

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT
Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Theodore G. Hansen

Conducted by Mr. John Gay

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Ted Hansen is telling us of his military career. He is a member of the Gislason-Richter Post 402 of the American Legion on Washington Island, Wisconsin. Now that we've got you introduced, Ted, why don't you go on ahead.

Well, the first time I had heard of the Korean invasion by North Korea, I didn't hardly know where Korea was!

Like the rest of us.

Yes.

I missed being drafted for the Second World War. I missed it by a short time – like a year.

Same with me.

So I didn't get into that. I went to Chicago and worked at Hagen's Fish Market, which was a nice little store and was a new business.

Which Hagan was that?

Bennett and Don were Hagens.

They were from the Island, here?

Yes. Don's wife, Martha, was Jake Ellefson's sister. I knew all of them before I went down there. They were good teachers. They let me do things you wouldn't believe they'd let me do! They'd leave me alone there at night and I was just an 18-year-old kid.

That was pretty good confidence in you. They must have felt they could do it, or they wouldn't have done it.

Yes. So, then, a little less than two years later, my good friend, Chuck Nelson, and I opened a little store.

Was that on Howard Street?

No, that came later. We opened up a store.

In downtown Chicago?

No, it was on the northwest side – Harlem and Foster. Our address was Higgins Road, but we peeked through where Foster was. We ran that for nine months, and we sold it to Don Johnson – Don and his brother – when we sold the store.

He wound up on Ogden, didn't he?

No. He was on Lawrence Ave., and the store is still there. His son owns it now. Anyway, our store isn't there, that we started. They ran it for several years and then Don went on his own. Later Junie closed it. I call him Junie – his name is George Johnson. They were a big part of putting money in our pocket.

Did they bring the fish down from the Island?

There was some. There was more fish caught in Lake Michigan than now. There were lots of chubs, lots of perch and that. Even Chicago had several commercial fisheries.

So you had to take them down by truck, then.

Yes, there was transportation. Now there's no transportation because there's no product. Now, a guy has a box of fish he wants to ship to Chicago, how does he do it? The transportation was great then.

So then you got called up to the service. What year was that?

1950 is when the war started – June 24. In the early fall I already knew I was going into the service.

Were you 18 at that time?

I would have been 19, maybe 20. Yes, I was 20 I think. We negotiated with these guys who were going to buy it, and they bought it. Which I thought might fall through at the last minute. I got kind of worried.

Was Don Johnson younger than you at that time?

He was older. He's about six years older than I.

So he got out of the service from World War II and he was ready to go to work.

He had been working for his dad.

Did his dad have a place down there?

His dad was a commercial fisherman in Waukegan.

So did you enlist here on the Island, or were you drafted?

I was drafted in Chicago.

You wound up at 615 W. VanBuren? Is that where they inducted you?

I don't remember where it was.

It was a big old building?

I imagine it was. And Chuck, my friend with whom I had the store, three months later he was in the service. So we had a short career in business.

How about when you were drafted: Did you take your basic training at Fort Leonard-Wood?

No, I was at Camp Breckenridge.

In Kentucky?

Just into Kentucky from the Illinois border.

Was there any infantry down there at that time?

Yes. That's what I was in. They send everybody who doesn't know anything into the infantry.

We got going in our infantry training. I'll tell you one funny thing that happened, about the second day we were down there. We hadn't even gotten our uniforms yet, and they said – there were about 100 troops there – “Everybody line up outside. We want 50 of the biggest guys available.” No one knew what they were talking about. Well, I was 49th. I was good-sized, but not big. And they marched us off to do work in the kitchen: wash pans, that kind of thing.

They needed big guys for that.

Yeah. I got a big kick out of that.

What time of year was that?

I went in on Valentine's Day – the 14th of February.

So it was still pretty cold, but warmer down there in Kentucky than it was here in Chicago.

Somewhat. The weather was really worse, really. Chicago gets cold and stays cold for a while. When you get down a little south, one day it's 30 and the next day it's 10. One day it's raining and the next day it's snowing.

Anyway, I got a big kick out of that because I was so fooled. But then, in about the sixth week of basic training I got pneumonia. I spent 21 days in the Army hospital. After I got in there and I got full of penicillin or whatever they give you, I felt good. I didn't feel sick; I'd had quite a high temperature.

That's the kind of thing that happened to me as well. Those barracks – people are always coming in and out, the doors are always open.

Anyway, when I got back I had to go into a different unit – the same thing but a different unit.

Did you have to repeat the training, or just part of it?

Not completely over, but where I left off. I suppose there was a little bit of repeat. I did fine there. Then, the outfit I was in first – the company – they all went to Germany. And we graduated from basic training we went to Korea. It wasn't much of a trade-off.

You went the wrong way! So this is now around May or June?

I got out of basic training pretty close to the first of July.

Did you have leave after that, and did you come back to the Island?

Yes. Oh, yes.

Was there a second period of training after that, or did they just ship you over?

No, there was no second training. They needed troops over there.

This was 1950 ...

It was 1951. I went into the Army on Valentine's Day, 1951.

We left from O'Hare field and flew to Seattle, and it took us a week there to get on a boat. I enjoyed my trip on the boat. You get on at Seattle and went up the Puget Sound which was much like Door County. It was rough the first night, but after that it was a real good trip. We landed in Yokahama. We went up to the former Japanese barracks and they issued us our clothes. So when we left there we didn't have any of our dress clothes or anything.

They just wanted to get you over there first.

Yes. Then we went around and down through the ocean ...

The Sea of Japan?

Yes, or something. And down around Pusan. And we came in up by Incheon – way up by Seoul. By that time they had finished the war pretty good. So we got off there. And they took us in on landing barges because the water there was too shallow to take a big troop ship in.

You weren't under fire there? The Koreans weren't there yet?

Oh, yeah. They'd been in and out of there. What happened in the Korean War, the troops got pushed back and forth so much in the early part of the war. That year – the war had been going on a little over a year then – they'd been pushed back and forth so there was hardly a building standing in Seoul and Incheon. There was literally nothing standing. To see pictures of Korea now you wouldn't hardly believe that had happened.

Anyway, we were moving up. We were replacements.

What was the fighting line at that time? Was it north of Incheon?

Yes. It was the 38th Parallel – right where it is today. I was lucky. I missed the heavy fighting.

Earl Davison was there. That was the terrible winter they had.

Was he in that?

Yes.

That was before I got there.

He lost three fingers frozen while he was there.

Anyway, the night before I joined the unit that I was in, we got shelled. We were supposedly five miles behind the front, and we got shelled with artillery. Nothing landed right exactly where we were, but it was going right over our heads.

Have you ever heard? They whistle. But they always say, if you hear the whistle you're safe.

It's when you don't hear anything.

I remember quite a bit of that night because it was real scary. We were sleeping in tents. Fox holes were all around, where we could get into. And three times that night we dove into those fox holes. If you ever want to find out who you are in your mind, something like that makes a Christian out of you in a hurry.

I'll bet it does! Did anybody get hurt?

No. Nothing ever hit right there.

One thing about the service, you don't know what happens five miles from you. They could have been having a lot of trouble but you don't know. We were close to the Turks.

Turks?

Yes. The Turks had quite an army over there – quite a few men. One night they came to visit. This was when I was in my unit. They came to visit. All we had to offer them was bread and water.

They must have felt sorry for you.

They couldn't talk to us because they didn't understand us and we didn't understand them. But we sat in that little – what I call a bunker – room made out of sandbags. But you could stand up in there. We made our own bunks in there out of communication wire we found. We wove it together and actually had bunks in there.

Was that in the fall of 1951?

Yes.

So it hadn't got real cold yet.

No, but it was getting there.

We moved. See, the secret of being in the infantry is not moving. But that's what happens. You move, and you move into an area and you've got to make your own bunkers and stuff. In the wintertime – see, I spent the whole winter there. In the wintertime it's cold.

That's what I hear.

And when your unit moves, if you don't move into a formerly used place it's really quite a thing.

You've got to start over.

Yes. This was the first or second night. It was old – it had been used before. But when we moved in there we didn't know that because it was three or four feet of snow.

Anyway, we got this one bunker cleaned out and we were sleeping there. And there was just room for the length of a guy. Five or six guys slept in there. And you stood two or three hour guard duty. When the guy on the inside – “Johnson or Peterson it's your turn” – we all had to get up and out so the guy could get out.

Were you dug down in dirt?

Yes.

So the ground hadn't frozen yet?

Well, underneath the snow it normally doesn't.

So it snowed before it actually got frosted.

Yes. The hole was there and we had to get the snow out.

Now, were these Korean shells coming over, or were they Chinese – because the Chinese were over there, too?

That I don't know.

It doesn't matter when it's coming at you.

No! You don't see the manufacturer.

So you spent the winter over there. Were you in the field the whole time?

Yes. I was never in a legitimate building the whole winter. But we had it different than the first year. The first year they didn't have the right clothing and it was just terrible. But the time I got there we all had good clothing.

What did that consist of? Did you have a sleeping bag and a blanket as well?

Yes. We had all the things we needed. It was not too bad.

Was there a field hospital nearby in case people got sick?

Oh, yes. I spent a couple of nights there. They took good care of you. I didn't have any real complaints about the service. I think it's the best experience I could ever have had.

Wakes you up in a hurry.

Yes. I understand what soldiers have to go through, and about the wars – the Civil War, the Revolutionary War and all that. You didn't have trucks hauling and stuff then, but you had the same miserable conditions.

If you weren't in the military, it's pretty hard to know what they might have gone through.

Yes. It was a great experience.

Now you were there through 1952?

I was only over there for 12 months.

Then you spent more time in over here in the States?

I got out the 15th of November.

1952?

Yes. Twenty-one months is what I spent. If I had to go to Valentine's Day that would have been two years.

So they recycled your whole group out of there?

Well, I think it was piecemeal.

Now when did the war wind down there? Was it in 1952?

Yes. It had wound down then. By the time I got there it had wound down so that we really didn't get shot at with rifle fire. We were very lucky. But there was always – you could see the enemy across the hills. There was like a hill here or a small mountain, then there'd be a valley. The Korean troops were over here. I was in what they called the 81 mortars. That's used for shooting over the hills. We never really had hand-to-hand fighting.

But you did do some shelling? Some mortars?

Yes. There was always a chance they could start an offense or something. I was about as lucky as you could get.

You have to have a little luck in the service. So you came back to the States. Did you land back in Seattle?

We landed in San Francisco, but we stopped first in ... Pusan is the capital of Korea and that's way down at the south end. Then there's the harbor, but I can't remember what the name of that harbor was. That's where we laid until we got on the boats.

How long did it take you to get back? Were you a couple of weeks on the boat?

Yes. Going over it was quicker because it was a bigger boat. But we landed in San Francisco, and they flew us. We got off the plane and went by barge down the Puget Sound into where you get everybody organized – whatever you call that. And we were in Chicago that night! Then we went to Fort Sheridan.

So that was your release from active duty.

But I didn't get out right then. We had a nice 30-day furlough.

Did you get to come home for the thirty days?

Yes.

Did you have to go back then to get discharged?

Yes. But I got out in November, and this was August.

So you had a chance to get back to the Island to see people. That was a good thing.

Charlotte was more or less waiting for me.

Were you married at that time?

No. We weren't even going together. We had gone together, and the way it worked out she was accepting my invitations.

She was a Hansen.

Yes. This is where she lived.

You're both "on" Hansen's?

No. We're "sen's."

Both of you.

Yes. She was Danish.

And you're Norwegian.

Yes, Norwegian and Icelandic by the way. The name is from Norway.

So you got married when you got out?

We got married the next year.

And then did you go back down to Chicago to run another fish store?

Yes. My brother and sister had opened the Fish Keg, which is the one we have now.

That's on Howard?

Yes. That store was a better store than what I had; a busier store.

You're in a good spot.

Yes. We've done real good there all these years.

That was in 1953?

They opened in March, 1951, while I was in the service.

So you just joined them down there.

Then, when I got out, I went in with my sister and brother and her husband. We were going to have two stores, but then my older brother drowned.

When was that?

1953.

How did that happen?

There were so many deer on Detroit Island that they organized about 50 guys to chase the deer off. He was hauling them out there and went too far south off the east side of the Island. He hit a rock or something and got knocked in the water.

This was before it froze over?

Yes. It was the 13th of December. It was only six months after I got married.

He was an older brother?

Yes. He was seven years older than me. Ray is three years older, my brother I went into the business with was five years older. Rich was seven years older.

That's a shame.

He had a mink farm, out where Willy Clayton lives. He ran that for several years and then the price went haywire on mink and he came back to Chicago. A couple of years later he came to the store to work – he'd worked somewhere else at first. We did pretty good. By that time my sister and I were running the store. Then my sister retired and I had the store by myself.

You and Charlotte ran it then for a while.

Yes. It's still running. Monty, my son-in-law, is running the store. It's been just a wonderful store.

You've been there going on 60 years.

We had our 60th year. We had a big celebration for our 50th, but we didn't do anything for 60. It got by before we realized it was coming!

Those things happen. So you've kind of retired back to the Island, here.

Yes. I've been retired for sixteen years. We bought, when Charlotte's dad died and her mother moved away. She was going to sell the place so I bought it. She called it and said, "Ted, do you want to buy the farm?" I never even asked Charlotte. I said, "I sure do."

It's such a great farm, too. You've got your cow back?

Yes.

Is there anything about your service that sticks in your mind, Ted?

I made friends.

Do you ever keep in touch with any of those guys?

Yes. The one guy has been up here a couple of times.

Where does he live?

He lives east of Los Angeles. He was practically raised as my twin. My dad died when I was eleven, and Harold's dad died when he was twelve. He went to a one-room school out in the country and that's what I did.

Was that the one up here on the hill?

No, down where the Gunderson girls live.

Is that the store?

Yes, but they added on to it. They had a hardware store there – Roger did. But Harold and I are exactly the same age. I was born May 5 and he was born May 10.

Did you meet in the Army?

Oh, yes. We met in basic training, in the second unit. I've thought so many times I was lucky when I got sick and got back in the unit. The reason we went overseas together and were in the same company and everything was his last name was Herbert. And mine was Hansen. So when they pick off five guys we were always in the same group. So we were together the whole time. Anyway, he was like a twin.

What did he do when he got out of the service?

He was a cement man, a brick layer I guess. But he really wasn't a brick layer; he was more stone.

Dorothy's father was a brick layer – a stone mason.

His father was a farmer.

Well, Ted, I want to thank you for spending this time with us.

I like to tell my story.

It's a good story, and it's nice to hear the good stories and not just the bad ones.

Some guys can't stand to be regimented, but that didn't bother me. When the sergeant says to get up, you got up.

And, as you say, it helps you to develop as a man and learn what discipline is, and the importance of certain things.

I never expected to go in the service. There was nothing to make me think I was going to go into the service until they invaded there. It was such a surprise how my life took a different turn.

And quite a few guys came from the Island, too. Thanks, again, for your time.

That's quite a thing you're doing there.

I think it's going to be a good thing for the Post and for the military archives in Congress. It's a very worthwhile thing. We'll have a story here for the Post. You see the pictures, but you don't know what they did.

Are you going to write this?

What I do is send this down. It will be put on paper by a typist who will listen to the audio, then type it up. It will be sent back here and you're going to see if I made an error or if there's a typo or something like that. When you get it all corrected we'll send it back down and the final copy will be sent to the Library of Congress along with an audio of this recording. You'll get a copy and the archives up here will get a copy.

It's quite involved.

Yes. And it's a pretty neat thing. Thanks again.