

A Veterans Oral History
Heritage Education Commission
www.heritageed.com
Moorhead, MN

John Soderquist
Narrator

Polly Wendlebo
Interviewer

About 2007

PW: This is Polly Wendleboe interviewing. It is February 27th and I'm interviewing John Soderquist today. John, can you tell me where you grew up?

JS: Columbus.

PW: Ohio?

JS: North Dakota.

PW: Columbus, North Dakota? Where is that?

JS: Northwest of here, it's a hundred miles northwest of Minot.

PW: Okay.

JS: A hundred miles northeast of Williston.

PW: Alright.

JS: Not close to anything.

PW: And can I ask your age?

JS: Eighty-two, I'll be 83 next month.

PW: What did you do prior to your military service?

JS: Farmed.

PW: And how did your military service evolve?

JS: Well, I was drafted and that was it.

PW: You entered because you were drafted? And what year did you enter, do you remember?

JS: Forty-three.

PW: And did you pick the area of service that you were going to go into?

JS: Not really, no.

PW: And what area did you go into?

JS: Well, I was in the Army; and initially, I was in anti-aircraft. I was an extra so I didn't go overseas with them. I ended up in the Army Specialized Training Program, and they sent me to Pasadena Junior College. They closed and they sent me to Camp Bowie, Texas; and I was in the tanks to start with. And I had one little ride in the tank and I said that was not for me. The tanks are made for people 6 feet tall.

It was fine when we were driving down the road; and then when they said, "Okay we button up." We shut the cover and there wasn't room for me. My head hit the ceiling. So I screamed loud and got transferred out of there to the combat engineers. And they in turn sent me to New Jersey for radio repair school for six months. And then back to the engineers and I went overseas with the engineers.

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

JS: Not particularly.

PW: And what was military training like when you went into the engineering part of the training?

JS: Well, actually I had basic training in the anti-aircraft and the schooling, in the engineers, and also in radio repair school, so I had basic training in all of these. And basically, they were all about the same.

PW: So your end job specifically was for engineering?

JS: Yes.

PW: And so what specifically were you trained to do?

JS: We worked mostly with mines and booby traps.

PW: Before we go overseas, do you have a most memorable boot camp experience?

JS: Nothing much actually happened from there. That was pretty much a day-by-day, run out when the whistle blows and you line up when the whistle blows.

PW: When you were finally given a station. Where were you stationed and how did you get there?

JS: In the States you mean?

PW: No overseas.

JS: Well overseas initially we spent about two months waiting for our equipment and getting it lined up. And during that time the squad I was in, we were living in the barn.

PW: In where?

JS: In France.

PW: And did you fly over to France or were you on ships?

JS: Oh no, on ships. Oh yeah, back in those days it was primarily by ships.

PW: How long did it take to get there?

JS: Well, the first ship we were on, we spent two days going out; and we broke down. And then we sat there for one day getting it repaired. The one destroyer they left to guard us ... circling around us; and they got the thing fixed. And we took off again and in the middle of the night the boat leaned over and it speeded up. A submarine was reported ahead of us. We went back to New York and unloaded. The next day we got on a different ship and we went overseas. It took 7 days. I was sick all the way.

PW: How did you get into France?

JS: By trucks.

PW: And then you had the first few days within a barn, did you say?

JS: The first two months, we lived in this barn.

PW: How many were in the barn and what was it like?

JS: Well, we had about 15 of us sleeping in this one hay mound. You rolled your sleeping bag out in a flat spot in the hay and that's where you slept. We didn't have any lights or anything, so.

PW: It must have been kind of hard to enforce some of the daily military life when you're in those conditions?

JS: Well, not necessarily.

PW: Did you have K-rations and that stuff to eat?

JS: No. We had a mess down the road, oh about a half a mile. We'd walk down there for our meals.

PW: Did you see combat when you were in the military?

JS: Yes, in Germany.

PW: Tell me a couple of your memorable stories of that?

JS: Well, mostly it was you jump in the truck. And they roared down the road for a while, and park it, and you wonder, well, maybe we'll get something to eat. So, you go out and build a fire and put the mess kit on there to try to fry some meat or something. And they blow the whistle and away you go again. You do that a few times. Once in a while, you get something to eat. Some days you didn't.

PW: And what was combat like ... the attacks and campaigns?

JS: Well, we were engineers, so our job was to take care of booby traps and mines. And usually there wasn't too much shooting right where we were. There was always overhead artillery or something. But we didn't usually get into let's say hand-to-hand combat, per se. But we'd get shelled. We'd try to build a bridge across the river. It was a one-way river and we were putting a pontoon bridge up. And we were just about on the far side, and the Germans, I think had been watching us, and they just blew our whole bridge all to pieces. And a few days later we tried another one.

PW: We have a letter here that you wrote back home. What is the time period of that letter in sequence? Were you in France at that time when you wrote that letter?

JS: Ah, no. I was in southern Germany at that time.

PW: So this was later on then?

JS: Yes, this was in 1945 right after the war and after censorship had been taken off.

PW: Your actions during that letter were?

JS: That was during the war. But this was looking back. This was telling the folks some of the things that I couldn't tell them before.

PW: And so that was after your experience in France then you were moved to Germany?

JS: Yes.

PW: When you were in the service did you feel like you had plenty of supplies and equipment?

JS: Oh, yeah. We had one experience. We lost all our trucks and vehicles. The Germans shelled us and we lost everything. We were just driving down the road and they started shooting. And the way we traveled, the sergeant rode up in front with the driver and he had one foot on the running board. He never put both feet in the truck at the same time. And they started shooting and the driver turned the key off and he jumped out his side. The sergeant jumped out his side, and the truck made a few jumps and skids. We jumped out the back.

PW: And were there injuries or?

JS: Well, this particularly case, the shelling was from some trees on the left side, oh, about maybe a quarter of a mile away. And everybody jumped out and went to the right except me. I was standing in the back and I saw a foxhole right by the truck there. Right handy on the left side, so I jumped in there. And they shelled us for a while, a couple of shells hit the trucks. There were pieces of the truck and stuff in the hole with me. And then they quit. So I looked around. Didn't see anybody. I hollered and nobody answered me. Nothing. Here comes a couple of German officers down the road. So I stopped them and asked them in English if they knew where the rest of my buddies were.

PW: These were enemy soldiers?

JS: Yeah. See this wasn't right up on the front. We were supposedly in a rest area. Every time we got beat up it seemed like we were supposed to be in a rest area. So we were supposed to be reserves. So these German officers, they'd probably been captured and turned and told to get down the road which was common. And they were headed down the road. They were headed home.

PW: And they had no weapons on them?

JS: No, they had no weapons. They had a couple of bicycles and I was getting hungry, so I thought well, "You fellows stand here and I'm going to get in the truck and get something to eat?" And about that time one of the sergeants or somebody hollered that they were over a hill. They were in a gravel pit. And they said, "Get over here right away. Bring them along." So I did. And just as we walked down the side of the bank there, everything broke loose up on top. They had been tracking us apparently with their guns. And they just started shooting. Nobody got hurt. A lot of dirt on us but.

PW: That was in your letter.

JS: Yeah.

PW: After this experience – I’m all tense. Can you describe the pressures or the stress you felt while you were in the military?

JS: I don’t recall any big problems. You know the thing there is, a mind is very selective and your mind remembers the good stuff and the bad stuff is ... Actually I can remember more things now about the service in some respects than I could years ago because I had put all this stuff out of the way. You didn’t talk about it, but it’s just something you forget about.

PW: Did you receive any decorations or medals while you were in the service?

JS: I think I listed several of the awards that were presented. Nothing let’s say personal as such.

PW: Now you alluded a little bit how you communicated with your family and that was by letter?

JS: By letter, yes. That was the only way. I don’t remember ever making a phone call from Europe.

PW: And yet letters weren’t totally satisfactory?

JS: Well, everything was censored. You were very limited on what you could write. You couldn’t talk about where you were. You couldn’t tell them the name of the town. You couldn’t tell them what you were doing. You couldn’t tell them what the weather was like. There wasn’t much you could say. I don’t know what I wrote but I used to write home just about every day. One thing back then, you see you didn’t have to put stamps on things. All you did was write free of [indecipherable]. Yeah.

PW: How did the servicemen entertain themselves when they weren’t right on the line?

JS: I don’t know. We didn’t really have much time to.

PW: Did you make friends while you were in your outfit?

JS: Oh yes. I had several, well actually I only had one close friend.

PW: And in the evenings or something, did you play cards or just tell stories, or?

JS: Oh, you’d play cards some. Like France now we didn’t have any lights. So when it got dark we were in the dark.

PW: What did you do when you were on leave?

JS: Well, the only leave I got was one time. I got I think two days in Paris. That was the only leave I had while in Europe.

PW: And just looked around Paris?

JS: Yeah.

PW: And were you alone on leave or were the other guys with you?

JS: Well, there'd be a whole lot of others there but as I recall when I went into Paris, I went alone. As alone as you can get. Now we went by riding in the back of a truck. And they took you in, and dropped you off, and arranged to meet you at a certain spot there at a certain hour, and you had to be back there. And that was it.

PW: As traumatic as that era was in the military, did you have any humorous stories that came out of your experience.

JS: Well, there was always a lot of unusual things. This one friend of mine, his name was Bugs Albert Bauman. And his nickname was Bugs because he collected bugs and he always carried a little bottle in his pocket. If he found a bug of some kind, he'd pop it in there and look it over, and he'd send the things home. And I can remember after the war one time, he was collecting snails. Now this was in France. And we were in the camp headed back to the States and he had his helmet full of snails. What he did he put some water in there and he cooked it over a campfire and cooked these snails. And then he spread them out on the ground and let the ants go in and eat everything inside of them. Then he wrapped them up and sent them home, hundreds of them. I said, "What are you going to do with them." Well, he said I collect them; but he said, "These will be good trading stock." He said, "I'll trade with somebody else for a snail that I want.

PW: So you met all sorts over there?

JS: Yeah. And in fact he was from California and I looked him up one time out of Pasadena.

PW: Do you still keep in touch with anybody that you served with?

JS: I was in touch with him, well, probably every other year we would exchange a letter; but that's the only one I've been in contact with.

PW: Do you ever talk about your military experience with others in your retirement community.

JS: Yes, there's quite a few of the fellows that have been in the service, so we talk about different things that.

PW: Because like you said it was a war that a lot of guys came back and didn't talk about it.

JS: Yeah.

PW: Can you remember your worst military meal?

JS: Oh, not particularly.

PW: Were the meals good?

JS: Oh, yeah. I was well satisfied. Everybody complained, but they were good meals. Yeah, you put on weight. You ate well. I wasn't used to complaining about food. We didn't have the choices that you have now. You ate what was on the plate.

PW: Being in the military, especially during that time, did that define your outlook on life afterwards or reshape?

JS: Well, I don't know if you'd say that. I always had plans of being in farming. And when I came back from the service, well I owned a quarter of land. And when I was gone, well my folks sold it. So when I got back from the service I didn't have any land. So I changed from farming. But I had been interested in the electrical because I had gone to school in Grand Forks for engineering beforehand. So I followed up on that.

PW: And anything you learned in the military, any of your training there apply to what you learned?

JS: Yes, the semester I had at Pasadena Junior College was electrical engineering and the six months in Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, was radio repair school. So that was applicable. But as far as mines and booby traps, no, it just doesn't apply.

PW: Now, how old did you say you were when you went into the service?

JS: Twenty – 19.

PW: So did you have any college schooling before that?

JS: I had engineering in Grand Forks.

PW: At age 19, you still had gone into Grand Forks to college?

JS: Yeah, see I graduated from high school in '42 and that fall I went to Grand Forks. I had six months in Grand Forks and we covered two years of electrical engineering

in six months. We covered a year every three months. We had class from midnight until 7:30 in the morning six days a week.

PW: I've never heard about that. Why?

JS: Yeah, that was a special Army training program. We weren't in the Army. We were civilians. The Army paid us but we had class there. They had a class 24-hours-a-day. When you stepped out of your desk at the classroom, and we went to the shop, somebody from shop went into your desk. And that desk was in use 24-hours-a-day.

PW: So there's another picture of war-life that influenced even colleges?

JS: Yeah.

PW: How could you stay awake that long during the night and study?

JS: There was no problem. I loved it. It was the first time I'd ever had to study in school and I liked it. I hated high school. In fact I run across my old senior report card a few weeks ago. I was looking at it; and according to that, I missed 83 days in my senior year.

PW: What were you doing?

JS: I just skipped school. I just didn't get there.

PW: And you still passed?

JS: Oh yeah. I was on the honor roll most of the time. No, we lived four miles from town. I had to walk to school and I just didn't get there. I'd take off in the morning and come home about 5:30 or something like that. I always carried my 22-rifle and when I did go to school, I carried the rifle in and sat it over in the corner in the hallway.

PW: You would have been suspended now days. And the police escort you out.

JS: Yeah, no problem.

PW: So really when you came back with an inkling and interesting career, the military was the benefit. Would you say the military was a benefit to you?

JS: Oh in a way.

PW: Did you use any of the military benefits for your schooling afterwards?

JS: Yes, I went to electrical school in Billings, Montana - Rocky Mountain College, I think that is. I took an electrical course in farm wiring. And came back to Columbus and started an electrical business doing farm wiring.

PW: When you got out of the service, what was your rank when you were discharged?

JS: Private First Class. I had one stripe.

PW: Do you remember the day that you were discharged?

JS: Ah, nothing special.

PW: And how did you get back home again. Was it pretty prompt from your discharge date to arriving back in the states?

JS: Well, we were discharged in the States. You aren't discharged overseas. No, we came back from Europe, and Japan was still fighting, so we got a 30-day leave, and we were scheduled to go into Japan. Yeah. But the bombs were dropped and they surrendered. Now that happened while I was home on leave.

After that we reported back to Wisconsin, and they sent us to California, and they gave us all new equipment, and they said just in case Japan wants to start again, you are ready. And we sat there for a couple of months and then got discharged.

PW: Was that your normal time of discharge or was that an early one?

JS: For me, it was an early one because I didn't have enough points.

PW: Tell me about the points system?

JS: I really don't understand it too much. But you got so many points for time in service and so many points for combat time. And if you had a lot of points, why you could get out quicker.

Our combat time was relatively short. So we didn't have too many points. So we would ordinarily have been stationed in Germany for probably six months or a year. But because of the fact that they wanted us to be ready for Japan, we got shipped back early. Otherwise, we probably would have been over there as an occupying force.

PW: And what did you do after your military service?

JS: I started an electrical contracting business, Columbus Electric.

PW: And how many years did you run that?

JS: Sixteen years.

PW: Were you married before you went into the military?

JS: No.

PW: And you married afterwards?

JS: Yes, we were married in Canada and my wife came in as a war bride - 1948.

PW: Since being in the military, did you join any veterans organizations?

JS: I've been a member of the American Legion since 1945.

PW: And do you participate in any of the activities or posts?

JS: Until I moved here, I was active all the time. I haven't become active down here.

PW: What were the activities that your post did?

JS: Well, mainly military funerals was the big item. But we put on programs and raised money and sponsored things and stuff like that.

PW: I see in the paperwork, you have some memorabilia and one of them is a pistol. Do you want to tell me about your pistol? Now is this an Allied one or a?

JS: This is German. In fact I took that off a German officer during the war. We were running a ferry across a river.

PW: It's not loaded is it?

JS: No, I checked it.

PW: Good.

JS: We were running a ferry across the river and we were taking American troops over and bringing German prisoners back. And two of these officers were in with this group of prisoners. For some reason, I wanted to check them out. One of them had this on.

PW: Is this their normal gun for a German, it's awful small?

JS: This no, the luger was their main much bigger gun. This is a small one.

PW: So do you think this was a private one that he carried himself?

JS: Probably, he had it in the middle of his back.

PW: Is there anything else you'd like to share?

JS: Well there was one time my buddy and I were called on to check out a house for booby traps. The way things worked over there, we'd move into a town and the headquarters outfit would take over the nicest house in town. They'd just move everybody out and they'd move in. And before they move in, they were supposed to contact us to come and check it out for booby traps or explosives. Well, they'd been getting by with no problems and no problems. So they moved in.

There was at least a dozen officers running around in there, and setting up stuff. We came in and did some checking. We went down in the basement and there was a box there and we opened the thing up. Ah, there was a nice big dial in there and an off-on switch. The three dials were day, hour and minutes. And this was sitting in a box of explosives – several hundred pounds of explosives – there'd just dug a big hole there. And the thing was turned on. The day was zero; the hour was zero, the minutes 30 minutes. Another 30 minutes and that thing would have gone off. Yeah.

PW: So you disarmed it?

JS: We just turned the switch off and just pulled the thing out – it was just inserted in there. And we just pulled the thing out and then we had it. And what we did then, we said we should report this to somebody. So we talked it over and said, “[undecipherable],” so went upstairs and cornered a couple of lieutenants there. “Come on. We got to show you this.” Took them down to show them that. Their eyes got big and they said, “Well, that's been disarmed?” I said, “No, we didn't do anything. We just thought we'd show you first.” They went up the stairs a screaming and a hollering and you could hear the banging from there. Everybody was running. The place was quiet, I mean like a tomb.

We sat down there and laughed our heads off. We went upstairs and peeked out the window and they were standing on the other side of the street. They were lined up. And we said, “Well, we better finish checking out.” We didn't find anything else. But that made it a control unit.

My buddy sent it home to California. And after we came back he was telling me, that he had been home on a leave and he saw this at his uncle's house laying on the mantle piece. The detonator portion of the thing was still live. Now there was enough power in that detonator to kill anybody within 10-15 feet. Yeah.

PW: Well you've come back with a lot of interesting stories?

JS: Yeah.

PW: So as an ending now to your interview, when you look back on your whole life, how would you like to be remembered?

JS: I don't know. Good question. Nothing – I don't know anything special. I've just never gone anywhere, never done anything.

PW: But you've lived an interesting life.

JS: Yeah, until we moved here I'd had one address all my life. I never changed address until we moved here.

PW: You're the exception now, I think.

JS: Yeah, Our kids have moved all over the country. They're spread all over.

PW: Were any of your kids in the military?

JS: Our youngest son was in the Air Force. Yeah.

PW: During any particular time period?

JS: No.

PW: Do you think he was in because of your influence or?

JS: I don't know what the deal was. He just came home one day and he said that he had signed up. And he signed up while he was in high school. And two weeks after high school was out, he was in the service. He signed up on a sort of a deferred, going in or something like that. I don't understand too much on that.

PW: Well, very good.

JS: Here's a couple of other gadgets that.

PW: Okay, you're showing me some cigarettes that were in the K-ration package, Chesterfields.

JS: I don't know if they had other brands. There were four of them in this package. And they had this package in with their K-ration boxes, passing out free cigarettes. And then during the war, they gave you a pack of cigarettes; and I'm not sure how many pipe tobacco and stuff like that are figured in there, for every day in combat.

So when the war ended, things started catching up to us and we had boxes full of cigarettes and pipe tobacco and cigars and candy bars. Just help yourself. And the typical way to buy anything at that time was cigarettes. If you wanted your clothes washed and ironed and buttons put on and things like that, you take and find a German girl, give her a pack of cigarettes and a bar of soap and they would wash and iron and repair.

PW: Do you think that contributed to a lot of new smoking habits?

JS: Oh, yeah. Definitely, yes. And when you got back into rest areas where you could buy cigarettes, the price then was 60 cents a carton. Sixty cents a carton.

PW: Well do you have anything else that you brought back? What is that?

JS: A cigar holder.

PW: Oh, it's a German one though, right?

JS: Yes, put your cigars in there.

PW: That's quite a medal container.

RS: The 13th Armored Division, that's the outfit I was in.

PW: Now what do we have here?

RS: German flashlights and it's got the lenses here.

PW: And what do those lenses do?

RS: Well, there's a black-out lens, a red one, a blue one, and a green for signaling.

PW: There's a button to turn the light on and off. Did you find that on a soldier or in a home?

RS: I have no idea where I found it.

PW: What is that?

RS: Another flashlight, see it's got colored lenses, also.

PW: For signaling?

RS: Yeah, it's got the button up there.

PW: Ademond and then narona - interesting.

RS: When I came into the country, I had to declare about 30 items on the the list. Besides this stuff, there was things like a pair of binoculars, a hunting knife, and I've got a lot of old German money. I mean like 20 million marks and that kind of stuff.

PW: That was a lot.

RS: Oh, yeah not worth anything. And I don't remember what all the other stuff was but there was a lot of insignias - sergeant stripes and officers, metals and things like that.

PW: Well, very interesting. I'm going to take a photo of this. Thank you very much for showing us this.