

ORAL HISTORY
George, Virgel
Interview Date: 10/17/2002

Interviewer: Joyce Sullentrop (JS)

Interviewee: Virgel George (VG)

Tape 1 of 2

Side A

JS - How old were you when the war started in 1939? What do you remember about what your parents, friends or you thought about the starting of the war?

VG - I was twelve years old then.

JS - Did you listen to the news on the radio with your parents?

VG - Yes, we listened to the radio. On that one Sunday we were listening.

JS - Pearl Harbor. Were you at home and listening to it or did a neighbor come and tell you?

VG - No, we were at home.

JS - Do you remember what you thought or what your parents said?

VG - I can't really remember what I thought, but I remember my parents getting shook up about it because my dad had come over from Russia. I think he had just got to be a citizen about a year before the war.

JS - So you never gave it much thought about how long it would last?

VG - I never gave it much thought. It didn't sound good to me.

JS - You were more interested in having fun?

VG - Or listening to Amos and Andy.

JS - So later you graduated from high school?

VG - I got out in May of '44.

JS - And did you have to register for the draft?

VG - Yes.

JS - What was that process like?

VG - We had to go up to the courthouse and register. They had a board that decided whether you went or stayed at home or whatever you did.

JS - Did you think at the time that you would be drafted?

VG - Yeah, I sure did.

JS - Were there other young men in the community that had gone off to war?

VG - Yes, and there was a boy that I graduated with that went the same time I did. I don't know where he went, but I went up to Kansas City and to Camp Maxie, Texas, for basic.

JS - So you went to Kansas City to be inducted?

VG - Inducted, and we got some of our clothing issued then. We were shipped by train down to Camp Maxie, Texas.

JS - When you were inducted did they tell you what training you would get?

VG - No.

JS - When you got to Texas?

VG - I was in the infantry near Paris, Texas. I can't remember how long we were in Fort Maxie, but they sent us to Cheyenne, Wyoming, to Fort Warren to quartermaster corps. I was there till we went overseas. That's what we did, we hauled troops.

JS - That's what a quartermaster does?

VG - Well, we were in the trucking part of it. They help hospitals and everything else, but we were in the trucking part of it.

JS - What was your basic training like?

VG - Quite a bit of the arms, like your rifle, pistol and machine gun and they gave you shots. Those guys had been around long enough that they knew how to get you. It was kind of sandy down there in Camp Maxie so when it rained, it didn't bother you too much.

JS - What would be a typical day in basic training?

VG - They would take you to class for awhile and show a movie. Then, they would take you out in the field, and some days they would take you out in the

field and we had markers and had to walk so many miles and everything. They varied. It wasn't the same thing or for a while it wasn't the same thing anyway, but walking on that blacktop your shins would get to hurting. They had your deal about sex and everything else—you know, to stay away and everything. We had those kind of classes and they would show us films and stuff.

JS - How long were you in basic training?

VG - I don't know if it was six or eight weeks and then we got shipped up to Cheyenne, Wyoming. Then we went to Fort Carson, Colorado, and learned to drive with blackout lights and stuff like that.

JS - Could you describe blackout lights?

VG - They were little bitty lights and they had just a little slit in them on the front of the truck.

JS - Like the headlights, but only had a slit of light?

VG - There was a deal on the side that showed just a little light and they were called blackout lights.

JS - How did they train you for that?

VG - Well they kept you in school like they do up there in Wyoming. We were up there three or four weeks before they sent us down to Fort Carson.

JS - Did you have a choice about going to quartermaster school?

VG - No, they just called your name out and there were a whole bunch of us from Camp Maxie.

JS - Were there any other young men from Kansas in training with you?

VG - No, I didn't run across anybody from Kansas. I think I got overseas before I ran across a Kansas boy and he was from Pierceville, right west here, and I had played athletics against him when I was in high school. You got real regular to where you would wake up about the same time every morning.

JS - This was the first time you had been away from home?

VG - Right. I had never been out of the state. First, I went up to Kansas City and they gave me a physical and I came back home and you could take care of things until they called you up.

JS - So, you went to Kansas City by yourself?

VG - No, there was more than that right here, but there was just the one from my locality. The others were from Cimarron and other places.

JS - What did your parents think about you being drafted?

VG - They didn't say too much, but I guess they thought that's what I should do, anyway. I don't remember how long we were in Kansas City later, but we got our uniforms and that is when they shipped us to Camp Maxie. They asked you what you did in civilian life. Were you a store clerk or something like that in civilian life? Course, I had been around on the farm most of my life

JS - When you got to basic training, was it a shock?

VG - Everything was brand new to me.

JS - What were some of your reactions to it being brand new?

VG - It took a while to get used to it, but it didn't take long because those staff sergeants shook you in line.

JS - What was the food like?

VG - Real good. We had real good food there. When we were overseas we had real good food, too.

JS - When you were sent up to Wyoming, did you take a train?

VG - Yeah, a train.

JS - What kind of training was it you received up there?

VG - To be a truck driver, how to take care of your truck and drain the oil and everything to keep it up.

JS - Course, you already knew some of that?

VG - Some of it since I had worked on the farm. My dad lived out there on the farm and worked for somebody. A lot of that I had picked up myself before I got in the Army.

JS - Do you think that is why they selected you to go in the quartermasters?

VG - I think so--your background and stuff like that. Those guys checked you pretty close up there, too. Sometimes I thought they had the white gloves on

because they could yell about something you hadn't noticed. Time at first passed as you made new friends and met new people.

JS - Did some people from Texas go with you to Wyoming?

VG - Yeah, anybody they wanted to send to quartermasters.

JS - Were there some who went to Wyoming, to Colorado, then overseas with you?

VG - When I went overseas, I didn't know too many of them. I made new friends after I got overseas. A lot of the guys were from different places then.

JS - When did you find out that you were going overseas?

VG - In April, I think it was. It says four of '46 somewhere on there.

JS - What was your reaction when you found that you were going to Japan?

VG - I got a little homesick after we got out on the water. I had always hoped I would go to Germany because I thought there would be more to see over there.

JS - By the time you went the war in Germany was ending?

VG - By the time I went over, Japan and everything was ended. I went in March of '45 and August of '45 Japan surrendered.

JS - When did you go to Japan?

VG - In April of '46.

JS - You spent about seven months in Japan?

VG - Yeah, six months and sixteen days.

JS - Did you understand what you were going to be doing when you got to Japan? Did they tell you?

VG - They told us we were going to be in a trucking company over there with the quartermaster corps. When we first got over there we stayed in tents for a while. They didn't have any buildings ready to go yet because they bombed them out. When we first got a barracks it was a horse stable they had fixed up.

JS - Where was that, near a town?

VG - Zama. Zama, Japan, and we hauled troops to Yokohama and Tokyo and everywhere. We hauled guys to the boats that came in. If they had enough time in, they got their orders to go home. Sometimes we drove all night long filling up a president boat that was pretty good size.

JS - What kind of boat?

VG - It was a president boat and had President Wilson or something like that for a name. They were pretty first class boats. They took home a lot of men to fill them up. Some of them were getting a chance to fly, but they started having trouble with the airplanes. They fell out of the skies and some of the guys that were going to go home on airplanes got cancelled out of it. Then again, if they landed someplace and there was somebody there who had more rank than you did, you set there on the island and he got to go.

JS - So, it was safer to take the ship?

VG - Yeah, right at the time when I left.

JS - Did you have to go places to gather these soldiers or did they come in to the base where you were?

VG - They came in to the base where we were. We would load them up and haul them to the ship.

JS - These would have been the soldiers that had been fighting there?

VG - Fighting the war and had enough time in over there and been in since the 40s or something and they were turning them loose.

JS - What did you think the first time you saw the ocean?

VG - Well, I got seasick over the rascal. I didn't vomit coming back, but going over, I had just as soon die. That's an awful feeling. Course, I wasn't the only one either. I think what got me was the smell of diesel fuel. I really hadn't smelled diesel fuel very much and boy, it was strong on the boat that we were on. We were on a maritime and it was a small one, then.

JS - About how many soldiers were on it?

VG - There was two thousand and some that went over at the same time. They assigned you guard duty or something like that, but when I got sick, I didn't have to take any of that. (Both chuckle)

JS - Did you have times when you weren't sick and had guard duty or free time?

VG - We went on deck and played cards and stuff.

JS - What kind of cards did you play?

VG - Oh, pitch and a lot of guys played poker and stuff like that and there were dice games and everything going on.

JS - How many days was the voyage over?

VG - fourteen, and it was fourteen coming back, same deal.

JS - Did you run into any bad weather?

VG - Yeah, we ran into one typhoon. I think, it was pretty close down there by the equator line and waves got big enough it would raise one end of that ship up and shake everything loose. There was a big amount of water running and we had a leak by the time we hit Japan. When we pulled into Yokohama they made us stay all on one side because the hole on the other side was letting water in. I suppose putting the weight over there raised it up enough to keep the water out of it. We had a little river running down through where we slept. Every morning we would get up and check if it was higher or lower like people do a flood.

JS - Were you scared?

VG - No, not so much. After we made it through the storm, I wasn't worried any, you know. I don't know what I would have done. I couldn't swim a lick.

JS - Growing up in Kansas you didn't have enough water to learn to swim in. As you moved from basic training to Wyoming to get into trucks and to go over, the friends that you made, did you keep in contact with any of the men?

VG - No, I didn't know their addresses. Now, I heard, after I was in Japan, that Jim Kortz that I went to Kansas City with went to the Philippines or someplace out in there.

JS - You didn't really encounter anybody that you knew?

VG - Like I say, the first guy I met was from Pierceville and I think I was the first one he had seen. You know, that you knew. There might have been other Kansas boys, but you didn't know where they were from or anything. They might have been in the same company or something.

JS - Now, how would you find out that somebody was from Kansas? Would you recognize the name?

VG - Everybody told everybody where they were from if they were in your company. When I was over in Japan, I was with boys from Washington, from Nevada and they were scattered over everywhere.

JS - With the truck, there was a driver and were there other people?

VG - Just the driver.

JS - You were in a convoy?

VG - Yeah, when we hauled troops, we were in a convoy. Matter of fact, first time out I tore down their signal marks so I was going to get lost from the other trucks. After you are around it is just like living here. You know where to go. The streets were so narrow in Tokyo that if we took our trucks down we had to put our duals on the sidewalk.

JS - How many would the truck hold?

VG - We hauled 24 or more, depending on the size of your truck. Now, I had a cab-over and I think I could haul twenty-four if I remember right.

JS - You said a cab-over?

VG - Yes, COE is what they called it in the Army. It was like these cab-over trucks and everything is setting right up front there. When I first got over there, I had a forward engine like a regular truck. Later on we got some COEs and stuff.

JS - You were a driver, but in your company, there were mechanics and what have you?

VG - Yeah, they had mechanics to fix your trucks and cooks, etc.

JS - How many trucks would be in a convoy?

VG - Depended on how many troops you were hauling. Usually, pretty near everybody had to go, especially when we were loading the ships and taking troops up there. I can't remember how many trucks we had in there.

JS - So, you would just pick up the soldiers and take them to the ships?

VG - Turn around and come right back and go back again.

JS - That was day after day?

VG - Day after day and if we weren't hauling them to the ships, we were taking out replacements to replace the guys that were going home. They were sending

VG - Nope, I think about the only thing I have left from the Army is an Eisenhower jacket. One of them little short ones, but it's too little for me now.

JS - What else do you remember about your experience in Japan?

VG - Most of the same things, take care of your truck and haul the troops. We had some USO shows come over.

JS - Did it seem like time went slowly?

VG - No, because when you got with a bunch of guys, time goes pretty fast. I just about learned to swim over there, too, about the time they got ready to send me home. We had a swimming pool there on the base.

JS - What was the base? Was it one that the Americans built?

VG - No, it was Japanese. I think it was a Cavalry deal. Like I say, our first deal was a horse stable. They had lead on top instead of shingles and they had holes blown in it, you know. We slept in tents for quite a while and you had to exchange your American money for yen and it took a fist full to buy something. You could get more with a carton of cigarettes.

JS - Is that what they called the black market?

VG - Well, we usually would just trade them for stuff.

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Side B

VG - One boy and I were pretty close and he worked in the Post Office before he got in there and I couldn't understand what he was doing there. A guy from Rifle, Colorado, was in there and a fellow from Washington. I can't remember the town. We had one out of New York. They were scattered all over.

JS - What did you learn from meeting all the different kinds of young men?

VG - That people lived different in different places than we did where I was from. In Cheyenne there was a fellow that was a Jew. I don't know if he had problems or what, but all he did was take care of our barracks. He had it cleaner than heck. You could eat off the floor. They finally let him go home, but I never did find out what was the matter with him.

JS - Were there African-Americans that were serving with you or did they segregate them?

VG - Yes, they had a trucking company, too. It wasn't intermingled yet. They worked and hauled troops just like we did.

JS - When you were drafted were you in for a certain amount of time? Did you know how long you would be in?

VG - What is it they say? For the duration is what I took it as, until the war was over with or they didn't need you anymore and that is just about what it was.

JS - You were in about a year and a half. Is that right?

VG - Yes, a year and a half. A lot of those guys came out with hash marks clear up to their elbows.

JS - Hash marks?

VG - They had a mark for every three years or something and a lot of them had been in since way back in the '30s.

JS - So, there were some veterans?

VG - Like I say, the marks started about their cuff and went right up past their elbows.

JS - Now, did you have to take care of your own uniforms, as far as laundry, etc?

VG - No.

JS - There were people on the base?

VG - When we first got in the Army, you just put your serial number on it and they would pick it up and bring it back to us.

JS - Were you known by your serial number rather than your name?

VG - No, by your name, and they could yell your name out pretty loud.

JS - Did you ever get in trouble?

VG - Oh yeah, that is why I was still a private when I got out.

JS - What kind of trouble did you get in?

VG - Just odd things, you know, and it depended on if the sergeant liked you. It was a pretty good life for some guys.

JS - Was it hard to follow orders all the time?

VG - Not so bad until we got down there to Camp Maxie. We had to get out and start crawling under the barbed wire and stuff. Then it was pretty tough. Those guys that were teaching us were those guys that had been over there for quite a while. Sometimes they were late coming in, too. They had probably seen all they wanted to see, too.

JS - Was the training you received sufficient when you got over there to do your job?

VG -Yeah, as far as our trucks went. We knew all about those things. As far as basics, well, a lot of us liked the machine gun, but a lot of guys didn't make marksmanship like I did with the machine gun. A rifle was different. Those guys from Missouri could shoot those things.

JS - Had you hunted at all, before you went?

VG - Hardly at all. I hadn't handled a gun very much.

JS - When you were in Japan, were you armed?

VG - No, we didn't carry arms. When we were at Camp Carson they had trucks that had machine guns on them. They had these radio controlled airplanes and we were supposed to see if we could knock them down. Well, it would get hot and the bullets would fall out and a lot of guys couldn't do that. I hardly saw any of those kinds of trucks over in Japan, but of course, the war was over so they might have done away with them. They weren't using them anymore. I think at one time they probably had a driver and a gunner on them.

JS - Those things you learned in the Army, you never used again?

VG - No. Oh, the truck driving and I hunted quite a bit after I got home. Mainly after I got married, I started hunting.

JS - Any other incident in your basic or going to Japan that you remember?

VG - Same old sixes and sevens; there wasn't anything special.

JS - Were you bored some of the time?

VG - There was always something to do. They kept you busy from eight to five; you were their men. Same way up there learning trucking, you were kept pretty busy all the time.

JS - That would keep you out of trouble?

VG - I guess.

JS - How did you find out that you were going to come home?

VG - They sent out a list of guys that were going to leave.

JS - You knew then, that you were going to be discharged?

VG - That you were coming home. We came into California and we were out there about a week before we got discharged.

JS - When you are discharged, you are on your own to get on home?

VG - You could take whatever they gave you for mileage and use it anyway you wanted.

JS - Could you keep your clothes?

VG - They gave us one pair of suntans, but by the time they turned us loose, they were standing up by themselves. The suntans were for the summer, you know. We got some ODs and a pair of suntans.

JS - What is an OD?

VG - Olive drabs, like the Eisenhower coat. Yeah, those clothes got pretty dirty before we left there.

JS - Where were you, at a base in California?

VG - Yeah, Camp Beale.

JS - And it just took them that long to process?

VG - I guess so, there were so many coming in there. They had closed some of the places down and were just using some of them.

JS - How much money a month did you make when you were in the Army?

VG - I think it was \$50 a month and they took a war bond out and for your laundry and stuff. I think I had about \$28 or \$30 when they were done and that didn't last long.

JS - You had to buy your cigarettes and things?

VG - Yeah, of course you'd go to the PX and things were cheaper there.

JS - Did most of the soldiers smoke?

VG - Most everybody I knew, did. There were a few who were exceptions. Then when we got on the boat they really got cheap after we got three miles out there, just fifty cents a carton.

JS - When you were driving the truck, did the trucks run on gas or diesel?

VG - Gas.

JS - So, the base had tanks to fill up the trucks?

VG - They had gas pumps. Of course, the trucks had pretty good sized gas tanks; I think they were fifty gallon or something like that. We could always make it on a tank full of gas and come back and fuel up.

JS - Were you responsible for filling them up?

VG - No, they had a fellow for that and changing the oil and things to keep your motor clean.

JS - So you had to clean it?

VG - Yes, we had to keep the back end clean. Like I said, we were busy when we weren't driving, too. When they came for inspection and said there was dirt here and there, now and then, I always thought they had a pair of white gloves on.

JS - When you had to take men to the ships, how many miles was that?

VG - Yokohama was twelve or thirteen miles from where we were.

JS - So you could make two trips a day?

VG - Oh yes, we could make several trips at night. It didn't take long to get up there and back.

JS - Did you ever wonder where all those soldiers were coming from?

VG - I was beginning to wonder how that island held that many. There were quite a few over there and there were some left over there when I left over there.

JS - Did you form any opinions about the Japanese or their culture? They had been our enemy and now we were occupying the country.

VG - No, the Japanese were real polite. They really never did anything you could get mad at them about, you know. They cleaned the camp and things.

JS - On here it says that you had a Service Medal, Good Conduct Medal, WW2 Victory Medal and Army of Occupation Medal.

VG - That is probably right.

JS - Did you receive those in a ceremony?

VG - No, the company commander just handed them out. You'd just fall out in the morning and they'd call out your name and give them. There was no big ceremony about it.

JS - When you came on home what were you thinking and feeling?

VG - It was a big relief to be headed home, especially since that was the first time I had ever been away from home and to wind up in Japan. I had never been out of the state of Kansas.

JS - Did you ever think of enlisting instead of being drafted?

VG - No, I wanted to finish school if I could. I think Jim (Kortz) was drafted, too. Of course he and his wife got married before he went in.

JS - So, did most young men wait for the draft rather than enlisting?

VG - Everybody that I talked to did. It was getting close to the end of it so there weren't too many that enlisted first. I would have gone anyway.

JS - When you came home what were you able to do that you couldn't do in the Army?

VG - Well, I didn't work for a while.

JS - Your parents let you not work?

VG - Yes, then I bought me a car and I had to go to work.

JS - What kind of car?

VG - '42 Chevy. I bought it from relation of mine at Garden City, a cousin of mine so I had to go to work then.

JS - What kind of work?

VG - I worked on the farm. I worked pretty steady on that farm. Must have been '47 to '51, I worked at that same place.

JS - The Korean War came along in '52 and there was no calling soldiers back up or anything?

VG - There were some that were in the reserves. They had signed up for reserves like the Navy Reserves and stuff. I think some of them got called up to Korea. After they got out of the service they stayed in the reserves.

JS - But you didn't do that?

VG - No.

JS - You had had enough of the Army?

VG - Yeah. Matter of fact, another fellow and I from Ingalls joined the Naval Reserve, but thank goodness, we never got called up.

JS - Why did you join the Navy Reserve if you were in the Army?

VG - Because we were plumb out of the Army and we were starting new. I think we had to sign up for two years or something like that.

JS - What did you do in those two years?

VG - Nothing, I don't remember even going to a meeting.

JS - You decided it was the thing to do?

VG - Yeah, we thought it would be a lot of fun and when the Korean War started, we both started sweating. We thought we were going to have to go back in again.

JS - How do you think that experience of basic training and then going to Japan changed you?

VG - I don't think it changed me much, but after a year and a half in there you kind of got to where you could think for yourself because we had come in right

out of high school. We had no experience otherwise, maybe just working on the farm or something and working in grocery stores and stuff. It taught you to respect guys that were in command. That helped.

JS - Did it increase your feeling of patriotism?

VG - Yeah, it felt good that you were able to do your part.

JS - What about reflections on the Army or war since then?

VG - Well, those guys that are over in Iraq taking that stuff make you feel good that you still have people that will do that for you. I don't understand these people having parades against the Army or president.

JS - Did you know anybody who wasn't in favor of the war?

VG - Then they could be medic or something or a CO and they didn't have to carry a gun.

JS - Conscientious Objector. During the war you were in high school. Do you remember things to help the war effort on the home front?

VG - We were buying war bonds. We would bring some money every week and put it toward a war bond. That was the main thing because we were setting out here in the middle of no place.

JS - What about rationing?

VG - Tires, sugar and gasoline, too.

JS - Coffee, but you probably weren't drinking coffee?

VG - Coffee too, but they gave us gas stamps and I guess if you ruined a tire and needed it real bad you could get one.

JS - I think there were scrap metal drives where people would give their scrap metal to the effort?

VG - I guess you are right there, too.

JS - There was a base at Garden City?

VG - That was an Air Corp base and one at Dodge that was an Air Corp.

JS - The one north of Ingalls, what was that?

VG - That was just a practice landing field for the one out of Garden City.