

Today is Thursday, June 26, 2014. This interview is being conducted at the home of Robert Magnuson. My name is Fran Prokop and I am speaking with Robert M. Magnuson who served in the Marines and is a veteran of the Korean Conflict. Bob learned of the Veterans' History Project through me and he has kindly consented to participate in the National Archives Veterans' History Project. Here is his story:

Bob, when and where were you born?

Chicago, Illinois, South Shore Hospital on November 4, 1930.

What were your parents' occupations?

My mother and father were both 100% Swedish. My mother was a housewife and my father was a superintendent at the 96-inch plate mill in U.S. Steel.

How many brothers and sisters did you have?

I had five brothers. My father had six sons and the last one was me. When the nurses came out and said, "Mr. Magnuson, you have a daughter." And he was overjoyed. And then the nurses came back and said "we made a mistake." How in the world could you make a mistake –

Like that - Were any of your brothers in the service?

Yes, my brother Spencer was in the Second World War; he was in the Army and he was a Military Policeman. He guarded the Japanese families that they thought were dangerous to our country.

Was that in California?

California.

And is your brother deceased now?

Yes.

What did you do before entering the service?

I was in college and then I dropped out of college 'cuz I ran out of money and I started working at the U.S. Steel as a Babbitt assistant – and then the draft called me up.

What kind of assistant did you say?

The Babbitt assistant – actually that is – we made bearings for armatures. And that was similar to lead, but they called it Babbitt –an alloy containing tin, copper and antimony.

No family members are currently serving in the service?

No.

How did you enter the service – drafted or enlisted.

I was an eight-year gator – and that was through the draft; you had to serve 8 years. When I went into the draft – they called me up in October – and I told them that we had our wedding plans for November, so they gave me a – an extension. And my wife and I – Gerry – got married on November 10, 1951. Little did I know that was the Marine Corps birthday. I left for San Diego November 28.

How did you – what mode of transportation was that?

That was by the train.

So you went from Chicago to –

To Los Angeles – Camp Pendleton.

Always best to mention names. Okay, departure for training camp and early days of training – first of all, why did you choose this specific branch of service?

I chose the Marines because I always wanted to be a Marine from my teenage – and I thought if I had to go to fight, and hopefully not kill too many people, I wanted to be trained by them, ‘cuz they are one of the best.

But usually when you’re drafted they take you into the Army – so did you tell them you specifically wanted –

When I went to the draft board, that was interesting –they lined us up and they said – the Marine Sergeant came forward and said, “we need 12 guys for the Marines; who wants to volunteer.” I went into the draft with two of my friends and they said we’ll go wherever you go. Well, I stepped forward and they didn’t step forward. So I and another person volunteered for the Marines. And the Sergeant said, “Okay, you, you, you, you and you are Marines” – and that’s how he got his quota for the Marines.

Oh, wow, because I know you have to volunteer for that – if you’re drafted you go into the Army.

Right.

Okay, so you left by train for Los Angeles, Camp Pendleton. You got to Camp Pendleton – how were your early days of training - how was boot camp?

That was fine. We were trained with special weapons, all sorts of weapons – how to strip, load and fix them. We were trained in amphibious landing and also in gas chambers without any gas masks.

What did this involve? How long were you there at Camp Pendleton?

Actually we stayed only two months for boot camp training and then we were shipped overseas.

Why was that? Was the war accelerating or something?

They needed more American forces over there to help turn the tide.

Okay. And when you say you were shipped overseas – you went from Los Angeles to where?

We went to Okinawa – Japan first. We landed in Japan first; stopped over there and had a day's leave before we left for Seoul, Korea.

On your journey over, do you remember what ship you were on?

No, it was a Liberty Ship and at that time they asked for volunteers for certain duties and I volunteered for Officers' Mess. And also, it was very interesting – the Marine Company that I was with were helping train an Army Company on how to field strip an M-1 rifle – and I thought that was very poorly done by the Army.

So were you a part of that?

Yes.

You volunteered for that?

Yes. And I didn't get seasick going over because I was in Officers' Mess and I had to think about other things where a lot of people got seasick going over.

Because they had nothing to do, right?

Yes.

You were busy –

And I made sure I was in the top bunk when I got out because I didn't have to worry about anybody getting sick –

Right, over you – ha, ha.

Right.

How many bunks were there – like 4 or 5?

There was 4.

And how was the trip over – was it rough seas?

It wasn't that rough. We didn't run into too much bad weather.

You were lucky. I've heard a lot of stories.

Yes.

In two months at Camp Pendleton did you receive any specialized training? Or was it just a regular boot camp?

Well, the specialized training was all weapons, BARs, M-1s, carbines, amphibious landing, gas chamber training.

Okay. And was that – along with field activities was any classroom teaching involved?

No. And also karate training – and hand-to-hand combat – with bayonets.

Okay. How did you adapt to military life – the physical regimen, the barracks and food and so on?

Well, the first thing I had to was the haircuts, because when you first got into camp, they handed out your gear and that, they took you to the barbershop and shaved every bit of hair off your head.

You're bald –

-- which I have a picture showing my I.D.

We were talking about adapting to military life - how did you find it?

I found it pretty strenuous - we went on many 25-mile hikes with packs on our backs and weapons and obstacle course every day for two months. And then after the two months we were ready with – for going overseas.

So what time would your day start in the morning - in training now.

Four a.m. in the morning.

You had breakfast?

The D.I. issued us out loud and clear - we knew who it was, every day. And then we went for - running first, and then came back in for breakfast.

Okay, and what did you do after breakfast?

After breakfast we started obstacle training, amphibious landing training, and gas chamber training.

And then it was time for lunch or was that dinner?

Well, yes, we were ready for lunch. When I went into the service I was a very finicky eater. When I got out of the Marines, I could eat everything, including the plate.

Did you gain weight in the service?

When I went into the service I weighed 210 pounds. When I got out of the service I weighed 157 pounds.

You're kidding – really? Wow and you're a tall man – how tall are you?

Six-one.

Wow, that was pretty slender for a 6'1" person –

Yes.

What do you attribute that to –

Just the exercise – training and lifestyle of the Marines.

You still were a good eater – I mean –

Actually a strict diet. When you're overseas the only thing we really had was C-rations.

Oh, I see.

Except at Thanksgiving – we got a turkey dinner.

So you adapted to military life well – you didn't have any problems with it – the barracks and the food, and the social life.

None whatsoever.

Did you have any kinds of sports activities? Were you on any teams or anything?

When you got to Korea –

In Korea there was no sports whatsoever – just fighting the war.

It's surprising – some guys –

-- not when you're one mile from the front lines. We were just north of the Imjim River.

We're going to wartime service – where did you serve most of your time?

I served 11 months in South Korea. And I had one year and two days of foreign service; it was all in Korea; the rest was in the States.

What part of South Korea are you talking about?

Well, when we hit Korea, we hit Seoul, Korea and immediately went to the front lines to a Forward ASP – and to break it down in common language – Forward Ammunition Supply Point – which was all sorts of ammunition that we supplied to the front lines.

So that was your job; you supplied ammunition to the front lines.

Correct.

And you did that for 11 months.

Eleven months. The Marines were not on a point system like the Army was. Depending on where you were in the Army, in the front, in the middle or in the rear, You got certain points. Marines never got any points. They were scheduled to stay one solid year in Korea, and on the 11th month we got R & R -- if you made it. My warrant officer came and talked to me and said, "Bob, are you ready for R & R?" I said, "No, sir, I'm not." He said "Why, are you refusing it?" I said, "Yes, I am. I'm married and I want to go home with nothing that is – disease or anything else."

Right.

So he came back and said get your bag packed; you're going home – after 11 months.

Wow. So you were in the service for two years?

I was in active service for two years and I served Reserve for the other six. And I wasn't called back up in six years. I got an Honorable Discharge at the end of my eight years.

Actually, you were mostly near the front lines so what was involved in your duties of getting supplies to the men who were on the front lines

I was stationed at a Forward ASP – the Forward Ammunition Supply Point -- we supplied all sorts of ammunition to our front lines – grenades, rifle bullets, 4.5 rockets, Howitzers – and the trucks – the six-plys would come back from the front lines and we'd load them up. We were known as “ammo humpers” – throwing ammunition on the decks of these trucks. And the worse time was the first of each month because that's when the draftees – new drafts came in. So that's when the North Koreans would hit us hard with Howitzer shells and mortars. Thank goodness they never knew where we were located and our front lines protected us pretty well.

So your job was basically get the ammunition, load it on the truck and someone drive it – drivers drive it to the front lines. They would unload it and come back empty –

That's right.

-- and reload it again.

Just constantly come back and forth.

So that was 2 or 3 or several times a day you had to do that.

Yes, absolutely.

And what were your emotions related to combat; did you witness any casualties – American casualties or destruction of homes or property – or was this the jungle?

No, it wasn't. It was a cleared area of rice fields; that's where we built the ammo dump and everything. But, we had – attached to us, a first Lieutenant and a Sergeant who were ammunition technicians that removed fields that were mined. And we had one in back of us, and it was a butterfly field where they were dropped by our planes. So they went back to clear this field for us and all of a sudden we heard a loud explosion and we figured it was the Lieutenant and the Sergeant – or some accident happened. So the big bad Marines dressed up with their ammunition and went back there, carefully walking through this butterfly field, and then we found our Sergeant and Lieutenant. They had lost their respect for ammunition and they had piled up these things in a stack and it blew up. We took back our Lieutenant and Sergeant in our dungaree jackets in pieces.

Oh my God. Wow. So, you did not see – other than those two casualties – what other casualties did you witness – any foreign casualties?

The only time we saw foreign casualties is when we went out on patrol just to make sure there was no infiltrators getting close to our dump. And we saw where our American planes had dropped napalm and scorched the whole area – that's where we saw burned-up bodies.

Did you do anything with those bodies or just leave them there?

No, we just left them. One of the things that the North Koreans would do was use our telephone wire to rig bobby traps – and they would do this with “Bouncing Betsies. Bouncing Betsies would only go as high as your waist so you know then what they would hit.

How about fellas that you met in the service. Did you stay friends with them or keep in contact with them afterwards?

There was the Four Ms - we became very familiar with each other. The Four Ms were Mitchell, Martinelli, Meisner and Magnuson – and we stayed buddies all the way – shipping across. And once we hit Seoul, Korea on shore, we all went our different ways and I never was able to contact any of them.

So you never had contact with them afterwards.

No.

How did you stay in touch with family and friends back home. What were communications like – was it just mail, written letters and packages from home or were there telephone conversations?

We had no telephone conversations whatsoever. And I wrote my wife twice a week and those letters were censored going back – and my wife would send me different packages and letters coming back.

How long did it take for a letter to reach you from home?

It would probably take a week or two.

One or two weeks.

Yes.

During the second world war it would take a month sometimes.

Yes.

How about packages – about the same amount of time?

Uh, about the same amount of time. In fact the whole time over there I only got about four packages.

Were there any recreational or off-duty pursuits?

Not overseas; no ma'am. It was strictly war games.

You were strictly doing war business there.

Right.

Of course the war didn't end when you came home; your enlistment was up and you returned home. You said you were offered R & R but you didn't take it then you came to the United States for lease.

Correct.

And when was that? Do you remember, like month and year?

Let's see - I went over there in '51; I got back in early '52 and I was stationed at Camp – Quantico, Virginia –

Wait a minute – after you came home and were on furlough you went back and were stationed at Quantico.

Quantico, for the rest of my two-year active – which was about eight months.

So you were actually discharged from Quantico ?

Not discharged – it was sort of a discharge – I didn't really get fully discharged until after the eight years. The only thing we did in Quantico is play golf.

Well, there you are, recreational pursuits –

Right, but that was back in the States.

So you had no real mission or anything in Quantico – why were you there?

Rehabilitation – to get back to understanding civil life – civilian life.

Yeah, readjustment. What is the highest rank that you achieved in the service?

Corporal. I was offered Sergeants' stripes if I would re-up in Korea and I said no way. I wanted to get back with my wife.

When you did return home from Korea, was it by ship also.

Yes, a Liberty Ship. And we went under the Golden Gate Bridge and landed at Treasure Island.

During the Viet Nam war people came and went by plane; during WWII it was strictly by ship – trains and buses – in this country. How was the return trip – any problems?

The return trip was a little rough and a lot of people got sick. And the only thing I ate on the way home was oranges and bread to keep the stomach down–

When you were in Korea during your 11 months there, what was your diet like? What did you eat?

C-rations.

C-rations only, that's it?

That's where I learned to drink coffee. They kept us busy for 16 o 18 hours –

You were not a coffee drinker prior to that time?

I was not a coffee drinker. And I tried smoking cigarettes because that was one of our rations that they gave us – so I traded that off for two-point beer.

Okay. Your readjustment to civilian life – after Quantico – how did that work? Did you go back to your previous job?

No, I really didn't have a job at the time. I was looking for one. And my wife wanted me to be a salesman for Quaker Oats - so I bought three suits – that didn't work out so I ended up applying for the Edison Company and Illinois Bell. I finally went with Illinois Bell.

I used to work for Illinois Bell too – years ago. What did you do for Illinois Bell?

I was a frameman – my basic job was running wires in the central office – run wires from one point to another – to a telephone number and a point switch and that actually connected your telephone number to the equipment in the central office.

I see. I see. Do you belong to any veterans' organizations today?

Yes, I do. I belong to VFW Post 12059 here in Carillon and Jim Singler is our Commander. And I also belong to the Korean War Veterans' Association. That's how I got the notice about the trip to Korea.

Right, we'll go into that – we haven't covered - we're still in Quantico – Then did you – you yourself registered to stay in the Reserves?

No, I was still in the Reserves.

You were just automatically put in the Reserves?

Automatically - it was an automatic eight-year gator.

Okay, automatic eight-year gator. What did that involve? You were out of Quantico – tell me about the Reserves.

Well, the Reserves for the six years, you could volunteer to go to meetings, which I did not volunteer to go. Or you could just stay, you know, stable, as not going to meetings. And for six years – I was not called back up like the veterans are now – to Afghanistan.

Right, right. But did you have to serve one weekend every two months or something like that?

No, I did not.

So you had no actual duties –

That's right.

Or didn't have to go anyplace during those six years –

That's right.

You were just "on call" but they never called you –

That's right, I was on call.

So you were able to pursue your regular job –

Yes, absolutely.

With no interruptions.

Right.

Okay. All right, that's different; that's the first time I heard that kind of service.

Right.

Have you had contact with your fellow veterans over the years – anybody that you served with –

No, none whatsoever.

No contact. And then you would say your adjustment to civilian life worked out okay?

Well, one night when we were sleeping, my wife and I, I woke up and I grabbed her by the throat and started squeezing her throat, and she started screaming – she said, “Bob, Bob, wake up!” And she finally got me awake – she said “Why did you do that?” “I thought you were a rat.”

Oh, my God.

Because rats were running through our bunkers and we would kill ‘em with the bayonets on our rifle – and that still stuck in my mind. But that was the only incident – and I finally got rid of that.

Well, my goodness, it’s to be expected – people – it’s a traumatic experience you go through.

Right.

Bob lives here in Carillon as do I, and that’s how I talked him into this interview. Bob has several commendations and letters. Bob has gone back to Korea with his son. We’ll be talking about that now – since this happened for anniversaries. Would you tell me, first of all, what kind of commendations or awards did you receive?

Well, we were there for the 60th Anniversary. We got a Thank You – United States of America from the Republic of Korea. Also got a letter of appreciation from the President of the Republic of Korea - the document is Korean on one side and the other side is in English .

What is the President’s name? These documents are all signed.

The President’s name is Lee – M-Y-U-N-G – B-A-K. He is the President of the Republic of Korea.

Thank you.

And the other one says – the Ambassador for Peace – the Official Proclamation of Robert M. Magnuson – from Kim Yang – the Minister – Patriots and Veterans Affairs of the Republic of Korea.

Bob has also provided me with two original photographs that will be included; they are photos taken in June 2010 when he returned for this reunion – photos of the 38th Parallel today with a North Korean guard and a South Korean guard. Then there is a photo of himself with South Korean Marines - along with Bob.

I also got a Certificate of Appreciation to Corporal Robert M. Magnuson, U.S. Marine Corps, from the Secretary of Defense, Chuck Haegel.

Is that dated?

There is no date on it.

I thought I saw 2010 when I looked at that.

It was the 60th Anniversary – 2010 through 2013, and the Korean War was 1950 to 1953.

Right, so these are the 60th Anniversary mementos and you made that trip to Korea on your own, right?

I went there with my son, Mark and his wife, E.J., who is Korean, and my grandson, Jason, and myself. And the Korean government – Korean Marines paid for my full trip, air fare and the trip –

The Korean government paid for your trip?

Yes. Korea is the only nation that I know that appreciated NATO and all the countries that served to pull them out of the stress they were in. I also obtained a Korean flag – and I had all the guys I was in the company with at the Forward ASP sign it - and it's a nice memento.

Yes, signed by your buddies.

And then I also have a copy of the propaganda that they dropped on us; it was all in Korean, because we had a Korean company of Marines that was assigned to our company.

So they would be able to translate that for you–

Right.

So you know it was all propaganda.

Right absolutely.

And that's an original too.

Right.

Did you get any service medals – Bob has a souvenir display case holding his medals and he will describe them now.

The medals I earned while in service in Korea was the Korean Service Medal with three battle clusters, the National Defense Service Medal, United Nations Service Medal, and the 50th Korean War Anniversary – to Korean War Veterans, and the 60th Korean War Anniversary. Korean War and Korean Service Veterans Badge – and the Korean War is known as the war that was forgotten. Navy Unit Commendation, Navy Presidential Unit Citation, Korean Presidential Unit Citation, ROK Korean War Service Medal.

Right. They don't even call it a war; they call it the Korean Conflict.

The Korean War started as a police action. It was finally changed by President Eisenhower to a war, and the war has never been ended; it's a truce now.

Right, because it's still going on today.

Yes. Well, there's no conflict; it's settled. There's sabre-rattling but that's only because of the young son in North Korea.

Right, right.

He gets things stirred up.

Looking back, how did your wartime experience affect your life, as a person, as a man.

Before I went into the service I had all civilian attitudes, and basically boot camp with the Marines were to eliminate complete civilian attitudes and think as a Marine. When you're confronted with something you do something about it. So what the Marines taught me was how to make decisions and strict discipline – because that's the only way you can survive in war.

And those are lessons you've kept the rest of your life, right?

Yes, they have carried me through.

So your life lessons learned from the military were strict discipline –

Yes, absolutely –

And how to make decisions – if you don't learn it in school you learn it in the military.

That's exactly right. You have to learn to find out what is the right way to go and to analyze it first before you actually jump off (inaudible) the wagon?

And what's important and what isn't important.

The most thing is teamwork; teamwork is really important because that's what you have to do to protect your buddy's backside.

Right, right. Well, okay, is there anything else you'd like to add?

No, I don't think so at this time.

Well, you'll have an opportunity because I'm going to type this up and we can always add something to it if something comes to mind later on, you can let me know. I appreciate very much your giving me this interview. Thank you very much for your service to our country.

It was my pleasure.

Thank you.

Actually, my duty and honor. Semper Fi.

Thank you, Bob.

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