

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

U.S. Armed Forces - Marine Resv

Personal Experience

O.H. 904

ROBERT PETKO

Interviewed

by

David Arms

on

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A: This interview with Mr. Robert Petko for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on U.S. Armed Forces - Marine Reserve, by David S. Arms, on March 10, 1976, at 2:15 p.m.

What is your position at the Marine Corps Reserve at the time?

P: I am currently a warrant officer located in New Castle, Pennsylvania.

A: What grade warrant officer are you?

P: CWO2.

A: How long have you been in the Marine Corps?

P: Since 1959. Seventeen years.

A: Has this all been reserve time, or has this been active duty time?

P: This has been all reserve time.

A: Could you just give me a little bit of background of your personal history? Where were you born and educated?

P: I was born in Youngstown, Ohio, and educated at Struthers High School. I had gone into the apprenticeship program in the carpenter's union.

A: How many children do you have? Are you married?

P: I am married and have two children, a boy and a girl.

A: Why did you join the Marine Corps?

P: I wanted to have some military training. The Reserve Program was available at the time. They were both available. Being that I was an apprentice carpenter, I had a job on the outside. This is the reason why I chose the sixth month program.

A: So you actually went on six months active duty? Was it a training program?

P: Yes. It consisted of boot camp. There was some MOS (Military Occupational Skill) training in the engineer field and the rest of it was boot camp.

A: Could you give me an idea of how this went? Did you go down and see a recruiter?

P: No, I came here, to the Reserve Center. At that time, they had the first sergeant act as more or less the recruiter for the Reserve Unit.

A: You just signed up at the time and went right to boot camp? Or did you stay here for a while?

P: No, I signed up in April and did not go until September of the same year.

A: Where did you go for training?

P: Paris Island.

A: Did you receive tour MOS training on Paris Island?

P: On that camp Lagune.

A: Could you be a little more specific on your MOS training? What did it consist of?

P: It was an engineer type training. We had demolitions, mine warfare, heavy equipment, and some construction work.

A: You were gone for a total of six months active duty? How much was each period there?

P: Boot camp lasted for thirteen weeks. Then there was an advanced infantry training that lasted about three weeks. The rest of it was MOS training.

A: Was it classroom work?

P: Both, classroom and field.

A: Then you returned back to Youngstown and fulfilled your regular job?

P: Yes, plus attended the Reserve meeting.

A: Then, your requirement after your six months was to attend drill meetings?

P: Once a month for six years.

A: Then, you were also required to take two weeks active duty?

P: Every year.

A: Could you give me an idea of what you did when you went to drill?

- P: Drill weekend, we were in the engineer company here in Youngstown. Most of the time we spent working on civilian projects. Churches, Boy Scout groups, and things of that nature.
- A: What did a drill actually consist of?
- P: At that time, they changed over from once a week drills to weekend drills. They would be on Saturday and Sunday for eight hours or more each day.
- A: You came in in the morning and did what?
- P: We would usually file in at 7:30 a.m. Then, after that, there was some classroom training. Or, if we had work to do on the outside, we would have on-the-job training.
- A: Did you have any other function other than working a platoon? How did you advance to the position you are at right now?
- P: For the first couple of years, I was just a Pfc. (Private first class) when I came back. I probably picked up lance corporal in a year and a half or two years. Most of the time, I was in the platoon until I made corporal. I believe after I was promoted to E4, I was moved up to the training office. I worked in the training for probably two years. Then I think I went back into one of the construction platoons. I think in 1968 I applied for the Warrant Officer Commission Program. I was accepted in 1969, that was when I was promoted to WO (Warrant Officer).
- A: When you applied for the Warrant Office Program, what was your raise at the time?
- P: E6 staff sergeant.
- A: What was the requirement at that time to apply? What did you have to have? So many years in the service?
- P: You had to have over ten years. You had to be E6, with under nineteen years of service. What they were after, were the construction field.
- A: Have you received any other training in construction other than through the Marine Corps? In other words, any formal training?
- P: I have been affiliated with the carpenter's union for quite a few years.
- A: Have they sent you to school?
- P: They have retraining programs that are available. I have taken a couple of them, as far as

welding and different job related fields.

A: Does the union send you away for this?

P: No. It is usually a program right here in town. I have not gone to any for quite a few years, but the ones that they have now are probably at the vocational center.

A: Does the union pay for all of this?

P: There is a registration fee but then they usually pick up the tab on ours.

A: On your two weeks training, did you ever attend any schools?

P: I have gone to quite a few schools. We had different construction type schools. I had gone to NBC (Nuclear, Biological, Chemical) school. Mountain Warfare, It does not have anything to do with my MOS, but it is a Marine type training.

A: Basically, your civilian training has helped you in your Marine Corps, and your Marine Corps helped you in civilian life.

P: They both work pretty well hand in hand.

A: Why did you want to become a warrant officer? Why did you stay?

P: I stayed because I liked the program. I liked the people I worked with. I always got along with all of the Marines that I have been affiliated with. The Warrant Officer Program came up in 1968 when they really had a shortage of officers as you probably know. I guess I was just lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time when it was offered.

A: What kind of people did you run into? Is a marine reservist a stereotype person or do you run into a lot of individuals?

P: Not really. There are many different types of individuals that you run into. All different types of education, background, and job classification. I could not say that they are all the same type. They were basically all civilians just doing that one weekend a month.

A: Why do these men come to drill for one weekend a month? Particularly someone who does not have the obligation like yourself? It is hard on your family. You are away from them and the money is not that much. Why do you keep coming?

P: It is because you are apart of the Marine Corps Organization. Being a reserve is one way to help your country out if there is ever a need for it. I think as long as you are physically

able to fulfill something like that, you should be part of an organization like that. And really, until you are 50 or 55, I think you are on call whether you know it or not. So, you - mind as well stay in an active unit where you can learn something and maybe contribute to it.

A: Did you start drilling here in Youngstown?

P: Yes.

A: Was it an engineering company at the time?

P: Right.

A: How many people were in the company?

P: About 120.

A: What kind of job did the engineering company do? I realize that they did a lot of civic projects and things. What was their mission?

P: Their mission was probably to back up our regular engineer unit on active duty. If anything would happen where they would have to be called, with the type of training they would be getting, they would be able to fit right in there with the regular Marine Engineer.

A: What do the Marine Engineers do?

P: Bridge work, road work, demolitions, mine warfare, and things of that nature.

A: Are they similar to the Sea Bee's Construction Battalion in the Navy?

P: A close comparison.

A: Have you ever done any work with the See Bee's?

P: A little bit. We have been down to Gulf Fort Mississippi.

A: Do you remember when this was?

P: 1969. We got a chance to train with a See Bee.

A: Were you sent down there for a special project or just training?

P: No, we went down for just MOS training.

A: What does an average two week thing to do? What is your average activity?

P: As a Marine Engineer, most of the time we were either sent to a formal school for a few weeks or sent down for OJT (on the job training). On the job training would be the same basic skills that I talked about before. The mine warfare, demolitions, bridge work, and some construction. A variety of everything.

A: Would you say you are a Marine first and an engineer second or vice versa?

P: I like to think I am an engineer first and a Marine second, but it is not really that way. Everyone is a basic Marine first, a basic rifleman. Then, your MOS comes in behind that.

A: So when you go on the two week periods, any Marine type training, or anything, we would be considered a Marine?

P: Some of the two week periods are spent on field problems with just Marine training.

A: Do you remember when the unit in Youngstown was disbanded?

P: 1971.

A: What happened to the people that were in the unit?

P: They had a choice of either going over to Akron or to New Castle. The majority went to New Castle because it was closer. There were a few that went over to Akron.

A: What do you think was the reason for closing this if they did not get rid of any people?

P: I think they closed down here in Youngstown because the base was owned by the Navy. The Marine Corps is more or less leasing the property order. The unit over in New Castle had their own training center, which was strictly Marine Corps, and the same in Akron. At the time, there was a large reorganization program going on in the Marine Corps. I imagine that a lot of the politicians had a lot to do with which ones stayed and which ones left. I think the biggest factor was sharing the training center with the Navy.

A: So, the Marine Corps did not want to get along with the Navy?

P: No, it was not that. It was just the idea that New Castle had their own training center and I think that is why they just made the move there.

A: How was the relationship between the Marine Corps and the Navy in Youngstown?

P: I think it was pretty good. We always seemed to get along pretty good. We had our weekends and the Navy would come in during the week. There usually was no problem at all.

A: What parts of the center did the Marine Corps use?

P: They used the drill deck, probably the left wing. The first floor in the left wing, top deck.

A: So, they basically used the left side of the building and the top and bottom?

P: Right. Except the Corpsmen used the same place where the Navy Corpsmen were at.

A: When you were here, were you required to clean up everything after you were done?

P: Yes. It is the same as what your people do.

A: How about food and things like that? How did you eat when you went on this weekend?

P: They usually had a caterer that would bring in sandwiches or hot meals in, depending on where you were at. If we were out in the field, they usually had box lunches made up. A few times, we would have field rations.

A: How was the food?

P: It was fair.

A: In the officer's groups, is there any getting together of the officers at any time?

P: Right now?

A: Yes.

P: When we were down at ATD, our annual training, there is a good opportunity for all of them to get together. The way we have it now, we try to have meetings on the evening before the drill, and we get together and discuss all of the problems.

A: How about socially?

P: Most of the officers in New Castle live so far apart, that the only time we really get together is on drill weekend. They come from Cleveland, Erie, and as far south as Pittsburgh. It is really tough to get together other than on drill weekend.

A: How about on ATD, do you socially get together?

- P: Usually we have a pretty good opportunity to see each other. I think that there are eleven of us over there right now. And for the two week period that we are down there, there are usually four or five nights that we can all be in the same place at the same time. Probably at the club or places like that.
- A: What is the attitude of the officers? Are they domestic toward the Marine Reserve?
- P: Well, the ones that are in over there are more or less in favor of the program that they are going to have right now. There is a few of them that would like to stay that have to get out. After so many years in or you are passed over a couple of times, you just automatically get out. But most of the ones that are there, are dedicated enough to stay and do the job that is required of them.
- A: You mean intelligence wise or desire to do the job?
- P: Both intelligence and desire. There is something lacking in most of the young kids that come around right now.
- A: Do you think that this is true in our own society, or is it just that the good guys are not coming around?
- P: That is what it amounts to. There is no pressure on people to join either the reserve or regular. I think the regular Marine Corps and the Army and Navy have the same problem. I have heard quite a few complaints about that.
- A: In other words, you do not think that we do not have as many good guys around?
- P: No, the people are there, there just is not any incentive fro them to really come in.
- A: Why do you think that some of these guys are coming in today?
- P: Basically, it is because of the job situation. The ones that do come in, are unemployed or are having a tough time finding a job. I am talking about the young kids that are right out of high school.
- A: That portion is dedicated to the Marine Corps or more self-centered?
- P: I cannot say that they are not as dedicated. It may take them a couple more years to come around. The first couple of years is kind of tough to get to them. But, I cannot say that they are not as dedicated because in time, two or three years, they might really make good Marines.
- A: Now, when you became an officer, when you received your commission, was this a

difficult adjustment for you in this way?

P: Yes it was. I was an enlisted man for I think eleven years before I picked up my warrant. And I took about eight years to adjust to it.

A: In other words, how do you think your relationship differs now? I mean, you still put your right pant leg on and your left one. I mean, you are no different that way.

P: No, I do not feel that I am any different at all.

A: Surely your relationship must be changed with the people you work with?

P: Not really, being a warrant officer, you are sort of right in the middle. You are not enlisted and not a commissioned officer. And being that I do not have a college degree, with the education background, say a lieutenant or captain would have. I do not feel that I am on the same level. I do not think a warrant officer program is equal to the commission program. It is halfway in between the enlisted and the commissioned officers.

A: Do you think that you are discriminated against being an OR?

P: No, but I can put up with it quite a bit.

A: I am sure you can. Is there discrimination there, you are not felt to be inferior in any way?

P: No. I have my own place here and I think it is not too hard to get along.

A: Now, how about any racial discrimination. Have you ever noticed any racial discrimination in the Marine Corps?

P: Yes. Not so much in New Castle, but down at Leguene there is some. It comes up every once in a while.

A: Do you think that it is as serious as the newspapers say?

P: No, I do not think that it is. I think that the newspapers try to magnify it a lot. There are problems, sometimes it is racial, sometimes it is not. But it seems that the newspapers try to bring it out more than what really goes on or takes place.

A: You say that you have seen it down at Camp Leguene. In what fashion? Not being allowed to sit at the same desk? Or being shunned aside?

- P: No, not that. There are demonstrations out in the public where, this was a couple of years ago, where the black power program was really strong. The people that took part in those, were after the attention that the news media would give them. Really the problem that was there, was the attention that they were getting from it.
- A: Is it a different Marine Corps than it was, say when you joined?
- P: No, I do not think so. I think that it is all the same. Same type of training, sure there is a lot of new methods and new ways of doing things, but it is still about the same thing.
- A: The Marine Corps has always been known to be hard nose gun ho, that type of thing. Do you think any of that is lacking?
- P: No. I do not think that they are missing a bit of that.
- A: Now you know that there has been a lot of changes, like in the Navy and the Naval Reserve with the longer hair and that type of thing. But you do not think any of that has come over into the Marines?
- P: It has.
- A: But it has not affected the Marine Corp?
- P: The long hair in the reserve program is a problem because these kids are only weekend Marines. They only have to come in Saturday and Sunday. You respect their wishes and their desires to have longer hair because it is really apart of today's culture, to be twenty-one with long hair.
- A: Do you see the Marine Corps relaxing any of their standards because of this? In other words, do you think that they are going to get to the point where they are going to be more interested in retaining people?
- P: I think they may compromise in a few areas, but I do not think that they are really going to relax their standards. They may have a few changes in the dress code and the type of personal appearance you are allowed to have. But as far as relaxing the standards, I do not think they will go that far.
- A: In your experience in the leadership areas, have you seen any changes in Marine techniques and leadership?
- P: No, they are basically about the same as they have been, at least as long as I have been in. They still demand for their leaders, well the officers and staff NCO's set the example and get as much out of people as they possibly can. As far as work an effort.

- A: Now the unit in New Castle which you are assigned to, in other words, you have been basically assigned to an engineering unit here in Youngstown. What kind of unit is in New Castle?
- P: It is a headquarters battalion and service company.
- A: What does it consist of?
- P: There are different units there. They have a photography section, a reproduction center, motor transport, which I have, supply section, it is basically that type of unit.
- A: If it were to be mobilized or go back, what would they do? Join at a bigger unit or be part of a headquarters, is that it?
- P: It would be part of the headquarters battalion, but it would probably be all split up and sent in different areas.
- A: So actually it would not be mobilized as a unit.
- P: No.
- A: You said that you are in the motor transporter area. What is your responsibility there?
- P: The responsibility I have is to make sure that the 60 people I have are trained in motor transport work. I basically have mechanics and drivers. We have a responsibility to maintain the vehicles we have. The biggest thing is to make sure that the people are trained and able to do the job that their MOS called for.
- A: Basically your job is a training officer type?
- P: Right.
- A: How is the unit organized? Does each one of these units have an officer? You said there were eleven officers attached.
- P: Right. Each section has one or more officers.
- A: They would have more than one officer attached.
- P: I did not mention this before, but the dispersing section would probably have five officers. One captain and a couple lieutenants and a couple of others.
- A: Is this a good way to organize a unit or company?

- P: In this type of company it is because each one has their own separate mission. Where as like a line company, everyone works together. Over here, everyone has their own separate mission to take care of and I think it works out pretty good. Each unit is more or less self-supporting. We do not rely on anyone else to take care of our job or really to take care of us.
- A: Are you required to have a certain amount of specialized technicians in a certain area, like diesel mechanics?
- P: Right, we have so many mechanics. Our motor transport section is divided up probably half and half. Half drivers and half mechanics. Out of the mechanics, we have a shop chief and a couple of senior mechanics, usually E5 sergeants and then it is broken down to the younger men. The drivers are set up just about the same way.
- A: What does a driver do when he is not driving?
- P: There is general maintenance on the vehicles that they usually take care of. It is called drivers maintenance. They also help out the mechanics once in a while. They take care of the quarterly presentative maintenance schedules and the annuals. There is more than enough to keep them busy.
- A: How do you keep trained people in a certain area? Do you recruit them from outside or do you try and train your own?
- P: Most of the people that are recently recruited will be sent down to a MOS training in that field. They will go away to boot camp and then they will go to MOS training to become a mechanic or a driver. When they come back to us, they are partially trained and then we have to take it from there.
- A: DO you have a allowance for certain specific MOS's or something like that?
- P: That usually comes through the office. The first sergeant, the CO, usually takes care of that.
- A: You only have ten mechanics and only some many of them are supposed to have a MOS and are supposed to be a mechanic?
- P: Right.
- A: I am sure your experience and everything has been educational. How does your family feel about you going over there?
- P: The first five to seven years, I imagine my wife had some doubts about the reason why I stayed in the program. But after this many years she has kind of accepted what I do. I

have gone away for more than two weeks at different times, but she gets along with the program pretty well.

A: Would you say she encourages you now?

P: I think she probably does. There were a few times when I thought about getting out, and I am sure she encouraged me without me knowing about it to stay in and finish my time up.

A: You are basically interested in completing 20 years?

P: I would like to stay in longer if there is an opening for me.

A: Do you think you are dedicated now than you were when you first joined?

P: I really do not think you are more dedicated until after your first enlistment. Maybe after ten years. Then you start to feel like you are a part of the program.

A: Now you are there for just the programs sake? Of course, the retirement and all of this counts in but that would count in, but that would be the main reason you are there?

P: I think so. I think that is the reason why I am still there. The money is not that great like you mentioned. I cannot say that I stay for the money, that is not true.

A: Do you find that this money is helpful though. Do you use it in a specific area?

P: I usually buy bonds for the kids education with it. I buy bonds and invest them for them.

A: If you had to do it all over again, would you do it?

P: I think so.

A: Would you go the active duty route?

P: I think if I was right out of high school I would have gone active duty. I probably would have stayed in because I do really like it. I think I would have made a career out of it pretty easily.

A: Is there anything else that I have not asked you that you would really like to say?

P: No.

End of Interview