

INTERVIEW

Robert G Arensdorf

YEAR

2005

GRAY COUNTY ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

NAME: Robert G Arensdorf

DATE: November 28, 2005

PLACE: Ensign, Kansas

INTERVIEWER: Joyce Suellentrop

PROJECT SERIES: Veterans Oral History Project for Gray County

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION:

Robert Arensdorf spent his whole life on the farm near Ensign, Kansas, except for the 13 months he spent in the signal corps in the army. He was drafted and received his physical in Kansas City and worked in supply in Louisiana and North Carolina. While in the service he had scarlet fever, which left him with a heart murmur so he was never sent overseas. Not a drinker, gambler or smoker, he sent most of the salary he received home to his parents. After returning to Ensign he farmed until a tractor accident caused him to retire.

SUBJECTS DISCUSSED: Entering the service and training and his life in camps with other men. The dirty thirties were discussed also.

COMMENTS ON INTERVIEW:

SOUND RECORDINGS: 60 minute tape

LENGTH OF INTERVIEW: ¾ hour

RESTRICTIONS ON USE: none

TRANSCRIPT: 14 pages

ORAL HISTORY
Arensdorf, Robert G
Interview Date: November 28, 2005

Interviewer: Joyce Sullentrop (JS)
Interviewee: Robert G Arensdorf (RA)
Tape 1 of 1
Side A

JS - Do you remember when World War Two started in 1939? You would have been about fourteen years old. Do you remember?

RA - Yes, my brother was in the Navy so I remembered that very well.

JS - What did you think about it and what did your friends or relatives think about the war?

RA - At that age we didn't think or worry a, but it very much. We knew we could whip them.

JS - So, your brother was already in the Navy?

RA - No, he was in the Guard, but he went into the Navy right away.

JS - What did your parents think about him joining?

RA - They were very depressed about it. The clincher was that he was at Pearl Harbor. That really shook us up and it was about three days before he could get any message out to us.

JS - What ship was he on, do you know?

RA - San Francisco.

JS - It was not damaged?

RA - No, I guess I told it wrong for a long time. We thought he was always in dry dock, but he was just in for repairs. They knew the ship was already in for repairs.

JS - Did he talk about his experience at Pearl Harbor much?

RA - He said he was probably just as safe as we were.

JS - Do you remember where you were when Pearl Harbor was bombed?

RA - I was at the skating rink at Dodge City.

JS - How did you hear about it?

RA - It came on the radio while we were still there.

JS - Your parents were already worried about it?

RA - Well, concerned. They didn't know how bad it was going to get. Immediately, when they said Pearl Harbor, we were really on alert.

JS - He was able to call you after three days?

RA - Yes.

JS - I'll bet that was a relief.

RA - Yeah, that was fine.

JS - Did he spend the rest of the war in the Pacific?

RA - Yes.

JS - You were drafted?

RA - Yes, I had a farm deferment and one morning the Hutchinson Herald came out and said all the farm deferments were A-1.

JS - Can you explain what a farm deferment was?

RA - We were there raising food for the war.

JS - And that was automatic?

RA - We were F4, but I don't know just how it was different. Clarence Irsik and I went to Kansas City. Like I say, "One day we were farmers and the next day we were drafted."

JS - When you were drafted and went to Kansas City, was that for your physical?

RA - Yes.

JS - Could you describe that process?

RA - Nobody seemed to be very concerned. I had been fighting high blood pressure and Dr. Jackman said there was no way that they would take me. They

just put the cuff on me and ran it up to where they liked it. I might have been able to fight it, but it didn't hurt me. It didn't hurt anybody.

JS - You said you were in the signal corps? Was that your choice or was that just what they put you in?

RA - They just put me in.

JS - Could you explain what the signal corps is or what it does?

RA - They had about three choices; most of the guys did dit-dot-dit Morse code. The other two choices were climbing telephone poles or teletype. I had such nice little hands they put me in the teletype.

JS - You were drafted, you went to Kansas City, then where did you go?

RA - I went to Camp Polk, Louisiana.

JS - Where you trained?

RA - Yeah.

JS - What did the training consist of?

RA - There was a lot of walking, etc.

JS - This was basic training?

RA - Yes, then while I was down there a lot of our guys were coming up with colds that they were getting. They wanted to call all the draftees goldbrickers anyway. I knew I had something more than that so when we were in line they would come along and ask if you had a cold. When they asked me I said, "I have got a dose of piles that won't let up."

Of course, they weren't about to check that. They took me on in and I sat down there and the doctor came in and I pulled up my shirt and I was redder than a turkey comb. Immediately he realized what it was and I had scarlet fever. They called an ambulance and rushed me to the hospital. After about two and a half weeks of living in a barracks with mumps, chicken pox and everything else, all of a sudden they got orders in to isolate me. It was about four days before I got out of there. That delayed me. I think all the guys that started out with me went overseas. One of them went to Korea and I got a letter that said it was no doubt that was the end of the world. One guy went to Japan and he loved it over there. Irsik just went to Kansas City and was an orderly.

JS - Did Clarence Irsik go with you to Louisiana?

RA - No, Kansas City was the last I saw him.

JS - You were in Louisiana and got the scarlet fever and then were quarantined. How long did it take you to get over the scarlet fever?

RA - I think about three weeks.

JS - Then you were out of your group?

RA - Out of the group and went into another one.

JS - Completed your basic training. What else did you learn in basic training other than marching?

RA - We did lots of marching and lots of KP. When I came back from the hospital they really put me on KP. I had a little heart murmur after this episode. Of course the Army has dozens of goldbricks on KP. I told them I was going to the doctor and they said, "Like hell you are going to the doctor. You get back to your barracks and pack up all your stuff." I went to the doctor and it definitely was a heart murmur. He came back with a note, "No KP." The Army doesn't like that so from that time till I moved on I had lots of routine to do.

JS - What would you do on KP?

RA - Oh, everything, peel potatoes and all that. I used to tell them there was something wrong with the coffee maker because the bottom had the top. I never was a coffee drinker, I couldn't stand it.

JS - Was it difficult to go into the service and follow orders and obey?

RA - I don't know how to explain it, but my brother had been in and had a few things he told me. Never volunteer, that was his advice. Big brother was right, but later on when I was in the signal corps I had taken the course and passed it. I managed to get in the supply room and that was a good deal because you didn't have to do the parades and stuff. A truck driver job came up and I couldn't stand that so I volunteered for that. They sent us out on a truck Thanksgiving Day. We were not supposed to leave the trucks till we got to our destination. It was a big semi and we didn't know what was in there. It was practically nothing. What we were doing was taking rifles when they were done with them and taking down and putting them in a warehouse in Texarkana, Arkansas. That was another experience.

JS - When you got through your training, you were sent on to school.

RA - We took school right there.

JS - In Louisiana?

RA -Yes.

JS - You said you were on the teletype machine. Could you describe that?

RA - I think forty words a minute was all we ever had to do.

JS - What were you typing?

RA - Oh, just various things.

JS - Messages or something?

RA - Could have been, yes.

JS - Did you ever use that experience?

RA - No.

JS - Because you got in the supply unit?

RA - I got in the supply unit.

JS - What was that?

RA - People would come in and wanted a different size shoe or had a worn out shoe or something like that. I finished out the rest of my year in that supply room.

JS - After truck driving?

RA - Yeah, what happened on that, for whatever reason, whether they closed down or what, we moved camps. We went to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. I drove the truck there and when that was done, that was it.

JS - When you got out you were still at Fort Bragg?

RA -Yeah.

JS - The entire time you were in supply?

RA - Yes.

JS - When you left home, was that the first time you had left home?

RA - Yes.

JS - What were you thinking?

RA - It was quite a change.

JS - What surprised you?

RA - Like I told my brother, it told you a few things that you learned. The word yes was a very important word. I had a bad accident; last New Year's Eve a tractor ran over me and I went in the hospital and that word no, you don't use very often.

JS - I think that is an important lesson to learn in life.

RA - Yeah, it is. The quicker you learn that, you can get along a little better.

JS - Do you have particular stories of people that you knew in training or when you were working? Are there people who were over you or friends or events that you remember?

RA - When I got in that second company, my roommates were from New York. Anything east of the Mississippi River, I won't even repeat the word I used. Of course, my mom was sure I was starving to death and I would share with all of them. I would get a box and I would be laying there in bed at night and here they were, after the lights would go out, they would be after it. I would jerk those lights on and I called them a good many bad words. I had no use for anybody from the East. The South was fine, but not the East.

JS - They were just so different?

RA - Yeah they were. There wasn't any other way to say it; they were just for themselves. You always thought if you were ever fighting you would hate to have that kind of guy behind you if you were.

JS - The ones from the South were.....?

RA - Oh yeah, they were gracious.

JS - Were there other people from Kansas that you knew?

RA - No, not really. There was one boy down there in camp and his mother was a telephone operator. Between her mother and my mother they decided I ought to go see this kid. This kid was a twin and he had an exceptional IQ. I went over to see him and I never spent two more boring hours in my life. We absolutely had nothing in common. That was good because his mother really loved that. In

those two deals that I could come home for harvest, something happened that I was able to get a little extension. The next year at Christmas I came home. The Captain gave me a few chosen words to not try to get another furlough extension. We got a genuine snow storm and there was no way I could get out of there. This operator got hold of the Red Cross and then when I did get back to camp there was never a word said. She and the Red Cross were a good deal for me.

JS - How was the food?

RA - Good, I don't think there was anybody that ever went through that and didn't gain weight. We'd call it high calorie now, but you never went hungry. No, nobody went hungry and weekends a lot of people would go on passes. I didn't have anyplace to go so I would stick around there and Sunday morning they would fix you eggs or anything else you wanted for breakfast to your order. Sunday nights were cold cuts and they had a lot of them. I was a good eater so I enjoyed that.

JS - What kind of uniform did you wear?

RA - Oh just fatigues.

JS - You didn't have a dress uniform or anything?

RA - Oh yeah, we had a dress uniform. I lucked out; I didn't have to make many parades so I didn't have to use the dress uniform. One time we went on an all night march. We went and marched in the night. I got up the next morning and I got a heel that was bad. You try to walk three to five miles with a bad heel. I had some muscles that were mighty, mighty sore. When I got back about the first thing I did was rush to the office to get me another pair of boots. "Sorry we don't have those." It was good news to me. I went right to the barracks and we had to go on parade. I just went right to my barracks and didn't talk to anybody. They came around checking the barracks and sure enough I was in there and they really were gong to tear me up. I said, "You didn't want me out there in uniform, limping along with one boot." "Well, you should have gotten some at the supply room." I had covered all the bases.

JS - When you worked in the supply room you worked during the day?

RA - Right.

JS - What would you do in the evenings?

RA - There always were PXs that you could go to. I wasn't a drinker, but the bunch that I was with, when Saturday night came they would leave the barracks and that is what they said they were going to do; go till they got drunk. That's

what they would do. I was in the barracks one time when these guys were there. I wasn't drinking with them. They had the table and they would put another bottle on it. That was just a lot of it.

JS - Why weren't you a drinker?

RA - I don't know if I would call it good sense or stupidity.

JS - Did you smoke?

RA - No, I loved athletics and I gave both of them up for athletics. When I came home my mother told me she just knew I would be smoking when I came home.

JS - I'll bet most of the people did smoke?

RA - Oh yes.

JS - Did you play cards or did you read?

RA - Some of them played cards. There was a lot of gambling on payday. I played some cards, but I was still an athlete. They would give us a truck and we would go around to other recreation centers and go in and chat up a game. If they were friendly we would play. If they weren't, we would just go on. We spent a lot of time doing that. One time, another kid from Nebraska and I finally got brave. We got a weekend and we went down to New Orleans. We were going to be big town boys. We got to the train station and got a cab to take us to a hotel. He said everything was full and we wouldn't be able to get a place. He finally took us over to some flea trap and we went in. We went up to the room; the bathrooms were down the hall. We looked at each other and simultaneously we said, "Let's get the hell out of here." "You going to try to get another room?" he asked. I said we were just lucky to get out of the place and we left and walked several blocks and right across. It was a good bed to sleep in, at least we had that.

JS - What did you do in New Orleans?

RA - We finally took a boat ride and had a couple of bottles of beer. He liked the beer; we were still country boys. We didn't get around much. They had some night boat rides and tours that take you out to the plantations or something. We were too green, we didn't do that. This kid liked to play pool so, between pool and basketball, that took most of our time up.

JS - Were you on a regular basketball team?

RA - No we were on a company basketball team. We had some danged good players.

JS - You would go play other companies?

RA - They finally had some tournaments. We couldn't figure it out, but it happened. I didn't have any problem about colored people, but we played a colored team. They gave me a Charlie Horse. They put me out of commission and another one of our best players. They'd get you right up there.

JS - How did you get on the basketball team?

RA - Like I say, we just had a bunch of us ran around challenging people and you just proved yourself.

JS - You went to New Orleans, was that the only trip you took to a large city?

RA - No, I did one other thing, I had another friend that lived in Washington, D.C., and I spent one Christmas with him.

JS - What did you do in Washington, D.C.?

RA - Not a darned thing; I was with his family. We got on a bus a time or two and colored people were already getting on the high side of the percentage and they weren't wanting to go to the back of that bus already. We didn't do much, he just had one brother and he was married and had a wife and the children. It was pretty much a family deal.

JS - Did you write home and did you receive letters when you were in the service?

RA - Oh yes, I heard from my mother at least three times a week and my brother's wife that was in the Navy was real faithful. I always had mail, but I think some of those poor devils never did get a letter.

JS - Did you also write home and tell them what you were doing?

RA - Yeah, you know you are going to have to answer or you aren't going to get them back.

JS - What kind of food did your mom send you?

RA - Cookies and cake and stuff, sweets that you didn't need.

JS - Do you remember how much money you were paid each month?

RA - Not exactly, the number that comes to mind right now, I think it was close to seventy dollars.

JS - What would you spend that money on or would you save it?

RA - I went right straight to the post office and made out a money order and sent it home.

My dad had power of attorney. I didn't drink or smoke so I always had money in my billfold, but I didn't actually spend much. I remember one time I went to the PX and bought a whole carton of candy bars with almonds in them.

JS - Almond Joy?

RA - Almond Joy; they about made me sick. It didn't hurt you at all. My mother thought I would be smoking, but I wasn't. All in all, thirteen months went pretty quick.

JS - The friends that you made while you were in the service, did you keep in contact with them afterward?

RA - Not really, I kind of lost out. After I got back, I contacted that kid from Nebraska and I drove up there one time and went hunting with him. He was a big old tall guy and I never was much of a walker and he about killed me walking. It was awful hard to keep up. The pheasants would be out in those corn fields and we shot lots of pheasants. They would be out in those corn fields in the Russian thistles and there was one old abandoned farmstead. We'd just go back there day after day. That was quite an experience. They lived in the country.

JS - He was the only one that you really.....?

RA - Yes, actually after I got out he was the only one. They lived out in the country. I think two sisters were all that he had. They were good people. Then I tried to hunt him up one other time and I never did get in contact with him. They said he was working in a town there, but I never did find him that time. He wasn't much of a letter writer.

JS - When you look back at the thirteen months, what do you think about that experience?

Did it change you? Did it make you think differently?

RA - I think you finally realize how good a life you actually had at home. A lot of people were arbitrary toward it and I never was that way, but I would never join back up.

JS - Why?

RA - I didn't want that for a life. When they got you in there they tried to get you to join up and get a two weeks vacation so they had lots of people that signed up

for two years. Clarence and I were smart enough about that that we wouldn't join. I think he had to stay in two years, but my dad had a heart attack while I was gone so there was a little pressure on to get me out.

JS - What did you do after the war when you came home?

RA - I came home and went right to farming and spent the rest of my life farming. It was seventy-nine years till the tractor ran right up over me.

JS - Last fall, you said?

RA - New Year's Eve.

JS - What happened?

RA - It was an old tractor, way back, '46 or '47. I probably bought it right after I got out of the service. It had safeties on it and you took all of them off. The switch was over to the left and the starter was over to the left, I reached over there to turn it on. It wasn't supposed to be in gear and I couldn't reach the switch. Just stood there and watched it climb up the back of my leg. It should have killed me, but Saint Peter said, "I'll leave you a while and let you suffer."

JS - Maybe you have work to do. Is there anything about your experience; any other stories that you want to get down?

RA - No, we had to go along with those guys from New York. I got in a little bit of trouble with this one fellow. We were going down; I don't know what you would call it. In the South it would have been a bayou, but we were up in Fort Bragg. We were walking down there and there were a lot of paratroopers. There was this little short fellow and we managed to bump each other as we went by. We started having a few words so finally he came back and we were going to have fisticuffs. I didn't think I was going to have any trouble with him and I was standing there. The next thing I knew, somebody hit me right behind the ear and knocked me clear down. I looked up and I could just barely see my buddy going over the hill. My judgment on him wasn't wrong. I managed to make it back up, but I thought it was a good time for retreat so I did. Oh man, was that a sore spot.

JS - I can imagine.

RA - Once in the barracks there was another kid, I expect we weighed within a couple of pounds of each other. We used to wrestle by the hour.

JS - For fun?

RA - For fun, we never had words. One time I would pin him and then he would pin me. Like I say, there was always something to do.

JS - You would have grown up during the '30s and the dustbowl and then you were drafted. Was it just expected that you would come back to the farm?

RA - Yes, that was just part of it. One other time, I had a wisdom tooth that was pretty bad. He made an appointment for me to come back. I was in the signal corps so we had some vehicles and I took a Jeep over to that. I checked it out and got it out of the deal so I supposed it was ready to go. They had me in the chair and had already deadened the tooth and he got a phone call. I never did know for sure whether it was because I was a draftee or whether he got a golf date. He said, "Come back in a couple of days." I never did go back, but when I went out to get the Jeep, it was a block to my destination. My Jeep started steaming like a Stanley Steamer. It got hot I guess and was without a bit of water in it. I thought I didn't want to drive a Jeep very bad so I went in and told them I couldn't get my Jeep started. They came over after me.

JS - You think that you had a good experience?

RA - Yeah, some of them wrote down that they couldn't get enough work out of me on account of that heart. This one fellow put me to sweeping with a broom to sweep a whole lot. Then he put me to cleaning the office. I found a whiskey bottle and I was running everybody out of there.

JS - I see why you had a good time.

RA - I don't think it hurt me a bit. I came home and went back to farming. Dad was getting up there in years. I would send him to town after parts and he wouldn't ever open them or look at them. He would come home with the wrong part and I would get aggravated. I went through a stage where I would get aggravated and I got to throwing things. The good Lord or something gave me the wisdom to know that that wasn't going to prove nothing so I got over that. Are you going to write a book?

JS - No, these tapes will be in libraries. What do you remember about the dirty thirties?

RA - In the dirty thirties, I was just a little squirt. We had these friends, we lived two south and a mile and a half west of Ensign and these friends lived five south and a quarter east. It was a Sunday afternoon, just beautiful. We had chores to do and we decided to go ahead and help do the chores. We did that and went on down there just to visit. We started down that road and got within a quarter of a mile of that turn and that hit. You could not see each other. You could just barely make out there were others in the car. We were that close to their place and there was no way you could get over there. We sat there and sat there and

finally Clarence had lit a lantern or lamp and carried it through the house. We saw that yellow flame and finally made it over there. Dirt blew day in and day out and we hung bed sheets over the windows.

JS - Did you have enough food to eat?

RA - Oh yeah, we always had beef steak. We would butcher our own beef. They were Holsteins, but we could fatten them and they were as good a meat as any. We always had chickens and eggs. We never went hungry. We didn't know there was any kind of check, but cream and eggs.

JS - Would you take those in to the town of Ensign?

RA - No, the train came in and for some unknown reason we sent our cream to Hutchinson, Kansas. Producer's was the name of the place. We'd take it in there and put it on the train and they'd pick it up that day. One day later the cream can would be back and a check would be there with it. There were no crops so you had to have something. We finally got hold of a little government money and built a chicken coop. We sold eggs to a hatchery. We took thirty dozen eggs into Dodge every Saturday for groceries. Bucky Harris had a hatchery that we sold to.

JS - Did you have a car or did you take the train to Dodge?

RA - We always had a car, an old Whippet. Sometimes Dad would be so busy Mother would have to take us to school. She hated to drive, but she'd get in that Whippet and instead of stepping down on the clutch and then the gas, she'd make it buck. Of course, us boys had lived on the farm and laughed at her, but she had to do it.

JS - I think I have covered all the questions. Is there anything else that you can think of?

RA - Probably thought more here than I would a home. Every Sunday in the service I don't think I ever missed going to church?

JS - The Catholic?

RA - Nine times out of ten I went to church, but the longest lines would be going to the Catholic Church. When Christmas came, I was going to midnight Mass if I could get some kind of transportation. Finally, they said I could have a truck. Saturday night came and I went over to get the truck and get ready. The old truck was full. The only time I ever had that many going.

JS - Because it was Christmas?

RA - Yeah.

JS - Did you get a special meal on Christmas?

RA - Yes, you always had special meals on holidays. You did a lot of griping, but you didn't get hurt. We had to stand in a chow line and I never did understand why the officers got to eat better.

Interviewer: Joyce Sullentrop (JS)

Interviewee: Robert G Arensdorf (RA)

Tape 1 of 1

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