

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT
Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Jim Esperson

Conducted by John Gay

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the request of the veteran.**

We're sitting with Jim Esperson on Washington Island at the Velkommen where his apartment is, and we're going to talk about his experience in the military and what he did after he was born on the Island here – Washington Island – and what he did after he came out of the military. This is October 5, 2015, and we'll let Jim start talking here.

Life Before Entering Military Service

So, Jim, you were born on the Island. What year was that?

1934.

Where did you live on the Island – over at Johnny Esperson's place?

Yes. When I was a little baby we moved to a cabin in the woods that belonged to MacDonald – not Ray, but his brother. He had a cabin back in the woods off Swenson Road. My dad rented the place from him.

My first recollection of life in this world was when I was a little baby and I was out crawling by a brush pile out by the back porch. I can still see it in my mind. I wasn't walking yet – I was still crawling. And I was in this brush pile and I had a snake there I was playing with.

My mom came out and said "Oh, my God! Johnny, come quick and bring your gun. There's a snake after Jimmy." And he came out and shot it and I cried and cried.

That was my first recollection in life.

Several years later my mom and dad split up and she took me back to Chicago. I lived on the west side with my grandparents for a few years. One Christmas she got into an argument with her dad and she brought me home with her. She lived on the north side of Chicago – around Broadway and Lawrence. I grew up there.

I went to school at Senn High School. I joined the National Guard because a lot of my buddies were in the National Guard. Of course, they were seniors and I was just a freshman.

Military Service

So you joined the National Guard?

In 1948 I think it was.

They activated us in early 1950 – in early February, 1950. That was when Korea was going. We were a 90mm anti-aircraft battalion.

You were in Chicago at the National Guard?

Yes. It was on the north side of Chicago, up by Thorndale and Broadway. It was the 698AAA Gun Battalion.

And what did you do there? Did you take basic there?

No. I was there with the Guard. I went to summer camp with them one year and came back. It was the following winter that we got activated. We got Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis as a going away present, from Julius Kline, who was our commanding general. They didn't take him in – that was the brigade and they didn't activate that part of it. There was too much brass in there and they didn't want to bring them in. They took us in and sent us down to Camp Stewart, Georgia.

Where is that?

It's down below Savannah.

So you were near the coast?

No, we were in the swamps – the Okefenokee swamp. We'd go out on bivouac and the first tank would stop and the whole convoy would sink in! We'd hook onto trees with our winches – all the vehicles had winches on the floor. 90mm guns are pretty heavy, you know.

So you were in an armored battalion?

Anti-aircraft. So what happened was our particular battery – I was in 'Dog' battery – we were the top battery battalion and we got called for a lot of training exercises. We came up to Wisconsin and trained the Wisconsin National Guard because they were getting activated.

Was that at McCoy?

Yes, Camp McCoy. It's Fort McCoy, but it was Camp McCoy then.

So we trained them in field artillery. And after we finished that assignment we went to Camp Perry, Ohio, and trained the New York National Guard and the New Jersey National Guard who were being activated.

So it was a mixture from the east coast as well as the Midwest.

Yes. We were the top battery in the 5th Army. So our training was quite extensive. We were good. We could knock the sleeves off those planes as they were towing them out over Lake Michigan. A couple of times we had to cease fire because they were tracking the planes. But we made it okay – we didn't knock any airplanes down. It was good.

How long were you there in the swamps?

Well, we did basic down there. We were about 12 months down there. Then we came up to Battle Creek, Michigan.

So this is about 1950, 1951?

Yes. I got out in 1951, I think – early 1951. I spent about 21 months in the active service.

Where did you go? Did they send you overseas?

No. We stayed here and trained other people.

What was that training like?

Well, we were 90mm and we had to teach them how to use them.

That's a pretty big gun.

It's a very big gun!

What was the range of those things?

I couldn't tell you. I was a mess sergeant. I cooked for 113 men. I was a kid. I had the kitchen. I got into some trouble and got busted down. I ended up as a machine gun sergeant. I was on a 50caliber quad-mount – another nice weapon! You sat inside a turret. Every fourth round was a tracer, so you didn't even have to look at what you were shooting. You just had to watch where the tracers were going.

You were saying that you got out a little early?

When we got out we were the last anti-aircraft outfit to be in the 5th Army. They stopped having 90mm anti-aircraft guns and went into EAC missiles. We became a guided missile company. We didn't get into the guided missiles – they phased us out instead. But they didn't have anti-aircraft guns after that.

By choice, or what was the reason for that?

They got upgraded by missiles – by guided missiles. They were more accurate than the guys on the turrets. It took the personal chance of making a mistake away. It was more accuracy.

So you were down in Georgia.

Yes. And from Georgia we went to Michigan. And there we got the training assignments. We were in Detroit, and about every two months they'd move us and put us out in a corner lot someplace. We filled sandbags and sandbagged our 90mm's. We were bored. We were guarding the northern border of the United States at the bridge there, from Canada.

That was near Detroit.

It was in Detroit. We were in Grosse Pointe Farm, Grosse Pointe Woods.

You had a fort there?

No. There was an old site in downtown Detroit. I don't recall now who it was for. But they set us up in there. We had Quonset huts and we lived out of there for a while.

I was in Detroit. I was at the University of Detroit in 1952, 1953 and 1954. I actually was working for a bookstore downtown – the Dale Hudson Bookstore. Where were you camped then? Were the Quonset huts along the river?

No. It was downtown. We were down underneath the bridge.

The bridge over to Canada.

Yes. We were in Dearborn, Michigan for a while – like I said, Grosse Pointe Farm and Grosse Pointe Woods and downtown Detroit. Wherever they had an empty prairie and they wanted something cleaned up they'd stick us in there. We'd fill sandbags and make gun placements.

You had to have a pretty big pile of sand to keep doing that!

Oh, yeah. We got through and we'd have to empty all the bags and bring just the bags with us. We'd go to the next location and fill them up again. We didn't move the filled sandbags. That was too easy.

And we had the buddy system when you'd go out on pass – 50% would go out on pass and the other 50% would carry... them out to the street so they didn't get full of mud. We were in mud holes. It was nasty!

That's a pretty select area, Grosse Pointe Woods and Grosse Pointe Farms. That's when General Motors was flying high.

And it was great. We had the use of their facilities. They had facilities on Lake St. Claire.

And when we're down at Camp Perry that was on Lake Erie. That ended up in World War II was a POW camp.

Where is that? Is that near Sandusky?

Yes. That's exactly where it is – Sandusky, Ohio. So we opened it up and it was the first time it had been opened up since World War II. Like I said, we trained Wisconsin and New York National Guard troops there in anti-aircraft.

So they actually shot these guns off from a placement in to a bunch of sandbags.

No. We had planes that would tow targets in sleeves, usually over water. That way our shells wouldn't hurt anything – they'd go down into the water afterwards. We fired 90mm rounds.

They were a mile or two miles away?

Yes. We'd track them on radar.

And you hit them?

Yes. We had a 97% accuracy rating. That's why we got all the training jobs for the 5th Army – because we were so good.

So the plane was trailing something behind.

Yes. It was a big sleeve made out of silk. It's probably as long as from the front to the back of this building. It's about as big around as those windows there. They were white and were made out of silk.

So the pilot said, "Make sure you hit the guy behind me!"

Yes! They'd be maybe a couple blocks behind the plane.

So that was kind of interesting. What did you do? Were you one of the trigger men?

No. The 50 caliber machine guns were just for perimeter defense. They had the 90mm to knock the planes out, and we protected the 90mm guns.

What did you do on the big guns?

I wasn't on the big guns. I was on the 50 caliber machine guns.

So somebody else was doing the big guns.

Yes. We had 120 men in our outfit. We had four 90mm guns.

How many men per gun would it take?

There were six men on a gun.

They had to carry the shells to the breech?

Yes. They had to carry the shells, one shell at a time. And we had a radar section which stayed in the big semi-trailer that had nothing but radar equipment in it. The top mushroomed out and stuff.

How heavy was a shell? It must have been about 50 pounds.

It was in the 50-60 pound range.

So those guys were carrying them from a pile into the breach of a gun?

Yes. You had a chain to pass them back and forth.

Wow. Nobody dropped it?

You better not! That thing landed on your toes and you'd be in sick bay.

Dave Miller said that when they were out in the jungles of Vietnam, they were out in a big firefight area and they had the guns. They actually had almost no sleep for two weeks. One guy carrying a shell actually fell asleep while he was carrying it, dropped it on his foot and broke his foot.

That can happen.

We weren't in combat conditions. We were just training – we were the school teachers.

So then you were replaced finally by guided missiles.

Yes. Most of our whole outfit was out. They discharged us all. We went through Battle Creek, Michigan.

What happened then? They dropped you and you just came home?

We came back and were released to state control. I never even went back to the National Guard because I had only three months to go and my three years was up.

So you were in the actual service for 21 months. And then you had another year-plus, in the Reserves.

Yes.

That was pretty interesting. What kind of pay did you get at that time?

It was like \$76 a month. As a sergeant I was making \$120-something. That was it a month.

I made \$80 when I was in. I got my beer and cigarettes out of it!

Yes. Cigarettes were 10¢ a pack then.

So you were also a cook for a while?

Yes. I was a mess sergeant.

Then you had someone to clean the pans for you?

Yes – KP's!

That was my first duty when I was in.

And the grease traps. That was worse – cleaning the grease traps every day.

Were you a cook very long in the service?

Yes – about 8 or 10 months. In fact, I went to food service school in Fort Benning, Georgia – where they've got the two 50' jump towers. So we cooked for the paratroopers.

Was that a four-week course?

That was something like eight weeks, I think it was.

So you learned where the salt and pepper were and all that kind of thing?

We were all cooks. This was more. We cooked because they needed somebody to cook for them! It was training in ration controls, ordering food, head counts and all that – all the technical stuff for running a kitchen.

I was in the medical corps when I was in. We were at Fort Sam Houston. Then I got sent back to Fort Chaffee, Arkansas – Camp Chaffee at that time.

All the camps are all forts now.

As a matter of fact, they closed Chaffee for a while. Then they reopened it as a fort.

I never knew what was behind all that stuff, between camps and forts.
We had Fort Sheridan, Illinois, and they just eliminated that – closed it down.

That became a big development.

Yes – a big housing development.

In the medical corps we had extra rations, so we ate pretty well.

You lived like kings! You had plenty of cigarettes, too.

Yes. I was in TI & E and the guys didn't like to sit there and listen to that speech and all that stuff, so they would bring me in things from the pharmacy or butcher shop – anything to get out of going to TI & E.

Do you remember these?

Oh, yeah – the cigarette lighters.

This is a bigger size. Dunhill made all the lighters for the service men. They were smaller.

This was a magazine holder, wasn't it?

No. This is just a replica of the cigarette lighter they made for the service men in World War II. It went with the rations. They were smaller. This is a bigger size. And they were all full of lighter fluid. This is a gas one, now. But the same company – Dunhill. It's silver and needs cleaning – I'm not much in the polishing business!

That's neat. You bought that later on?

Yes. I bought that in the Dunhill shop in Chicago.

So you were relieved of duty in Battle Creek, Michigan about 1950?

Yes. It was 1951.

They wanted you to re-up?

No. There was no pressure for that at all.

Well, Korea was going pretty heavy at that time. I'm surprised they didn't lean on you.

I got out in January. I turned 17 in February with 21 months of service under my belt. I didn't have to worry about Vietnam or any of the other wars.

So you were in when you were 15? Wow.

Yes.

Someone told a little secret about how old you were?

No. It's funny. When we were kids living in up-town Chicago, you used to register for Social Security at the firehouse. They took your application in there. I went in there when I was 12 years old and told them I was 16. So I had good ID's when I went into the service. When I got out I was 17, and I had an ID that said I was 21. So I could go into bars and drink. When I got my drivers' license I used my phony date of birth and got my drivers' license.

So you had three years of service – 21 months active. You came out and you were still only 17.

In fact, I had just turned 17. My enlistment would have been up in June and I turned 17 in February.

That's amazing! No one had to sign for you or anything?

No. They thought I was older. They didn't know I was that young. They didn't ask you for ID's in those days. They were happy to have you!

Returning to Civilian Life

So what did you do when you came out? You got out in 1951?

Yes. I went to work. I worked for Remington Rand for a while repairing adding machines and computers. I got working in the ceramic tile business. I was in that for about 15 years.

What did you do?

I was a helper.

Making the ceramic?

No. I was laying tile.

So all the different colored tiles?

In those days it was all ceramic. We didn't do the asphalt stuff. We could have but we passed on it.

But you had different varieties and different colors?

Yes. We just installed it. Our boss sold them the kind of tile they wanted.

Did your knees bother you?

At times, yes. It got cysts on them – all that time kneeling, and you'd end up kneeling on crumbs and pieces of chipped tile. I never did anything about it. After I got out of the business the knees cleared themselves up. To this day I don't have trouble with any of my joints.

I've got back troubles, but that's from degenerative narrowing of the spinal cord.

So you were then in Chicago for a number of years after you got out?

Yes. I just moved back up to the Island here in 2001, 2003. My dad was very old.

He lived to be 101?

Yes. I had him in assisted living until he didn't know anybody or remember anybody. So I moved up here. I saw a for-rent sign out and I stopped in and filled out an application. I got accepted and moved up here then.

Lon Fry bought his property? What is he going to do with it?

Oh, he burned the house down and all the buildings. He doesn't want anyone living there – him and his glass house.

He doesn't want to be seen, but he lives in a glass house and you can see right through from one end to the other. That used to be a girls' camp.

Actually, that's where my mom was working when I came into this world. She was a cook there at the camp.

There's a lot of little cottages in around there.

In fact, it's funny. They came and got my dad. He was out ice fishing out in Jackson Harbor – I was born the 23rd of February, so it was cold. He was out there ice fishing and they said, "John, Zoe's having the baby!" So he left and went to where she was, and that was a farmhouse over on Gasoline Town Road. It's Wally's house now – the first white house on the right hand side as you go on Gasoline Town Road from Jackson Harbor. That's where I was born. A midwife was there.

So he came back and thought somebody stole his ice fishing stuff. He couldn't find his ice fishing stuff. About five years before he passed away they were tearing down all the old buildings there in the old campgrounds. They tore down the garage and there was his stuff up on his homemade sled. All his ice fishing gear was there! He got it back. But that was his first thought – somebody stole it.

Somebody just pulled it in off the ice for him.

Yes. They knew his wife was having a baby.

Was he a farmer?

Yes. Actually, he was a genius with radios. He was working on his own radio when radio was invented. He was a real pioneer with radios.

He had 40 acres up there?

Yes.

What did he farm?

Cherries. Grandpa farmed potatoes there.

Your father's father.

Yes.

When did he come over?

Around 1900. It's hard to say. I saw my grandfather once or twice in my life.

Was he from Norway?

No. He was from Denmark. I asked dad, "Dad, how did grandpa ever find this place?" He came from Denmark to Washington Island – a little Island in Lake Michigan. He said, "Your grandfather was a seaman who worked on ships over in Denmark. When he came over here he got a job on a ship sailing the Great Lakes. The captain of the crew of the boat he was on had some property for sale and your grandfather bought it." It happened to be on Washington Island.

I was reading on the abstract and there was a company that built the canal down in Sturgeon Bay. They went from Green Bay waters to Lake Michigan waters out there. For that job they were awarded so much property, and the Washington Island property was part of it. That was part of their payment.

I'll tell you something. There are several lots called canal lots on the island. I have part of one of them, down on Woodland, where Woodland butts into Eastside. It's where Woodland goes off on a diagonal – those 40 acres there.

The same deal.

Yes. And I guess the reason the government sold the property was that they needed money now and then, so certain amounts of property that the government owned were owned under homestead acts or canal acts or something like that. That's what this was.

That's how we got on Washington Island.

So he had trees there.

Oh, yes. He ended up cutting them all down, though, because they taxed you for every tree on your property. And the cherry business was bad because they got the Japanese beetle – the peach borer got active in the cherry trees. They'd get yellow leaves and die off. That and with the tax on every tree he wasn't making any money on it. He cut them all down.

I can't blame him.

There are a lot of trees there now that weren't there when I was a kid. And they're big, tall trees that have grown up since.

I think also, down at the county they were growing cherries. And by the time the ones got ripe up here they'd already broken the market down there.

Yes. They closed down the canneries. That's what happened. In fact, dad was the worst because his were the last ones on the Island to ripen. He was so far up north. It was cold.

He had land not far down from John Quincy Adams – the Elm estate.

I remember him. John Adams was one of my dad's closest friends up here. John Adams used to drive by my father's place in the winter time to see if there was smoke coming out of the chimney. If there wasn't smoke coming out of the chimney, he'd stop in to see if something was wrong. One time it happened that dad was lying on the couch with a broken hip. He was cutting down a tree. It was on somebody's driveway he was taking care of in the wintertime. He had this homemade Jeep and trailer, and he went down to cut the tree down and I guess it came down on top of him. It broke his hip. He was able to unhook the trailer from the Jeep and drive home and just lay down in bed. John Adams found him and got him to the hospital.

John was a good guy.

It was funny. We went there to dinner one time after he brought his wife up to live up there.

Gert was it?

Yes. Gert. So Gert made some cherry pies. She heard a 'ping-ping' on the plate. She forgot to take the pits out of the cherries! A good cherry pie, but you had to be careful you didn't swallow the pits.

John had about 5,000 trees over there; different kinds.

What you were referring to – where Swenson Road comes into Jackson Harbor Road, Agnus Svenson lives on the corner there. And across that intersection, catty-corner, dad had a piece of property that he had a tarpaper shack on. I remember one of the first few times I came up to visit in the summertime – I was just a kid and my mom would leave me for the summer with dad – we lived in that little tarpaper shack. Grandpa was still up and about on the Island with the family on the farm. So when they all moved out to Washington, dad took over the farm.

Is that where Alan Thiele lives now?

I don't know who lives there now. But it was Agnus – Agnes Svenson. He was one of dad's first friends to die. He was tremendously overweight – really overweight. That and Steve Eaton was another close friend of dad's. They used to talk about what kinds of potatoes were growing, what trees were doing well and what trees weren't.

Conan Eaton was the father. He wrote some books on the Island. So after you worked in ceramics ...

I got into being an electrician. I built Subway sandwich shops. I built probably 300-400 Subway sandwich shops.

You wired them up.

Yes. And I did a lot of houses.

So they sent you around the country?

No. Basically in the Chicago area.

For a while they were putting them up two or three at a time.

Yes. We put up 200-300 of them and it was basically in the Chicago area up to the Wisconsin state line, even in Wisconsin just past the state line – up in the Chain-O-Lakes area there.

Had you become a journeyman?

No. He was non-union shop. I wish I was union. I'd have a nice pension today. And I went off on my own eventually.

Down in the city?

Yes. Well, northwest of the city – Cary, Fox River Grove – that area northwest of the city.

Any Danes up there?

We had one guy who came up there all the time – Arthur Knutson. There are a lot of Danes up there.

And Quinn's. That's very interesting. So you worked here until you retired from the electrical business. And you just decided to come up.

Well, I was driving up to visit dad in assisted living in Sturgeon Bay. And I came up on a Friday to visit him, come up here for the weekend and visit him on the way back down again. Eventually I got a place up here. They took my application, so I moved up here.

This is owned by the town?

No. It's owned by the corporation – Velkommen Corporation. I'm on the Board of Directors. Actually the government owns it because they owe so much money. They got a \$400,000 loan to refurbish these places. He's got new carpeting, paint job, counter tops. He's going in and putting in new bathrooms, but he's just starting on the bathrooms today.

It's a nice place.

It's a nice place. They think of everything for you here. The rent is 30% of your income. I live on Social Security, so they're not getting much out of me. That includes electricity, heat, and hot water. I've got a nice garden plot out back.

How far does the property go?

It goes all the way across to that tree line, and all the way up north of here.

It must be about ten acres or so.

I don't know how much an acre is anymore.

Dave McCormack lives here, too?

Yes. And Bob Eldridge, also. He's right next door to me.

So you're surrounded by other vets.

Yes.

So you've been here since ...

I moved here in 2007. I've been here nine years.

It's nice here.

It's great. I couldn't afford to own my own home and live up here as reasonable as it is here.

Well, it's nice that you could join the American Legion post.

It's funny. I was going through some of my old paper work. It almost looked like a discharge from the American Legion from when I was in it in Illinois. I'm a past commander of the service post in Chicago.

Is that on the north side?

It's the whole city.

I'll get those papers to you, Jim. They're a list of what you were in and a disclaimer that you release this information. You can send them to me at home.

You'll miss the cider pressing! Those taffy apples are something else.

I remember one year we were doing it with snow on our shoulders! It will be nicer this year. But I'll get those papers to you and when you get them back to me I'll get the transcription of this interview. You can take a look at it and change anything that got messed up. Then we'll get the final copy made. If you want to send a picture along we can do that. And it will go to the Library of Congress.

With that we'll end.