

**A Veterans Oral History**  
**Heritage Education Commission**  
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Moorhead, MN

**Adam Brehm**  
Narrator

**Polly Wendelbo**  
Interviewer

**February 20, 2007**

**PW:** This is Polly Wendelbo. Today is February 20<sup>th</sup> and I'm interviewing Adam Brehm.

**AB:** **Right.**

**PW:** Adam, where did you grow up?

**AB:** **Lincoln, Nebraska. My parents were Germans from Russia and they came over. The railroad brought them over from Russia and they settled down in Lincoln, Nebraska, because they were building the railroad between Chicago and Denver. So that's how they ended up in Lincoln. And that's where I grew up.**

**PW:** Can I ask how old you are?

**AB:** **Eighty-four.**

**PW:** What did you do prior to your military life and how did your military life evolve?

**AB:** **Well I just went to high school. Took the usual stuff going in at school and that was it. I worked at home. And when it was time to get drafted, my time was coming up, we had a friend in the family who was in the military. He said, "Adam, if you want to get into what you want to do, you better enlist. Don't get drafted because if you get drafted, they'll stick you anyplace." And so I enlisted, I went in the Air Force.**

**PW:** And that was your choice?

**AB:** **And that was my choice, yes.**

**PW:** And what was it about the Air Force that you wanted to do?

**AB:** **I wanted to fly.**

**PW:** And did you fly?

**AB:** **Oh, yes, that big bird over there. I was central fire control gunner. I didn't pilot, I was a gunner. I was a Central Fire Control Gunner, which is the upper turret; and our gun turrets on the B-29 were remote control. So we didn't have to sit inside the turret, like they did in the 17 and the 24th. We could operate remotely. So I sat on top and operated the two top turrets.**

**PW:** And that's a B-29.

**AB:** **That's a B-29.**

**PW:** Were they cold, like some of the other ones. They said they were so cold their hands were cold.

**AB:** **No, they were warm. We had heat in there from the engines, yes.**

**PW:** Interesting. Why did you enter the military?

**AB:** **Because I was ready to get drafted and it was time to do something, so I wanted to fly. So I enlisted.**

**PW:** Do you recall your first days in the service?

**AB:** **Well, not really. That's been so long ago. It was a little different down at Sheppard Field, Texas, where I went for basic. We went through basic training and the sergeant told us, "Well it's time. You guys are going to go into ..." I can't remember what it was now. But anyway, I said, "No, Sarge, I enlisted. I want to fly." And he said, "Well go tell that to the chaplain." So I went and told the chaplain that I had enlisted so I could fly, and they were going to put me in a chemical warfare outfit. And I didn't want to do that. So the next day, I was on my way to Lowry Field to learn how to be a gunner.**

**PW:** So the chaplain had pull?

**AB:** **Oh, yes he did. He sure did.**

**PW:** So you were trained at this other field to be a gunner?

**AB: Yes, right. I went to Lowry Field to be a gunner.**

**PW: How long of training is that?**

**AB: Oh, that was about six weeks, eight weeks, something like that.**

**PW: And what year was that? Was the war already going on?**

**AB: Oh, yes. It was in the early 40s, when the war was just – they had dropped – well, they had dropped the bomb on Honolulu. I mean, they invaded Honolulu. And it was shortly after that, that I joined that would have been in '42.**

**PW: Early 40s ...**

**AB: Yes.**

**PW: Wasn't it '41 that Pearl Harbor happened?**

**AB: Forty-one, yes.**

**PW: Can you remember a memorable boot camp experience?**

**AB: Only that business with the chaplain.**

**PW: Did you enjoy boot camp?**

**AB: Oh, yes. It was different from home. It was something new and I was okay.**

**PW: Were you married when you enlisted?**

**AB: No, I didn't get married until afterwards.**

**PW: You served during wartime?**

**AB: Oh, yes.**

**PW: Where were you stationed during the war?**

**AB: We flew off the islands of Saipan and Guam, over Japan and the other islands where we were invading. We were on a photo recon squad, so we were taking pictures. We didn't drop bombs. All we did was take pictures of these various places and we'd go over to Japan. I had 27 missions over**

**Japan. We'd fly over the area and take our photos and then bring them back. Then they would research those to determine whether or not it was worthwhile hitting, or if they'd already bombed it. Is it worthwhile going back in again? So that was what our job was.**

**PW:** Were you actually taking photos yourself, or you were in charge of the gunnery?

**AB:** I was in charge of the gunnery . . .

**PW:** As protection?

**AB:** system, yes. Now we had another photo man in charge of the photos, the cameras.

**PW:** So the cameras could take photos of the ground from the air?

**AB:** Oh, the cameras were almost six feet tall. They were big cameras. And they were mounted in the airplane and then the site was out of the belly of the plane. There were little windows down there and they would look through those.

**PW:** Did they develop them then back on Saipan or Guam?

**AB:** They brought them back. Yes, Saipan . . .

**PW:** So they had equipment to develop that large of a . . .

**AB:** Oh, yes, they brought that stuff back and ran it through the machine and did the developing and then they would research the pictures.

**PW:** Was it captains and people on the island that researched it and made that decision, whether you needed to go back and invade again or did it get sent onto higher command?

**AB:** Command, higher command, yes.

**PW:** Did you actually see any combat?

**AB:** Oh, yes, the one mission we flew was – we went back to Okinawa – not Okinawa – Nagoya, that's the name of the town. Nagoya? Yes. Anyway we were coming away from there after having taken the pictures. And we didn't know it, but the Japs had Messerschmitts, ME 109s, and they could reach

**our altitude. We always flew at 35,000 feet and they could do maneuvering up there; whereas, the “Zekes” and those other planes couldn’t do that.**

**Well we didn’t know that they had gotten those ME 109s. And all of a sudden – we had gotten away from the target, so we were resting. And all of a sudden, boom-boom-boom, and we had two engines shot out. He’d gotten us coming up from the bottom and shot out two engines.**

**PW:** Out of how many engines?

**AB:** Out of four, so we lost two on the left side. And then he went over and he came back and was going to come around from the other side on top; and I was able to get my guns all set up. And I was able to shoot him down, put him down in the water – where he was trying to put us.

**PW:** Wow and you were able to land with only two engines?

**AB:** Yes, we left the area and we were lost. We didn’t know which way we were going. And as it turned out, we were heading toward Russia, because our navigation system was shot out, too. And all of a sudden on each wing tip is a P-51 Mustang fighter. They had come up from “Iwo,” Iwo Jima, to help airplanes like us in trouble back to Iwo. So they took us back down to Iwo Jima. They turned us around and headed south.

**We got that back to Iwo, and the pilot was able to land the airplane very nicely. It was tough but he did it. He got it down. Then they replaced the engines; and we took off and went back to Saipan or Guam, I mean. Yes.**

**PW:** If you hadn’t been able to do your job, you would have been in the water?

**AB:** Oh, yes, we’d have been in.

**PW:** Instead of the enemy?

**AB:** Yes, he’d have gotten us on the second run. We’d have been in the ocean and never come back.

**PW:** Can you think of any other experiences that you’d like to share and that?

**AB:** The other memorable experience was after we had dropped the second bomb at Hiroshima. It was our crews turn to fly. So we went up and took pictures of that.

**I have never seen such devastation in my life as that was. That city was completely wiped out and I think the other town was the same way. They were both – and it completely eliminated . . .**

**PW:** You mean like leveled the buildings or just leveled?

**AB:** **Oh, yes, buildings all leveled, right.**

**PW:** How long after that did you fly over there?

**AB:** **Just about two, three days after the bomb. Yes, they wanted pictures of that right away. General LeMay wanted pictures of that right away, so he could see what happened.**

**PW:** And was there any hazard of flying that close to that atomic . . .

**AB:** **Well I still suspect that there was, but we didn't pay any attention to it. But I think there were still gases, and whatever, coming up out of that area that we should have avoided. But we went in anyhow and did it.**

**PW:** And there was still smoke and stuff in the air?

**AB:** **Yes, it was bad..**

**PW:** That is something that a lot of people wouldn't have had experience to do.

**AB:** **Yes, that's right.**

**PW:** Did you feel when you were in the military that you had plenty of supplies to work with?

**AB:** **Yes, we had plenty supplies, we had everything we needed. We didn't lack anything at all. We had all the food we needed and the ammunition and gas.**

**PW:** Because that's something they're talking about now is not having what's needed.

**AB:** **Yes, that's right.**

**PW:** Can you describe any of the pressures that you felt as a soldier?

**AB:** **Well, of course, each time it was just a matter of, "Are we going to get back? Are we going to get hit with anti-aircraft, or is the airplane going to fail and go down in the water?" Because all we had was water. There was no land**

**between our islands and Japan. It was all water, so we'd have been in the ocean and never got out.**

**PW:** As a young man, just growing up a normal life, this is quite a change.

**AB:** **That's right, oh, yes, and that was probably the most stressful.**

**PW:** How many times a week do you think you went out?

**AB:** **Well at least once a week. Yes, it was once a week. Like I said, I had 27 missions total.**

**PW:** You said something about going over to Japan for some missions?

**AB:** **Well that's where we flew all our missions. Except we did take pictures of Okinawa and some of those other islands that we invaded, we took pictures of those, too. But that was usually on the way up to Japan. So usually most all missions were over Japan.**

**PW:** Did you receive any decorations or awards?

**AB:** **Yes, I received the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Air Medal, and I was a good kid, so they gave me the Good Conduct Medal, and then the three Victory Medals.**

**PW:** I'm going to take a picture of that.

**AB:** **And those are my stripes that I wore in the 20<sup>th</sup> Air Force.**

**PW:** What was your rank when you got out?

**AB:** **Staff sergeant.**

**PW:** And each stripe is [unclear] level?

**AB:** **The three upper stripes showed the sergeant, and the one underneath - staff, and the two circles underneath were tech sergeant, and the three were master sergeant. And I was staff.**

**PW:** You've got it displayed really nice.

**AB:** **Yes, that's thanks to Mike Vandrovec (sp?) over at the VA. He did it for me.**

PW: Oh, have you always had that on display?

AB: **Oh, yes, it's sitting right there.**

PW: How did you communicate with your family, when you were in the . . .

AB: **By mail, strictly by mail.**

PW: And did it have to go through any censorship?

AB: **Oh, yes, they would censor over there, before it left. And then that was it.**

PW: Because I can remember my grandmother got mail from an uncle, and a lot of the things you couldn't hardly read.

AB: **Yes, that's right.**

PW: Just that he was there and was okay.

AB: **Yes, right.**

PW: How did you entertain yourself when you weren't doing . . .

AB: **Radio, usually radio. They had radio music on or something. We had programs. A mystery program on TV – or on radio; there was no TV. All we had was radio.**

PW: Did you listen to the propaganda out of Japan, too?

AB: **Oh, yes, we did.**

PW: Someone said they had such good music. That they had latest.

AB: **Yes, Tokyo Rose had the good stuff.**

PW: Yes.

AB: **Yes, she did.**

PW: Were there entertainers that came?

AB: **Yes, occasionally we did have entertainers that would come and produce a big stage show, which was always good. They're all out of Hollywood.**

**They're well known. I can't remember their names but they were well known entertainers and they did a real good job. Yes.**

**PW:** What did you do when you left the military?

**AB:** Well I came back and I'd met Elizabeth just before I went in the service. And we corresponded, fell in love, and when I came home, we decided we were going to get married. So we did. Her dad was a German preacher down in Lincoln, Nebraska. So we got married in 1947. Forty-seven? Yes, right, 1947, and had a very good life until 2000. No, actually before that, 12 years before that, she got cancer. So it was tough but then we still lived good.

**PW:** Yes. What did you do when you were on leave in the military? We're going back and forth here.

**AB:** Oh, we just come home and relax with the family.

**PW:** Did they fly you home from . . .

**AB:** Usually, yes, or by rail, one of the ways – either way.

**PW:** And they paid your way totally to your home?

**AB:** Yes, oh yes.

**PW:** Because that's another thing right now, they're saying they'll only fly you to the first point and it's up to you to get . . .

**AB:** Is that right? No, it was all the way, either that or by rail.

**PW:** How much time would you have off on a leave?

**AB:** Usually 21 days, I think that was about it. Yes.

**PW:** Was it hard to go back after leave?

**AB:** Oh, yes, it was. Because you had such a great life at home and then you go back to that other life.

**PW:** The contrast must have been remarkable.

**AB:** Oh, yes, it was.

**PW:** Do you recall any humorous or any unusual event?

**AB:** **Well only the ones that I expressed with the fighter and the mission to Hiroshima after the atomic bomb was dropped. But that was really about it. It was always a good experience to get up in that airplane and fly, though. Because that was a good airplane.**

**PW:** Did you have fun in the service on off time?

**AB:** **We had some enjoyment, too. Yes, whenever they'd have entertainment and we'd sit around and tell dirty – I mean tell jokes.**

**PW:** Did you make some good friendships when you were in the service?

**AB:** **Oh, yes.**

**PW:** And have you communicated with some of them?

**AB:** **No, it ended there. That was it. We had a lot of good friends, yeah.**

**PW:** Did you meet any interesting people?

**AB:** **Boy, that's a real tough question. No, I don't believe it was. They were all just like me – just commoners.**

**PW:** Can you remember your worst military meal?

**AB:** **Worst military meal? Yes, SOS. Of course I won't, I won't repeat what it says, but that was grilled – not grilled. Well they would take – I hate to think of it –dried beef. Beef that had been dried and they'd cut it up in little pieces, and they'd put it in milk and flour and stuff like that. They'd put it over toast. Well, like I say, we had another name for it, but that was probably the worst meal.**

**PW:** Now when you were in the military during wartime, did your military experience do some defining on your life?

**AB:** **Well I think probably the most important was that it taught me to trust God. That He would help me and bring me home. And be honest and trust to the people in charge.**

**PW:** And I see you're still very patriotic.

**AB:** Oh, yes. I've got everything up.

**PW:** Your generation seems to be fiercely patriotic.

**AB:** I think you're right. Yes, I think it makes a difference.

**PW:** When your service time ended, can you recall that day?

**AB:** Oh, yes. That's for sure, because I was coming home to Elizabeth. That's her right there.

**PW:** And so you were counting down the days?

**AB:** Oh, yes.

**PW:** And were you in Guam? Did you make a direct comeback from there or . . .

**AB:** Yes, we flew back – no, that was another problem. I didn't have enough points to fly home. So I had to come by boat. And that was 21 days on that stupid boat coming home from Guam, but we got here.

**PW:** From there did you have to go in to the station for a while?

**AB:** Oh, yes. We went to the station in California, and from there we went by rail to Colorado, Denver, and from there by rail to home, Lincoln, Nebraska.

**PW:** So it took longer than you really. . .

**AB:** Oh, it took long. Oh, yes, it took longer than a couple of days. Yes, it was a long trip.

**PW:** What did you do after you left the military service?

**AB:** Well, like I say, I got married. I married Elizabeth and I told her I was going to go back to work for the railroad, which is what I'd done before; because our family was railroaders. And she said, "Why don't you go to school?" She said, "The government's going to pay for it." So I did. I went to the University of Nebraska and got a degree in business administration and got my degree there. And that's how I ended up in the life insurance business because I got a job in Lincoln, Nebraska, with the life insurance company while I was in school.

**PW:** Any other benefits of the GI Bill that you used, like home buying?

**AB:** Well that and then of course, I'm getting a pension now, thanks to Mike; and he's taking care of all my health at the VA.

**PW:** So you were in Lincoln and then how did you end up in Fargo?

**AB:** As I said, I went in the insurance business, and after I moved around in various cities, I think there was four different cities; because I was always looking for something a better job. So I ended up going like to Indianapolis, Indiana, and to Pennsylvania, where my last town was before Fargo; and Illinois, yes, and here. And then I found out about this job at Pioneer Mutual. The vice president was retiring, Buz Morley (sp?). He was going to retire and he was 60 – 65 years old. So I applied and got his job and I came here. That's how I ended up here. And I'm glad I came.

**PW:** So it was a benefit to use the school bill for education?

**AB:** Oh yes, we had a good life here.

**PW:** So how long have you lived in Fargo?

**AB:** We came in 1970.

**PW:** Did you join any veteran organizations?

**AB:** Just the DAV, the Disabled American Veterans.

**PW:** And are you active in it or . . .

**AB:** No, not anymore. I was when I had wheels and I was able to get around but I don't have any wheels anymore.

**PW:** What are some of the functions that the DAV does?

**AB:** Well they'd have annual money-raising feeds, feasts, you know. And we sold tickets to that and they'd have speakers come in and tell us about various things going on. So it was a good organization.

**PW:** Do you have anything else that you'd like to reminisce about with your military life?

**AB:** Oh, there goes one. Yes, that's an airliner. We went through Hawaii quite a few times, going over and coming back. And then after that, my wife and I went over there for vacations. And we went up to [unclear] Maui and the

**volcano there is named Haleakala. Early in the morning you'd drive up to the side of that thing and park up on top and watch the sunrise, see the sun come up out of the water in the Pacific. It was something to see.**

**PW:** And having been there before, it must have brought back some memories.

**AB:** Oh, yes.

**PW:** But positive ones that you could share with your wife then?

**AB:** Oh, yes, right

**PW:** Enjoyed with her?

**AB:** Yes, we had a lot of good life, good vacations and stuff.

**PW:** Yes, so overall, even though it was wartime, do you feel that it was a necessary war?

**AB:** Oh, yes, it was because the Japs and the Germans wanted to take over the world more or less, and rule the world. And it wasn't our way of ruling. It was a dictatorship and it just wasn't what we wanted. And so it was a very necessary war. Oh, yes.

**PW:** How do you feel that war has changed over the years? Do you feel it has?

**AB:** I think it has, yes. And of course, right now, everybody is so up in arms about the way he's running it. And I think we went into it, initially, with the idea that we would help those people over there; but apparently, it isn't working, so I don't know what to do ...hard to tell.

**PW:** The battle plan seems different, too.

**AB:** Oh, yes, that's right.

**PW:** When you've got people sneaking around, it isn't so up front and just . . .

**AB:** Yes, right, it's different.

**PW:** Fighting hand to hand, yes . . .

**AB:** Yes.

**PW:** Overall then, looking at your whole life and your experience and especially your military which is quite a dramatic experience for a young person, looking back at your life, how would you like to be remembered?

**AB:** Well, I guess as an individual who trusted God and worked for people, helped people. That was probably it – yes, because I do a lot of that here. I help people.