

A Veterans Oral History
Heritage Education Commission
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Jim McLaughlin
Narrator

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Interviewer

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SM: Hi. This is Stephanie Manesis interviewing Jim McLaughlin on August 7, 2011, in Fargo, North Dakota. So why don't you tell me, Jim, first a little about where you were born and your growing up years.

JM: I was born in Bismarck, North Dakota, and grew up there. My dad was a janitor and we lived in the basement of the school. We stayed there until my mother passed away when I was nine years old. And from then I went and lived with my aunt and with my grandmother. I ended up going to St. Mary's High School and graduated there in 1943. In 1942 I actually enlisted in the Navy, went to Minneapolis for my physical. But they weren't ready for everybody to come in and so I finished my high school and then it was in November of '43 before they actually called me in while I was living in Bismarck.

My dad was overseas. I always wanted to fly and he was, at that time, on Guadalcanal. He was in an anti-tank company, keeping the Japanese away from the airfield. So that kind of gave me an interest to become a pilot. And that's what I had signed up with in the Navy. I thought I'd go someplace to learn how to be a pilot. They sent me to Valley City to go to school. And they thought everybody that was going to be a pilot should be educated to some extent. So that's where I started out.

Well they overdid the recruiting. They never developed enough people to train all of the people that they recruited. So they gave us a test to see what else our capabilities were. And I was good in math and science. So they sent me to a school in Philadelphia called Swarthmore. It was run by the

Quakers. But at the time we were there, there were also some Chinese Navy people who had been doing underseas work against the Japanese.

Well, that went on for a while. They decided they didn't need the scientists that they were training. And so they tried something else. They sent me to Cornell University to become a deck pilot or a deck officer in the Navy. They could see the war was winding down to the point where they didn't need all the people they were training, all of a sudden. So every other class was "washed out" as they call it. And so, I was part of that group. They still had to do something with me, so they sent me out to a storekeeper's school to become a storekeeper. And after that training, I went to Great Lakes Training Station and worked in the storekeeper end of it at that time. And then as the war was winding down, they sent me to Jacksonville, Florida, to work in a separation center, to separate people coming back from the service, sending them back home.

They went on a point system and I eventually had enough points to get out myself, so I separated myself. At that time, when I came home, I went to my high school counselor to see what the possibilities were to get into the university and finish my education. It was too late to sign up, so I went to school at BJC, at Bismarck Junior College, to take English and speaking classes. And then during that time, I looked at SU and UND.

SM: Where in the Great Lakes were you stationed to be a store-hand, in Duluth or somewhere else?

JM: It was upstate New York where the storekeepers' school actually was. And after I finished that, they sent me to Great Lakes to work.

SM: And which town on the Great Lakes?

JM: The Great Lakes is just north of – I can never remember the town. But it's halfway up the lake, and it's a big complex of naval training, been there for many years.

SM: In New York.

JM: No, it's in Illinois.

SM: In Illinois, okay, so right off of Lake Superior, I mean Lake Michigan?

JM: Right.

SM: So tell me about your store-hand experience, what all did you end up doing for your experience?

JM: It was originally to work in the housing area to get people oriented when they came in to be trained, and then also to see that they had the proper clothing and so on, to fit what they were going to be doing. It was interesting.

One day there wasn't much else to do, so they put me on the front gate. And I ended up with a bakery delivery, delivering pies all over the whole camp set-up. But you do what you have to do. And if you feel like you're doing something good, even though you're not in battle or anything. The support people are just as important as the fighters.

SM: Absolutely and so when you were stationed at Great Lakes, what timeframe was that approximately?

JM: That would be – let me think now – be 1944-5.

SM: To forty-five and then you went and did [unclear] in Jacksonville, Florida. Can you tell me more about your experience there?

JM: That was a Naval Air Training Center but they set up a separation center there for people coming in, to be separated from the . . . My job there was – again, I was good with books and understanding and I worked on finding the way in which we would get the people home the quickest: airplanes and railroads, buses, whatever. And we had to set up a sequence of that and be ready when they came in.

SM: So you did a lot of logistics planning, it sounds like. And these were all Navy people, just Navy people coming in?

JM: Yes, just Navy at that particular separation center.

SM: Where were mostly of them coming from?

JM: They were coming from battleships and destroyers and from all over the world.

SM: And how long did you do that?

JM: About six months.

SM: What did you like most about your experience in the Navy?

JM: I guess it was the education and the people that I met. I ended up going to so many different schools that I never knew existed. And it was all people kind of in the same boat, wanting to do what they had to do.

SM: Why did you decide to join the Navy in the first place?

JM: It was because they had come to our high school and recruited us more or less to explain that the Navy pilots are necessary. And like I say, I had always wanted to fly. So they had us all come to Minneapolis to be checked, to see if we were physically capable of doing it. And the surprising thing to me, at that time, was there were a lot of athletes from all over the state that were being checked out and about a third of them were color blind and washed out; so they couldn't get in at all. It was those little interesting things that surprised me.

SM: Can you tell me more about your father's experience in World War II?

JM: He joined the National Guard when he was 16 years old. And in 1941 all of the Guard people were what they called "federalized." They were put in the U. S. Army. It was February of 1941 when they were called in. They went down to Louisiana to be trained, and after their training, they were sent out to the West Coast and did patrol work on railway, train bridges.

Eventually they sent them overseas and they ended up the first American Army group to fight against the Japanese on Guadalcanal. He was in the National Guard in Bismarck which was a rifle company. And when they decided to federalize the Guard, they didn't have an anti-tank company in North Dakota. So he and an officer were sent to Harvey, North Dakota, to recruit people and start training them to be soldiers. When they went down to Louisiana, they didn't have any equipment because it hadn't been an active anti-tank group. They didn't have any guns so they trained with a pipe and had soup cans go through and that was how they trained, originally because they didn't have the equipment. Well, they finally did get the equipment just before they went overseas, so they were ready when they went.

SM: And did your father survive Guadalcanal?

JM: He survived but he was mentally – he had a mental discharge because he was older than the normal; and he was, like I say, they were supporting in keeping the Japanese away from the Henderson Field on Guadalcanal. And there were alot snipers. Japanese were quick to climb trees and become snipers. And one sniper was causing, apparently, a lot of troubles – and he was a crack-shot. Over the years he'd gone to Camp Perry, Ohio, for

national rifle meets. And while on Guadalcanal, he shot one of the Japanese people out of a tree who was about my age. And, I think that and seeing so much stuff happening, got to his brain; and he just, he had to get a medical discharge.

SM: How was your father after the war?

JM: He went to a couple of VA Hospitals for a while to be treated – to be checked out. And he was finally became pretty good. And he ended up getting out and actually going to work for the railroad.

SM: So he was able to hold a career in the railroad after that until he retired?

JM: Until he died ... he died when he was about 57.

SM: So he died young.

JM: Yes.

SM: How old was your father when he went into the war?

JM: Called in 1941 ... he was 33.

SM: Quite a bit older than average.

JM: Yes, he didn't have to go. But in the Guard unit that he was in Bismarck, being a janitor in the school, he knew a lot of the kids that were in the Guard. And he wanted to stay with them but it didn't work again. They decided he should start this anti-tank company.

SM: How often was your father able to communicate with you and your mom during the war?

JM: Well my mother had died before he went. His letters were far and few between because they didn't have a lot of time to spend writing. If they did well, it was so censored that it wasn't much left to read. I guess they didn't want somebody to get a hold of those and find out what our troops were doing.

SM: Did you and your father talk about World War II after the war was done?

JM: To some extent – he was reluctant to begin with to talk about it. But, eventually, after he'd been in the VA Hospitals a few times, well, he found out he should talk about it.

SM: Mr. McLaughlin what was your most memorabilia experience during the war?

JM: Wherever we were, like Swarthmore or Cornell, with going to school, they were keeping us informed of what was going on in different places in the world. How the war was going. And it was interesting to be able to keep track of that while we were doing other things. I guess the thing I enjoyed the most about all of my movements and all that was I met so many different people from all over the country. And they're all different, that's good. So it was a learning experience without a question.

SM: Any particular funny experiences that stand out?

JM: Oh, goodness, let's see. When I got to Swarthmore, there a lot of people from the East Coast. And they were funny to me, and I guess I was funny to them when we were different people. We enjoyed each other and learned a lot from each other.

SM: So tell me how did the war impact your life after you got out?

JM: Wherever you went, people were always talking about it. Because even though the war had ended or just about ended when I got out, people wondered what was going to happen in the world, down the line, as far as what the Germans might do later on and what kind of an impact that would have on our lives. But it was so different coming home, and the world was different by that time.

SM: Is there anything that you'd like to share with me about the war that I haven't asked you?

JM: Oh, I can't think of anything. It's things that came from my dad and other people that I've met at the separation centers, and I usually talk with them about their experiences. They were all very different and everybody was doing their part.

SM: When did you finally separate from the military, when was your last month in the service?

JM: February of 1946.

SM: How did war affect your opinion on the Germans and the Japanese?

JM: My mother's parents came from Germany. And I guess I had accepted them even before the war or even thinking about the war, when I was a young boy. It wasn't the people that caused all the problems, it was the leaders, as usually happens. And it really didn't change my thinking of the German people, per se. But it did make me more aware of not only the German leaders but other leaders in the world and how they affected us, even though they shouldn't have.

We didn't dislike the Germans. In fact we had in Bismarck at a fort just south of Bismarck, Germans from the Graf Spee battleship that were captured and they were brought there as POWs. We also had Japanese there. They didn't get along very well, the two of them. So it was interesting to watch all of that, too.

SM: Now that was where, in Graf Bay, you said?

JM: The Graf Spee was a German battleship that the English had kind of forced to be scuttled. When it was scuttled, the people had to get off the ship, and they were all captured and brought back to Bismarck as POWs.

SM: Did you have any interaction with the German or the Japanese POWs?

JM: Not really. I had a friend that was a guard out there and he said you would think that they would get together but they were fighting each other all the time and both of them were trying to tunnel to get out digging tunnels. It was kind of interesting that they tried to keep themselves busy and get away. But when the war ended, a lot of the Germans who were released as POWs, actually stayed in Bismarck and married local girls and lived in Bismarck for the rest of their life.

SM: Your friend that was the Guard, how did he say that the POWs were treated?

JM: They were treated real well. They were well-housed. It had been a fort at one time, and so they had good living quarters, good food and as far as I ever heard, they were treated quite well.

SM: How did the war affect your opinion on the Japanese, about the Japanese?

JM: The Japanese were not as well-known to us as the Germans. At the time, we couldn't understand why they would even try to take us over. I like to read a lot of history and seeing TV shows where they had both American and

Japanese people telling about what was happening. They were just foolish people. They thought they could rule the world. And they wanted to take over and, but they didn't go at very wisely. They could probably do it now with the economics.

SM: Anything else you wanted to add?

JM: **No, I can't think of anything else. That pretty well covered it.**