could be considered in good conduct?

P: No. Except we were watching, I think we were in Myitkyina at the time, and about three miles away there was an encampment of Chinese soldiers. We went over one day to watch them train, and if a Chinese soldier was not dressed exactly right, the inspecting officer, as they stood in line, took the soldier by the back of his head, pulled his head down, and the inspecting officer's knee when up and hit him in the head. [He] hit him in the face.

G: This was something that was going on all the time?

P: It seemed to be in standard procedure. We saw it happen three times that day we were watching.

G: Any Chinese guerrillas that you came into contact with?

P: No, we came into contact with a lot of Burmese guerrillas.

G: What were they like?

P: Small, wiry, and tough. They were Kachins from Northern Burma.

G: Any activities in coordination with them?

P: Well, we had a line, I don't recall how many people, but we had a line going down the Burma road with the mules and all. It probably stretched out for four miles. There were that many soldiers, and they were always sent ahead to scout to one side and the other to see what was ahead of us. That was their main job with us. There was a detachment of them with us.

G: You mean actually attached logistically?

P: Right.

G: You said you were stationed in Myitkyina and you'd go out to work on a road as your basic area of operations.

P: We weren't in Michinaw very long. Our point in Michinaw was a gathering quarter, or upstaging area for the rest of the outfit to come in before we started south down the road.

G: You were doing work on the road, now you said you handled mules. What exactly did you do with them? Just guide them up and down, and carry supplies?

P: First thing every morning we packed the mules. Now some mules had guns on them, some had food, some had feed for the mules, just about everything we carried. First thing in the morning we packed the mules, got ready to go and when the line started, we started down the road. We would take a break every, I believe it was every two hours. We stopped for about 15 minutes, eat, drink, or do whatever we had to do. Then at night, first thing we'd do was unpack the mules, feed the mules, water them, and then we'd take care of ourselves. Incidentally, some of the mules were packed with water cans, too, for water.

G: What did you do when you reached your destination?

P: I didn't make the destination because I got wounded before we got there.

G: How was the relationship between the officers and the enlisted?

P: I noticed that after we got into our first fire fight. What would

happen, a small group of Japanese would attack the line from the side, then take off again through the woods. There never was very many. . . In fact, there were many times when the head of the line never knew what was going on in the back of the line or in the middle of it. The line was too long. It was extremely mountainous up and down mountains. After the first couple of little fire fights we had, the officers at the time were a little haughty, or stand offish, until that happened, and their attitude changed. They were just one of the boys.

G: They acted that way?

P: Right.

G: How would you account for this? [Were they] afraid?

P: I think that they thought, or they finally got the idea, that we were all together. You had to watch out for each other, I think that was the main reason.

G: Did the enlisted and the officers hang around a lot on and off duty hours?

P: No. The officers were usually by themselves, enlisted men were by themselves.

G: Now your unit, did it have any heavy weapons attached to it?

P: A 37 mml cannon was the biggest weapon we had. Those and mortars.

G: Did you have actual artillery men, or something to that effect?

P: No, we used those.

G: You used them yourselves?

P: Oh, yes.

G: Now you said when you were doing that cross net training, whenever you had, say the breaks in Michinaw. What did this consist of?

P: Oh, bayonet practice, a certain amount of close net drill. Many lectures on the country, on Burma, on India, on China. How to conduct yourselves and things like this.

G: How did you or everyone else react to these lectures?

P: We followed them, most of us followed them and found them interesting.

G: So your unit really had no problem with the natives.

P: With the natives?

G: Right.

P: No.

G: Were there any units that you know of that did?

P: Not in the area that I was at, no. The only problems that we had were with, like I said, the Chinese.

G: Now whenever your supplies were very low, maybe the air drops weren't coming in, or the Chinese was staling it, what did you do exactly to move through that?

P: You did without.

G: Really?

P: It's that simple.

G: There wasn't any bargaining with anyone else?

P: Well, I'd have to say that we did go through a native village and borrowed or bought. I don't remember anyone ever stealing anything, but we'd buy chickens, and rice. That was a great rice eating area, and every village had a flock of chickens. We'd buy chickens and rice and boil them in our steel helmets over fire.

G: Was the food bought by the soldiers individually or as a unit?

P: By the soldiers individually.

G: So everyone more or less took care of themselves then?

P: Right.

G: Is there anything else you'd like to discuss pertaining to the operation?

P: Pertaining to this whole operation?

G: Yes, your experiences in the military.

P: Well, the only thing I want to say you may find surprising, but I'm thoroughly disgusted with the Vietnam Veterans crying all the time. I have to say that. When I got out of the service, we came back home on a cruise ship to Seattle, Washington, and then by train, home. When I got home, there were six other soldiers on the same train coming home, there were no brass bands or yellow

ribbons, or anything like this. You didn't expect it. We did what we thought we had to do, and never worried about it. I've talked to a lot of World War II veterans, and they have the same attitude that I have.

G: What did you think of the Korean War veterans?

P: The Korean War, if you notice you didn't have that in the Korean War, and they were treated the same way when they came home. There was no big to-do about it. And the Desert Shield, everybody way over reacted on that, in my opinion.

G: Concerning Korea, you had contact with the Chinese when you were in Burma. What did you think of the fact when China entered the war in Korea?

P: Oh, I don't recall that I had any thoughts on it at all at the time.

G: Just something that passed by?

P: Yes.

G: Is there any activities that you take part in now which are influenced by the fact that you were in Burma?

P: Well, I belong to the local VFW. That's about all.

G: After you came home, what exactly did you do after you had been released from the service?

P: I loafed, I think, for a couple of months, and then I got a job at U.S. Steel. I was a truck driver in the steel mill.

G: Were there many veterans that were working with you?

P: Well, at that time you could get a job just about anywhere you wanted. I never thought about other veterans. At that time, for veterans coming home, there was a lot of work. Anybody could get a job, in the mills especially, in the different plants in Youngstown and Warren.

G: I mean, did you come into contact with many where you worked?

P: Oh, I probably did, I just don't remember.

G: Oh, you just never talk about it.

P: After all, that's been what--45 years ago?

G: Are there any last comments?

P: No, I can't think of anything else.

G: In retrospect, what do you think of the activities in Burma and our general involvement with it?

P: I think we had a job to do, and we did it. I'm glad I went for the experience. I found out how people live in other parts of the world, but I wouldn't want to go through it again.

G: Okay. Thank you very much.

P: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW