

INTERVIEW

Richard Gerber

YEAR

2006

GRAY COUNTY ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

NAME: Richard Gerber

DATE: July 13, 2006

PLACE: Dodge City, Kansas

INTERVIEWER: John McLoughlin

PROJECT SERIES: Veterans Oral History Project for Gray County

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION:

Richard Gerber was working in California at the time of Pearl Harbor. Believing that he would be drafted and not wanting to be in the Army like his brother, he joined the Navy at the age of twenty-two. After training in California he was assigned to a troop ship out of San Francisco. It was a luxury liner which the navy re-named the Mount Vernon. He spent the next years as a metal smith working in the machine shop on board as they took troops to many places. In 1944 he was diagnosed with tuberculosis and spent his last two years in hospitals until his release in 1946.

SUBJECTS DISCUSSED: Entering the service and training and life as a part of a troop ship crew that moved troops to the Pacific and later to Europe and Africa via the Atlantic Ocean. His diagnosis and treatment as a tuberculosis patient was discussed

COMMENTS ON INTERVIEW:

SOUND RECORDINGS: 60 minute tape

LENGTH OF INTERVIEW: 1 hour

RESTRICTIONS ON USE: none

TRANSCRIPT: 10 pages

ORAL HISTORY
Gerber, Richard
Interview Date: July 13, 2006

Interviewer: John McLoughlin (JM)

Interviewee: Richard Gerber (RG)

Tape 1 of 1

Side A

JM - I am interviewing Richard Gerber at his home at 506 Edgemore, Dodge City, Kansas. You were in the military for quite a while, weren't you?

RG - Four years, 1942 to 1946.

JM - That was the World War Two and the Korean War Era. You were MS First Class. What would that mean to a lay person?

RG - Metal smith.

JM - So you worked with metal; we will learn more about that. You served on the USS Mount Vernon?

RG - Yes.

JM - Was that a light cruiser?

RG - A troop ship.

JM - Was it named after the town where Washington lived?

RG - It was an old luxury liner named The USS Washington that the Navy took over a year or so before the war started. I guess that is why they named it the Mount Vernon. It was about ten years old at the time. When they started the draft, they called in the naval reserves and the Naval Reserve took over the ship.

JM - You served, where?

RG - I was on that ship for three years.

JM - Where did you go?

RG - We went to Hawaii several times. We would take a load of troops, seven thousand. We took several loads to Hawaii, Pearl Harbor; Australia; New Guinea; Bombay, India; and New Zealand. We did that for two years and our home port was San Francisco. Once in a while we would go down to LA or San Pedro or San Diego, but usually we would go back to San Francisco. After a

couple of years of doing that in the Pacific, we came back through the Panama Canal and around to the East Coast. For the last years of the war we were hauling troops out of mostly Boston and New York over to England.

JM - You were in both the Pacific and the Atlantic Campaigns?

RG - Right, we would take a lot of trips over and usually we would bring back some German prisoners.

JM - Was there a difference of treatment of them?

RG - No, they were sort of isolated in a certain area of the ship and we didn't bother them and they didn't bother us.

JM - Metals, now, could you explain to us on a daily basis what your routine was?

RG - I worked in the machine shop. I did a lot of welding, lathe work and drill press, and that sort of thing.

JM - People would break things?

RG - We did the general repairs to the ship, also. There were always things that needed repairing.

JM - Do you remember how long it was?

RG - The ship was a little over 700 feet.

JM - That was a good sized ship. Just to give perspective, seven thousand people, not everybody got their own cabin.

RG - No, that's for sure. We were stacked in there about four bunks high. The troops were really jammed in.

JM - You had it a little better, as a petty officer?

RG - Petty officers had it better. Third class was as high as I got. I was just a machinist. Every ship had so many machinists and electricians. You could take an examination and pass it, but if there was no opening above that you still didn't get advanced. I switched to metal smith to hope for advancement. We had a warrant officer that was our division officer and he had been in for twenty years plus. He didn't care about anything. He was a rummy and was out of it most of the time and he didn't care what we did. We just took care of our job and he didn't bother us.

JM - That is just what happened and that is what we want to hear. If you had to say that there was something about your service that was most memorable, what would you say that would be?

RG - I always felt like I had really good duty because some of the guys were stranded on some island and going nowhere.

JM - You did join the Navy to see the world, didn't you?

RG - I figured I traveled over 350,000 miles over the water. That was two years that I was cruising and the other year was in port somewhere. We never stayed anywhere very long.

JM - Where did you go in the Atlantic when you were there?

RG - Most of the time we went to Liverpool; Glasgow, Scotland; France; Italy or Africa and ports in the Mediterranean area. Most of it was to England, taking troops in there.

JM - Thinking back to before the war, like in 1939 when it was declared, do you remember what the reaction was locally? You are a native of Gray County, right?

RG - No, I was living in Dodge City in 1941 and I went to California and I was working out there when December 7th, Pearl Harbor, came. I knew I was going to get drafted, anyway so that is when I enlisted in the Navy. It was in Los Angeles where I enlisted.

JM - What other memories do you have of December the seventh?

RG - I remember that some other folks and I had decided to go on a little picnic at some park. We had just picked up a bunch of picnic supplies and we were on the way back into town and had the radio on. We heard about Pearl Harbor and at that time I thought, "Where's Pearl Harbor?"

JM - You found out, didn't you?

RG - Oh, I guess.

JM - Why did you join so quickly? You said you knew that you would be drafted.

RG - I decided I didn't want to be in the army. My brother was in the army and I knew I didn't want to be in the kind of outfit he was in.

JM - What did your folks think of this?

RG - They didn't like it that we had to go into the service, but there wasn't any choice.

JM - Think of the day that you went down to sign your name on the dotted line, what was that like?

RG - Everybody was doing it so I didn't have any emotions about it.

JM - You were not alone. Where did you go for your basic training?

RG - San Diego, we were there a couple of weeks and they ran out of barracks so they sent a bunch of us over to Balboa Park. There was some building there that they used for a barracks. We were there a few days and they shipped us by train to Treasure Island, near San Francisco. I was there a couple of days and they put me on the Mount Vernon draft and took me over to the ship. Less than a month after I went in the Navy I was headed across the Pacific.

JM - They didn't teach you a lot of things, but thought you were normally intelligent and could figure them out?

RG - They didn't kick me out like a few of them got kicked out. They were just green kids when they enlisted.

JM - How old were you?

RG - I was twenty-one. I guess I was twenty-two by the time I went in.

JM - You were already away from home so you just let your folks know what you were going to do.

RG - Yeah.

JM - They didn't like it, but they said OK. When you left the United States after a month what were your thoughts?

RG - Not a lot that I can recall, I just remember there were twenty-five of us on this draft that were assigned to the ship's crew at that time. There were seven hundred in the crew. Most of them got assigned to different quarters. I alone got assigned to a corps of old salts that had been on the ship for years. They would tell me about how they had been around the world. They left Boston and went clear over to Africa and different places. They picked up a bunch of English soldiers over there somewhere and took them around. They didn't go through Panama, but went clear around and ended up in the Philippines. That was when the war had already started. They said they practically had to carry some of those English soldiers off the ship because they weren't going to make it. A lot of them were in that Death March.

JM - Bataan?

RG - Yeah.

JM - You had never been on a ship before that? Did you make the adjustment pretty well?

RG - Oh, yeah.

JM - You weren't jammed in, but what was it like at your place where you slept?

RG - We had very nice quarters.

JM - How many people shared it?

RG - The first quarters I went in there were fifteen. What quarters we had, were the crew's quarters when the ship was a luxury liner.

JM - What about the chow?

RG - When we had troops on, we didn't eat too well then. We made up for it on the way back.

JM - Was that when you had prisoners?

RG - We never had many prisoners at one time and we would have some wounded Americans. There was nothing like ten thousand. We always had extra good meals when the troops were off.

JM - Did you work normal hours or did you have to stand watches and things, too? Tell me what a day on the job was like, for instance.

RG - When I first went on the ship, I was in what they called the deck force. When we were out to sea you were on gun watch for four hours on and eight hours off. That was around the clock. The eight hours off was during working hours which was eight in the morning till five in the afternoon. You worked all the way from painting to whatever was needed. You might stand watch like twelve to four in the morning and just get in bed when it was time to go to work. Quarters always sounded an hour before sunup. When we were out at sea everybody got up an hour before sunup and everybody went to their battle stations. You didn't get much sleep that night. After about three months of that, one of the guys had goofed up in the machine shop and hacked off one of the officers so they kicked him off the ship. I put in for a transfer to that division and had no more watches. That was the only division on the ship that never had to stand a watch.

JM - Which was that one?

RG - On the ship it was the A-division, which was the auxiliary. They were the machine shop and they took care of all the heating and air-conditioning of the whole ship and repairs.

JM - You had air-conditioning in the forties?

RG - There wasn't much air-conditioning except for the officer's quarters.

JM - What about communication? Did you write and get mail?

RG - Usually the only time we got mail was when we came back to port.

JM - Was the ship assigned to San Francisco the whole time?

RG - That is where all the mail would come to, APO, a number, and San Francisco.

JM - They knew where you were going so they forwarded it?

RG - I don't think we ever had any mail forwarded except when we went to Bombay. It was three months from the time we left San Francisco. We went clear around and made stops in Australia and Bombay. When we got to Boston it was a three month trip. When we went to Bombay, we were there for two weeks. We could get off the ship every other day in the afternoon only. It was just like the terrible pictures you see. People would just lie down at night in the street to sleep. We stayed there for two weeks. We had a bunch of the Indians that came on and were building barbed wire barricades on the ship. We took on some prisoners there. I don't remember where we dropped them, probably in Australia or the United States, I don't know. I don't think we took them clear back to Boston. I don't recall. We had those guys working and they did all their work with their feet and hands and a little saw and hammer. That was the only tools they had. They used their feet as much as they did their hands.

JM - They didn't have any shoes?

RG - No, I remember one thing at the dock where we were. We were there for two weeks and the day after we pulled away from that dock another ship pulled in. That next day there was a munitions ship. They wouldn't let them into the dock. They had to stay out a mile or two. It blew up and the ship that had pulled in at the dock where we had been, it just pushed it in and lifted it up and set it on the dock.

JM - Did you write home often?

RG - Not too much, as soon as I got back to San Francisco to our home port, I would call home. I didn't do a lot of writing.

JM - That was easier. Did they write to you?

RG - Oh yeah.

JM - How did that feel when you got back?

RG - Everybody was always waiting for the mail when we got back to port.

JM - It was better than good food, wasn't it?

RG - We could see what the latest news was.

JM - As the war continued what were your thoughts?

RG - Everybody wondered when it was going to get over. We had a lot of mixed feelings about how long it was going to last. Everybody was looking forward to that day. Everybody could see that last few months that it was looking better.

JM - From January to April things were ending in Europe?

RG - Yes, that last winter, Germany was pretty well beat up.

JM - Did they turn you around and send you back to the Pacific after you were done in Europe?

RG - I think that ship was finally mothballed and finally cut up for scrap after the war was over. That is what I heard.

JM - How long was it before you got out of the military?

RG - I left before the war was over. I left the ship in April of '44.

JM - That was a full year before the European thing was over?

RG - From the last of April until January of '46 I stayed off the ship.

JM - Where were you?

RG - I was in hospitals. I was at Fort Houston, Virginia, and Sampson, New York.

JM - What were you doing there? Were you injured or something?

RG - It all started, if you want to hear the whole story, I think we were in Norfolk, Virginia, one time we had come back across the Atlantic. They ran everybody over for a chest X-ray. We got out to sea and they called me and one of the other guys on the ship and said our X-rays had shown some little shadow or something. They X-rayed me on the ship and just after we got back to Virginia in Norfolk, they sent me over to the hospital there. They took more X-rays there and after about two weeks the doctor said, "You haven't had a leave for a long time, why don't you take off for thirty days?"

JM - When, before that, had you had any real leave?

RG - One time we had nine days, I think.

JM - In all the four years that you served?

RG - I took that thirty days and I came back to Dodge to see my parents and I went back expecting to be sent back to my ship. I went back and they took some more X-rays and they said that spot was smaller. If it had been the same they would have sent me back to the ship, but it was smaller so they kept me. We lay around there and did nothing. There was a tuberculosis hospital at Sampson, New York.

JM - Where is that from the city, do you know?

RG - It is south of Rochester around the Finger Lakes.

JM - Central New York is a very pretty area.

RG - They sent me and two or three other guys there to Sampson, New York. We went in there and there was a big ward with probably fifty guys at least. There were two rows of beds, one down each side, but there were a couple of them in real bad shape. I never did have any treatment of any kind. The way they treated the ones that got treatment, they would stick a needle in your ribs and pump air between your rib cage and your lungs to take pressure off the lungs. Those guys would come back and they were feeling bad. I don't know how long it would last. I think for a couple of days they would feel bad, but that was their treatment. I never got any treatment and I always doubted that I had any kind of tuberculosis. I had pneumonia about six months before I went into the Navy. I recall that after I had that pneumonia about two weeks I would have a little pain in my back where my lungs were. I always thought that was just a spot from that. I figured it got irritated in my work. I worked in a machine shop, welding. I worked with asbestos a little. I always thought the pneumonia had left a scar and that was the spot.

JM - Can you think of anyone who was very interesting that you knew?

Interviewer: John McLoughlin (JM)

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Tape 1 of 1

Side B

RG - I have a few old pictures. We were going to Pearl Harbor with this load of troops probably along about July of '42. We didn't arrive in the harbor until about an hour after it was dark. The gates were already closed so we blinked a signal that we wanted to come in. They signaled back that we couldn't come in till morning because the submarine gate was closed. The captain said, "We have 7000 troops on here and I am not going to endanger their lives setting here all night with them." They signaled back that that was too bad and we were going to have to stay out there. He said, "I'm coming in. You either open the gates or I am going to crash right through them." So they opened the gates. When we got back to San Francisco we got a new captain. He got booted off.

JM - He was a little bit too forward for the admiral or something?

RG - Right, I don't know what happened to him. He probably just got a new ship. This picture shows us getting the new captain and Alcatraz is in the background. I am right back here.

JM - You have a rear admiral here.

RG - He is the next thing above a captain. These are all officers from the ship. This engineering officer we called "Grumpy". When the Navy took this ship over, a lot of the officers were in the Merchant Marines. They were officers on the USS Washington at that time. They had to go down every so often and sign papers for the merchant marine. First thing, they had signed papers to be in the Navy and didn't know it. A lot of them were in the engineering section. I was on a gun that was four barrel and took about twenty guys to pass the ammunition and load it.

JM - You might want to share these pictures. You were still in the hospital and you didn't get home until January of '46? Was there anybody that was significant in your service?

RG - We had characters. We had one guy we called "Peaches". It was in Boston and half the ship had a party. In a hotel ballroom we had a big dance. I don't know where I am in this picture. This picture was when we were in San Diego. This is my diary. We went to Auckland, Adelaide, Wellington, Sidney, New Zealand, Fiji and San Pedro, to name some places. Here is a newspaper from Bombay, India.

JM - We know you got out on January 29th, Kansas Day in 1946. Did some place impress you?

RG - Hawaii, I went at that time to the Royal Hawaiian Hotel. It is only about four stories high. Back then it was about the only hotel there on the beach. We were not there very long, but I remember going down there and swimming in the afternoon. They had a beer garden that would open up for about a half hour. It was in a tent by the hotel and they would let you buy a beer. It was nice there.

JM - The war is over and you are home. Thanks for sharing your memories with me.

Interviewer: John McLoughlin (JM)

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Tape 1 of 1

END