

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT
Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Donald C. Kieffer

Conducted by Mr. John Gay

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I'm at Don Kieffer's home on Washington Island on Green Bay Road, and this is October 6, 2010. We're going to ask Don about his experiences in the military.

Entering Military Service

So, Don, could you give us an idea of what went on prior to your being in the military?

I was a high school student. I graduated from high school on June 2, 1943. I was inducted into the Army on June 6, 1943, in Camp Grant, Illinois, which is now Rockford Municipal Airport.

I had basic training at Camp Croft, South Carolina, which is no longer a military camp either. After basic training, I had previously taken tests to become part of what was called the ASTP: Army Specialized Training Program.

From basic training I went to college at the University of Connecticut in Storrs, Connecticut. While I was there, in a training accident, I crushed the first lumbar vertebrae in my back and I ended up in military hospitals at Fort Devens, Massachusetts and Schick General Hospital in Clinton, Iowa. I was in the hospital until June, 1944.

That's a long time!

It was a long time. I had a full body cast. It was what it was.

[Don adds the following to his account:

In November 1943 the Army cancelled the ASTP program that I was involved in. The need for more soldiers in both theatres of war, but especially in Europe led to this decision.

As fate would have it, many of the men I was serving with at the U of C ended up in European battles including the "Battle of the Bulge", and many were wounded or killed. In conclusion, I believe the injury to my back saved my life.]

Duty Assignments

After that I was assigned to limited duty. I was assigned to the first parachute training regiment in Fort Benning, Georgia. I was at Fort Benning, Georgia for a little over a year. In July, 1945 I was shipped to Camp Stoneman, California for duty overseas somewhere. I don't know the exact dates that we shipped out of California. We were on a troop transport when the armistice was signed in Tokyo Bay, which was in late August, 1945.

We sailed into Tokyo Bay probably two or three weeks, or a month after that. We sat there in the Bay for about a week waiting for assignment. Then we sailed to Korea. I was the quartermaster of the company, and we were a military government group. We

went into Korea to help the Korean people establish civilian government. Korea was a Japanese colony for forty years prior to the end of World War II. When we went into Korea, all the Japanese military were shipped back to Korea. In our group we had a lawyer, a doctor, an engineer. We had people who could help establish a civilian government.

Were you in Seoul?

No. In Korea I went into the port of Pusan, which is the port for Seoul. Then, by rail, we went up to Kwang Ju in the mountains. Cold! Oh, my God, it was cold. It was 0° temperatures all the time. So I was there.

[Don adds the following to his account

“It took almost a month to get our company’s gear off the ship, loaded onto a railroad car and travel from Pusan to Kwang Ju. The day I arrived there the company was barracked in a former Japanese hotel. In the basement was a large stone crock about 4 ft in diameter. This was the bathing place for all hotel guests. A wood fire was built under the crock which was filled with water, to heat by evening for the guests’ bathing. That night I was number 156 to bathe in a tub mostly filled with soap etc. After 30 days without a shower it felt mighty good. The hotel was infested with lice and bedbugs. We moved out of there to a building that looked like a school house. Large square rooms with a single light bulb that was not bright enough to read by. No toilet facilities, so we used slit trenches covered with a tent. Our engineers recovered an old fire engine with a wood boiler. By connecting this to an army water tank they provided us with hot water for showering.”]

Toward the end of the year the Army came out with a program that if you reenlisted for a year and a half, they would ship you back to the United States, give you a 90-day leave, and you would be reassigned to something else. I was low on the totem pole as far as the number system was concerned, so I reenlisted.

{Don deletes the following: I was shipped back to the United States, had 90 days furlough. Then I was in Fort Knox, then Fort Belvoir, Virginia. **and inserts the following:**

I returned to the United States on a worn-out PA “personnel attack” ship. With just one boiler working, we were making only 6 knots per hour. It took over 30 days to get from Korea to Seattle. While sailing in the North Pacific Ocean the weather turned very bad. We were hit by a typhoon which lasted several days. The ship listed 46 degrees and hung in that position for over 2 days. Everyone was praying mightily for our safety. In spite of the weather no one became ill or seasick. When I shipped out of San Francisco headed west, men were heaving over the rail before we got beyond the Golden Gate Bridge.

After my 90 day furlough was over I reported for duty at Fort Knox, KY. I was assigned to the Engineers school at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. }

I was in Fort Belvoir, Virginia to take some training in what was called then the sniper scope. It was the Army's first electronic night vision scope. It mounted on a carbine. I went there to take training on how to repair these things. Then I was assigned to Camp McCoy, Wisconsin for winter training exercises to use all this equipment under winter conditions, and see what would work and what wouldn't work. While I was at Camp McCoy I lived in a two-man mountain tent out in the wilderness, three out of four weeks every month.

Temperatures down to -30⁰ in a tent. Every morning we would wake up and the bottom of our tent would be full of water from our breath – condensation. We'd let it freeze during the day, then we'd go in and break it up, throw the ice out, put our sleeping bags back in – which were wet – climb in a wet sleeping bag, night after night.

Almost worse than being in Korea!

Oh, yeah.

What did you do in Korea?

In Korea I was the quartermaster for the company. I was responsible for the company's equipment and making sure that everybody had whatever they needed in the way of equipment.

Did the Koreans come to you with open arms after being dominated by the Japanese for so long?

I would say I did not personally experience that.

Were they too shy?

I think so. You've got to understand. Japanese as rulers are very cruel people; very cruel. I did not experience any welcome by the Korean people, and I could probably understand why – probably just because of their past experience with rulers. Their whole generation had not lived under a democratic government. So they would be in doubt as to what was going to happen. Obviously I think we did one heck of a good job.

When you look at South Korea and how that country has turned out as a republic, and the people there have freedom just like we're supposed to have here.

And even in Japan, for that matter, they did a pretty good job.

Yes. After the War.

Well, we also were in Japan. We had people in Japan helping them get their government underway. This great industrialist, he went into Japan and taught them how

to create industries that were greatly productive. He had ideas which he tried to sell to companies here in the United States, and they rejected his ideas. So he went to Japan.

I think it's Deming: W. Edwards Deming. There's a statue to him in Tokyo, I think.

That might be. It starts with a 'D,' I know that.

But he was very successful in getting the Japanese to listen to his ideas. And the result of that, we all are aware of. I mean, where did all of our automobiles come from for years and years, and electronics and everything else.

Yes. It was amazing.

So you were in the service from the middle of 1943 until ...

April of 1947.

Discharge and Return to Civilian Life

So you almost had four years. And where were you discharged? Oh, didn't you go back, after McCoy, to Japan?

No. The program at McCoy ended in the middle of April, 1947. I was due to be discharged in June, anyway. So I just asked my company commander if he could get me discharged. So he did. They said there was no reason to assign me somewhere else.

They didn't need you anymore.

No.

So you came out at McCoy?

Yes. I was discharged out of McCoy.

And what happened after that?

I went back to Dixon, Illinois where my parents and my wife's parents lived. I got married in the summer of 1946, so I had a wife while I was at McCoy. We had a little apartment in Sparta, Wisconsin. One week a month I could go home at night, and the rest of the time I was living out in the field.

I even had thoughts of reenlisting in the Army, making a career of it, until Camp McCoy (chuckles). That cured me real fast!

Reflections and Lasting Effects

What did the military mean to you? Do you feel it changed you any way or reinforced anything?

Well, the discipline of military life was fine with me, because I've always been a pretty self-sufficient person. When I was four years old my mother had to go to work in a factory to help support us – my grandmother came to live with us and my mother had to help support grandma. So she went to work in a factory, and my father was working in a factory, so most of my time I was a free spirit. I was in control and out of control of my life most of my time.

But my parents were very strict. I had a lot of rules. You get to know, after you get slapped on the side of the head a couple of times, you get to know what's right and what's wrong. And you just do what's right.

What happened in the training exercise that hurt your back? Was that a freak thing?

Yes. I was grappling with another guy. We were doing wrestling training and I was grappling with another fellow. He was quite a bit bigger than I was. I got my foot hooked under a mat and couldn't get away and he just kept coming at me. We both went down on my tailbone – 450 pounds on my tailbone – and it crushed my first lumbar vertebrae. The pain was excruciating.

I'll bet it was. So they let it heal, then, by putting you in a cast?

Yes. They put you in a cast. Actually, to cast me they put me in a steel frame like this, and I was bent way back. I was bent back and wrapped in a plaster cast which I wore for six months.

Never taking it off.

It was on all the time. And the idea was they opened up the vertebrae and let it heal – immobilize it and let it heal.

Did you have any duties while you were in the cast?

No, just walking around the hospital. I played a lot of pinochle (chuckles).

You got good at it.

I don't know about good, but I played a lot of it, as did everyone else there.

So when they took the cast off, that's when they started to reassign you to other duties?

After the cast was off for about 90 days, and I had physical therapy during that time in the hospital. And then the hospital gave me a steel frame that went up my back

and had a big strap around my belly, and straps under my arms, to hold my back in shape. I wore that frame for a while and finally got tired of it and threw it away.

Any lingering problems?

No.

So what they did worked.

What they did worked. Yes.

And throughout my whole life I've had back problems to varying degrees. Some of it was brought on by what happened in the military, and some of it was brought on by the work I was doing.

So when you came out of the Army in the middle of 1947, we were beginning to recover as a nation from depression and from war, what did you get into then?

My wife's folks lived in a duplex {in Dixon, Illinois}. And their next door neighbor and another guy had a little sign business in Polo, Illinois. He offered me a job at the minimum wage, 75¢ an hour. At that point I didn't have a vision of anything more, so I went to work for him, and learned the trade as best I could from them – from Ray and John. I worked for them for about five years and then went in business with two other guys and we had a sign business for a couple of years. Then our partnership broke up.

Then I moved to Louisville, Kentucky and worked for a sign company there. I went to Kansas City and worked for a sign company in Kansas City for five years.

Then I moved to Chicago and worked for Federal Sign and Signal in Chicago for about a year-and-a-half before I got fired. The president, Bill Scott, he didn't like me when I was hired. This was in the late 1950's. Federal is an old company and had a lot of old employees. They needed a change. Their manufacturing methods and materials and a lot of stuff, and I was hired to try to do that. But the resistance of all the old people was ...

Too great.

Yes. Well, the result of that was that eventually Federal went out of the sign business because they refused to change. Bill Scott called me up to his office on a Monday morning. He said, "Kieffer, I don't like you. I didn't like you when you came here. I want you to just clean out your desk and leave."

Well, that wasn't too subtle.

No. He said they would pay me a month's pay. I'd get a check for the next two weeks and then I'd be done. So that was it.

I got fired twice in my lifetime. The other time I got fired from a sign company in Louisville because the man who was my boss – I worked in their design and pattern

department – one afternoon said, “Don, we’ve got to go over to the electrical workers business office; we’ve got to go over there and talk to them about something and I want you to come along.” So I went along. I had no idea what was going to go on. This person had had some kind of an altercation with the electricians that I wasn’t aware of. What he thought I was going to be was his stoolpigeon. So he would make a statement and turn and look at me and say, “Isn’t that right, Don?” And I said I didn’t know anything about what he was talking about, and I did that throughout the whole conversation because I didn’t. I couldn’t back up his statements. He was a liar and he wanted me to back up his statements and make me a liar, too. So I refused. The next day when I went to work, the owner of the company called me in and said, “Don, Pool came in and said it was either him or you who has to leave. He’s more valuable to me than you are. Good bye.” He gave me a check for a month’s pay.

So after the second firing you went into business for yourself.

I went into business for myself in Sheboygan, Wisconsin in 1959. And I retired from that business in 1984. My oldest son took it over. He ran the business for 25 years and retired two years ago.

It turned out to be pretty successful.

Yes.

Did you cover mainly Wisconsin?

We covered the whole United States. To start out with I was just a small sign company doing business within a 75 mile range, or something like that. In the late 1970’s my son, Steve, came in the business with me and we hired people and started going after national accounts. We built a sizeable manufacturing facility. I think today they’ve got about 200,000 square feet of buildings. We manufactured signs for companies like ShopKo, Best Buy, Cub Foods, Walgreen drug stores.

{Don adds the following:

The Person who managed Federal Sign and Signal sign division, as it was dying, applied for a job with Kieffer and Co. Inc and worked for Kieffer for over 20 years. His name was Billy Brown, a very likeable person. As Federal was gone, he brought several national accounts to Kieffer, which are still being served by the company. }

Those are pretty good accounts.

Yes. We had a lot of national accounts.

Is it still under the name Kieffer?

Yes. Kieffer & Company, Inc.

Well, Don, it sounds as though your experiences were not too hurtful except for your back. And you came out of it all right.

Yes. You're talking about a time in my life when ... War is hell. And we want to win. There's no two ways about it. And the insignificant things you do seem to be that when they occur. But when you take what everybody's doing it becomes the big picture because of everybody's effort in working together. The military was a good experience for me.

Well, you came out of it all right and that's a blessing.

Yes. I'm still around!

At the age of 85.

85 and three-quarters.

Well, Don, thanks a lot for your time. I appreciate it.