

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

World War II Project

Personal Experiences

O. H. 730

RAY PENWELL

Interviewed

by

Doug Silhanek

on

May 1, 1985

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

World War II Project

INTERVIEWEE: RAY PENWELL

INTERVIEWER: Doug Silhanek

SUBJECT: medic training, D day, farm life, Depression
years, draft

DATE: May 1, 1985

S: This is an interview with Ray Penwell for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, by Doug Silhanek, at Mr. Penwell's home, on May 1, 1985, at 7:30.

Tell us something about your parents and family and what you remember about them as you were growing up.

P: There were eleven of us in the family. We lived on a farm. When the Depression came, we were all ready with a family like that.

S: Did the farm help?

P: Oh, yes, it helped. Sure, it helped. I started working when I was eighteen at the brick plant. Then I was drafted into the army.

S: How about school? What do you remember about high school growing up in Bessemer?

P: I went to Mount Jackson.

S: How about Mount Jackson?

P: It was a nice school. I went to the eleventh grade. I quit in the eleventh grade.

S: Was there anything about school that you remember the most? Were there special times?

P: We didn't have a chance to do anything because we had to get home and work on the farm.

- S: What do you recall most about the Depression? What sticks out in your mind?
- P: Pretty rough. Sometimes you had enough to eat and sometimes you didn't with eleven in the family.
- S: How did you figure in the eleven? Were you in the older?
- P: I was the third oldest.
- S: How many boys and girls?
- P: Nine boys and two girls.
- S: Do you think a large family was better for the Depression?
- P: Everybody had a large family at that time.
- S: What do you remember as a good time as you were growing up there? If you did have extra or free time, what would you . . .
- P: Baseball.
- S: Did you come to Bessemer for that?
- P: Yes, I came to Bessemer.
- S: You said you were drafted. Can you remember your feelings about being drafted? Do you recall if there was anything that started to make you think that there was going to be a war? Was there an event? Was it Pearl Harbor?
- P: I was drafted way before the war started.
- S: What year?
- P: 1941.
- S: What happened as you were drafted? You went in before it started.
- P: I took basic training. We came back to Indiantown Gap.
- S: What was it, the Army?
- P: Yes.
- S: What did you go through? Did they have a plan for you in particular that they wanted you to be something, or did you get to pick?
- P: I was in a medical battalion.

S: Did you pick that?

P: No, I picked the force.

S: Was that alright with you?

P: Yes, it suited me alright.

S: Now that you are in, when did you realize that we were going to war? You were going to start seeing action sooner than later.

P: In December we were coming back from manoeuvres. I heard it on the radio.

S: If you can remember, trace all of the places, all of the camps, and what you went through when you left Bessemer.

P: First I went to Camp Pickett, Virginia. From there we went to Camp Louisiana. Then we came back to Camp Gordon Johnson, Florida. Then when we came back to Indiantown Gap, we went overseas.

S: At each camp what did you go through? Was each camp something different in the stages for you to go into being a medic?

P: No, it was all the same because we had already had our training.

S: What were your feelings about leaving home when you were drafted? Were you eager to go or sort of reluctant? What do you remember about that?

P: No, I didn't mind going. I had to go. We didn't have to, but we went; everybody went.

S: How about the mood of Mount Jackson and Bessemer? Do you remember the mood of the town? Was it the type of mood in support?

P: Oh, yes, they were really supportive.

S: What about leading to action? When did you first find out that you were finally going to go overseas? Was it when you were at Indiantown Gap?

P: Yes, we left from Indiantown Gap.

S: What were the orders? Did you know then if it was going to be right to D day or if there were some stops in between?

P: We didn't go in on D day. We were D plus six that we were in on.

S: Did you go to England? Then from Indiantown Gap you went to

England.

P: We landed in Le Havre.

S: When did you realize that there was going to be an invasion? Did you realize that there was going to be some sort of an invasion?

P: We didn't know anything about it until we saw the planes going over that morning.

S: That morning?

P: Yes. That was when we knew it.

S: Did you think you were going with that group or did they then assign you?

P: No, we weren't going to go right away.

S: You came in D day six. Is that six days after that?

P: Yes.

S: What did you experience? Was it easy for you to come ashore?

P: We got off the boat fairly good when we went ashore on Omaha Beach.

S: Was there still fighting?

P: Yes, here there was.

S: Did you take care of wounded as soon as you got on there?

P: Yes, we took care of all of them.

S: What was that like for you coming from a small town and getting that kind of action?

P: It didn't seem to bother me that much.

S: Did you feel like you were pretty well trained?

P: Yes.

S: Then what happened once you hit the beaches? Was it work right away?

P: All night and all day sometimes we would work without rest.

S: Was there a breakout then? Did you run into the breakout and then just continue on?

P: Came right on through.

S: Did you hear anything from home?

P: Yes, we used to get mail all the time, not all the time, but whenever they would get it to us.

S: Was there anything special that came from any organized groups at home? Did they send any kind of care packages?

P: No, just what we got from home; that's all.

We went across the channel.

S: From Portsmouth?

P: Southampton. We crossed the channel. Then we came down to Omaha Beach.

S: How long did it take before you got off of Omaha Beach, do you remember?

P: We were on the ship one night. We got off the next morning.

S: When you were on the ship looking in, was there heavy fighting.

P: We couldn't see from where we were.

S: Just that they were?

P: Right.

S: Did they tell you that you were working day and night beforehand?

P: No, they didn't tell us anything.

S: Once you got passed the beach, were you moving pretty well?

P: We went fast from there. We zigzagged through.

S: Was that the design?

P: It was what we were to do.

S: Were you in the backup crew for that?

P: They were already through before we got there.

S: Was it still dangerous to go through?

P: No, it was alright. They put Bailey bridges across.

S: How did that work? I have heard about that.

P: Engineers put them up. They were riding on pontoons.

S: But they held.

P: Yes.

S: Bradley was your division commander?

P: Yes.

S: Do you remember seeing him?

P: Yes, he was fighting right with us. He walked right with you.

S: Do you think Bradley did anything different that made the men fight different? He was completely different than Patton. Do you think the men fought any differently for him because he was more like a soldier?

P: I don't know if they did or not. He was one of the men; I know that.

We had hit a lot of hedgerows in Normandy. Hedgerows are about four feet high and are so thick that you just can't get through them.

S: What did you use to bust through those?

P: We used tanks to go through.

S: Mow over them or did you blast through them? You didn't have to blast through, did you?

P: No, we mowed right through them.

S: Did you ever use those for an advantage?

P: No, farmers put them up for their cattle. It was like a fence.

S: What were the people going through? Do you remember coming in contact with just the regular French people in the countryside?

P: They were all friendly and everything.

S: Did you trust them?

P: Yes, I did. I had two Germans come up to me. They didn't even have a weapon or anything.

S: Were they lost?

P: They surrendered.

S: Were they older?

P: No, they were all kids.

S: Were they real young?

P: Eighteen, nineteen. Then we had some old ones. The kids all wanted chocolate.

S: The Germans?

P: French. We went though Paris, France.

S: What was that like? Do you remember?

P: The whole division marched through there.

S: Was it a pretty good feeling then?

P: Yes.

When we were in Luxembourg, we liberated it before General Patton was killed after the war was over.

S: Did you ever run into him?

P: Yes.

S: What do they mean by the west wall?

P: That's the Seigfred line. It was made up all of cement. You couldn't get through it. We had to blow it up.

There were field boxes. They were just like a house in there. It was about fourteen inches of cement. To get up there, they took dynamite to put on them and blow them up.

S: Was there a particular group? Was it engineers?

P: Yes, they had a demolition team.

S: For you as a medic was it pretty much constant work, a steady work from the time you hit the beach?

P: I was right up on the front line. That was rough.

S: What went on there?

P: That is where the Germans had that breakthrough that one time around Christmastime. We had to get rid of all our supplies and everything, all of our meal. Everything was burnt.

S: What for?

P: So the Germans couldn't get a hold of it.

S: Was this around the time of the Bulge then?

P: Yes, Battle of the Bulge.

S: What did you go through then? Were you surrounded?

P: We weren't. The infantry was.

S: What do you remember most about all of this?

P: Let me see . . .

S: Did you take over houses or anything?

P: Yes, we slept in houses. We kicked the people right out.

S: Did you get much resistance?

P: No. Some of the people weren't that bad.

S: Did you ever run into anybody you knew while you were in, like from around here?

P: Bob Stanley was the only one I ever saw.

S: Where did you run into him at?

P: In Camp Gordon Johnson.

S: Was that by accident?

P: No, he found out I was there and he came and looked me up.

S: When you were over there, was there any time for you to enjoy where you were?

P: Yes, we had a leave of time.

S: What do you remember? Is there anything that sticks in your mind, something that you really enjoyed?

P: Over in England we used to go to some pubs all the time. We had a good time in there. Then they had a lot of amusements. Everything was blacked out in the towns.

S: How about when you got to France and Germany? Was there any time at all to enjoy where you were, or was it all pretty much tough because there was fighting?

- P: No, Germany, we had fun in there too. We had a lot of fun in there, not too much.
- S: When did they tell you that you were coming home?
- P: July 26th.
- S: 1945 then. So you stayed there after the surrender?
- P: Yes.
- S: Were you getting a little anxious to come home?
- P: We trained a lot of recruits over there.
- S: How about the Russians? Did you come in contact with the Russians at all?
- P: Yes, we came in contact with them.
- S: Were there any problems?
- P: No, no problems.
- S: What was the ship that came over that you came back on?
- P: I don't remember the name of the ship; it was a liberty ship.
- S: Was it crowded?
- P: We had 109 infantry battalion and 103 medics.
- S: What was that like on there? Were you celebrating the whole way home?
- P: Played cards and relaxed and they had movies.
- S: Then when you came back, where was your port?
- P: Indiantown Gap.
- S: Right back in the same place.
- P: Yes, that was where I was discharged.
- S: How about when you came back home? What was the mood of the area when you came back home? Was it--let's get back to life?
- P: It was more or less like when we left. Nothing changed that much.

- S: Did you stay in contact with your family the whole time while you were over there?
- P: Of course. There were six of us in all together, six brothers.
- S: Where were they all at? Do you know?
- P: There were two over in the South Pacific. The rest of us were over in Europe.
- S: Did you keep in contact with them?
- P: No.
- S: Just from back home?
- P: Just from back home; that's all.
- S: Were there any problems with the mail? Did they censor your mail?
- P: Oh, yes, they censored everything going out and coming in.
- S: Do you know how that worked? Did you mail whatever you wanted to mail and then they read it?
- P: They censored it, yes.
- S: Did you ever feel that you were saying something that needed to be censored?
- P: I never did.
- S: Did you watch what you said?
- P: Yes, I watched what I said.
- S: Everybody came back all right, though, in your family?
- P: Everybody.
- S: Did you lose any friends from around here?
- P: Yes, not real handy here, but we lost three fellows from around Pittsburgh.
- S: Is there anything about the Army that sticks out in your mind that you think made you better? Did you like the Army? Was it good for you?
- P: Yes, I liked it really well. It was what you made of it. You could make it rough for yourself, or you could make it good.

- S: What was that like for you to go from the Depression to the Army? Was life better afterwards? Were you glad you went through all of that?
- P: Yes, I'm glad that I saw it all.
- S: Did you come back to New York Harbor and then to Indiantown Gap?
- P: Yes, we came back to New York.
- S: Did you have time to spend there?
- P: No, we shoved off right away.
- S: Train?
- P: Yes.
- S: Did you have enough points to get out? You were in the war the whole time.
- P: Yes.
- S: Did you have enough points before that to get out?
- P: Yes.
- S: You just stayed?
- P: No, we had to train those recruits. 28th Division was scheduled to go to Pacific. The war was over there, so they didn't go. They went to Camp Shelby, Mississippi.
- S: Did you feel as if you were going to the Pacific too?
- P: No, I had enough points to get out.
- S: You had enough points. Did you have any thoughts about staying in?
- P: No, I was anxious to get out.
- S: Did you have any thoughts of doing any kind of medical work when you got out?
- P: I would have liked to have gone to school, but at that time the money was rough.
- S: Back to the farm then?
- P: Back to the farm. Then I went back to work at the brickyard.

I went back over there several years ago.

S: Did you go back?

P: Yes.

S: What did that feel like?

P: Everything was all cleared up then. We saw every place we went through.

S: Did you retrace your steps?

P: Yes. I was there for fifteen days.

S: Did you go back to the cemetery at Normandy?

P: I went back there.

S: What was that feeling like?

P: It was rough. It was all lined with crosses as far as you can see.

S: Did you visit anybody's grave in particular?

P: No.

S: Did you go back into any of the towns?

P: Luxembourg and all the towns.

S: Could you remember it?

P: Oh, yes. I was in London; I was in Paris.

S: Were there any signs of the war from what you could tell?

P: Some of the cathedrals you could tell. There were marks on them yet. They tried not to destroy them, the churches.

S: It wiped out a few, though, didn't it?

P: Yes, it did. When we came off the beach at Omaha and came through the town of St. Lo, there wasn't a house standing.

S: None?

P: No buildings.

S: Was that from the bombarding of the ships?

P: Ships and airplanes.

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S: How about now? Did you go through?

P: We didn't get to St. Lo.

S: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW