

Today is Tuesday, December 9, 2014. My name is Fran Prokop. This interview is being conducted at the home of Walter R. Warren, who served in the Army Medical Corps from 1948 to 1950. Mr. Warren 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:

When and where were you born?

I was born in Plymouth, Indiana on November 11, 1929.

What were your parents' occupations?

My father was a laborer and my mother was a housekeeper.

How many brothers and sisters did you have?

I had five brothers and no sisters.

What did you do before entering the service?

I've got to think – you know, I worked in a grocery store as a meat cutter and I also worked as an engineer for a company that manufactured punch presses.

Were any other family members in the military – any of your brothers?

Out of the five brothers who reached adulthood – we were all five in service.

Really - like the Sullivan Brothers.

Three were in service during World War II – one was killed.

Killed in action?

No, in training – the last training flight before being shipped out. The plane blew up in midair.

What a shame – How did you enter the service – were you drafted or did you enlist?

I enlisted.

Why did you choose that specific branch of service?

I didn't –

Oh, you just went in and enlisted and they put you in there?

Yes.

How did you get into the medical service?

Well, I was sent to Fort Knox, Kentucky first for assignment, really –

For basic training?

No, for assignment. And they sent me to Fort Devens, Massachusetts for basic infantry training. At the end of the basic training I was shipped to Walter Reed General Hospital. There were 11 of us and when we fell out down there, the Sergeant asked if anyone could type. I volunteered and was assigned to the Assignment Section under Sgt. Wood.

What were your duties there?

I had the records of every man and woman on the post both at Walter Reed and at Forest Glen Annex. During that time I conducted a survey to make certain that every person was actually operating in their correct MOS – military occupation specialty.

How old were you when you went into the service?

Eighteen.

And did you have any college education at that time?

No.

Just high school – and typing – always look for typists.

Yes.

How long did you stay at Walter Reed?

At Walter Reed – I was there until I was discharged.

You spent your entire service there?

Entire time.

So Fort Devens, Massachusetts was your regular basic training?

That's correct.

How long did that last?

Let's see – maybe I was only 17 when I enlisted – anyway, from September to December.

Did you have to go through regular basic training with marching, and guns –

Oh, absolutely, absolutely.

You had the full range of basic training?

Yes.

How did you get to Fort Knox, when you first went in – by what mode of transportation?

Bus.

And then from Fort Knox to Fort Devens?

By train.

We didn't finish your early days of training – how did you find military life – during basic training – describe a typical day in basic training.

It was tough, because – well, first off, when we first arrived at Fort Devens, we had to prepare the post for basic training. It had been a prisoner of war camp during World War II.

Oh.

So we had to clean it up; we found knives and things in the barracks – but – I was in Company B. Company A was a group from New York City and they knew nothing. They couldn't march, they couldn't shoot, they couldn't do anything. I rather enjoyed

basic training. It was tough because we – when we started out basic training they gave us a new obstacle course – whereby we were sort of guinea pigs – and one of the things was to – a group of 5 or 6 on each team and we had this log that we would throw back and forth. My team – one of the fellas missed the catch and he caught the log just above his boot top and broke both bones in his leg. So they disbanded that one. But it was tough – but it was good.

Tell me – since the war was over already, why did you join the military – you just wanted to join – for economic reasons or –

Well, that's a story. My buddy and I had plans to buy motorcycles and travel to California. And at that time you couldn't buy motorcycles; they weren't manufacturing them and everything that was built prior to the war was in the hands of people who didn't want to sell. So, we went to – do you know anything about Indiana?

Yeah, I know where Plymouth is, on Route 30 – a small town – north central Indiana.

Route 31 – okay – we were in South Bend looking for motorcycles and I was disgusted. On the way back we stopped in Plymouth and I went in and enlisted.

Ha, ha.

Now the recruiting sergeant – see, I lived on a farm and he would come out to the farm during the week just to gab. There wasn't much going on at the time – and we were taking in hay one time, and I had the bailer behind the tractor and he hooked the wagon behind the jeep and hauled the hay around to the barn and helped me unload it., So, it gave him something to do – but anyway that was the story. So when the group of, maybe 15-20 guys were grouped together to be transported to Fort Knox, and they put me in charge of the group, probably because I looked like I was the oldest. Anyway, Fort Knox was kind of a hell hole – KP and you're feeding 3,000 men out of one mess hall.

So you just enlisted because you weren't working and you couldn't get your motorcycle –

No, I had a job –

So you were working but you weren't happy probably with the job – just wanted something different.

Yes.

That's a good reason.

And of course at that age, you know, you don't have to have a good reason.

Right, right. So did you have any specialized training in the Army after the basic training?

No, no, I did not.

Did you ever go overseas?

No.

You spent all of your two years of service at Walter Reed.

That's correct. Well, I take that back. I would take patients out to various VA Hospitals on TDA – temporary duty assignment - so this was a long time ago - I'm 85 years old.

I understand that.

Anyway, then we got a requirement from the Surgeon General's Office – they needed a clerk. So I volunteered for that and was sent down to the Surgeon General's office, which was down in the main Navy Building at the time, in downtown Washington. And my job there was selecting officers for overseas duty.

Wow –

Under the auspices of the Captain. But I would get a requirement from each of the theaters of operation – and the requirement was – Medical Service Officer in the rank of Captain for the Far East – or whatever it was – and I would pull the jackets – and go through and select a group for each one of these theaters – and then pass them on to

the Captain who would check to see if he knew any of them – if he didn't, they were gone. I sent my assistant Troop Commander overseas and he didn't care much for it.

What was the highest rank you ever achieved?

PFC.

How about friendships formed and camaraderie of service – people that you met there –

Well, it was primarily at Fort Devens in basic training, I met a fella from Chicago – Forrest Paddock – was his name – we called him “logs” – and the only way I got to know him – like I say this was a hell hole at Fort Knox – and if you made your bed, or bunk then you wouldn't do anything or sit on it during the day so they could do their inspection. Well, I walked in the barracks one day and this fella was lying in my bunk. So I picked him up like this (indicating) and I dropped him on the floor and he became like a log.

That was a nice way to start a friendship, ha, ha.

It was; it was. But I was married while I was at Walter Reed.

So you got married at an early age.

Oh, yes, yes – too early, and it didn't last.

Did you meet the lady there in Washington?

No, no, high school sweetheart.

So did she come out there to live with you?

Yes, yes. We were married by an Army Chaplain.

Did you have like a military wedding?

No, no, just in his office.

So you and your wife had your own apartment in Washington.

Yes, we did; lived off post.

What post were you assigned to?

That was Walter Reed – that was the post.

To me it's the hospital – but it's much more than that.

Oh, yes, if you ever saw it.

I never have seen it.

Well, let me tell you just a bit about it – because it had a lot of labs in it – you go up there and Forest Glen. Forest Glen was primarily a – well, they did a lot of appliances – you know, artificial limbs –

Yes, yes – they're not called appliances today; they are called prosthetics. Maybe at that time prosthetics was not THE word, but appliances was used.

Right, yes. Anyway, and I had to tour both facilities to make certain that the people working there were in their proper MOS – if not I had to take them before the MOS Board, of which I was a part, and correct it. I also assisted the recruiting office. Each time a guy would be up for a discharge, they'd try to re-enlist him. So as a result I had to take reports down to the Pentagon from time to time.

So you're pretty familiar with Washington, D.C. in general.

Yes, yes.

How about your family back home – your parents and your brothers – how did you stay in touch with them – was it just telephone calls, letters.

Letters. We didn't have a phone.

No phone.

No, we lived on the farm –

That's right; they were still on the farm; they remained there.

Yes. My two oldest brothers had married by that time and they were living away from home. Of course my brother Bob was the one who was killed. Then I had the younger brother Orville at home.

You described most of your duties and you continued with those duties for the two years you were there.

Well, while I was there my Troop Commander was reassigned and when that occurred the new Troop Commander brought his own First Sergeant, Supply Sergeant and assignment Chief. That put me out of a job. So they sent me up on the Hill, so to speak, up to Regimental.

And what did you do there?

Nothing.

Were you almost ready to leave anyway?

No, no, but I didn't have any duties. That's why I was on these DS trips – Detached Service – and I took patients all over the country – to Denver –

Why is that – was he going home or something?

No, he was being transferred out there. He was a TB patient – and Letterman was the best TB Hospital in the group. And I took a patient to St. Cloud, Minnesota to a VA Hospital –

How did you travel with these patients?

Well, the first one to Denver we traveled by train primarily. But to St. Cloud we went by air – now it was an Army Hospital plane – and on the way back – this was just before Christmas, the first Christmas I was in service, the plane stopped in Chicago for refueling on the way back – the pilot's wife lived there. So he stopped. Anyway, I got off on leave, I think a week, and I took a bus in to my home.

So where else did you go with other patients.

Oh, yes, -- I couldn't go south with a black patient - I went to Denver with a black patient, but trips were primarily up in New York State, and to Baltimore --

So who would go with the black patients - a black person?

Yes, yes.

Your two years came to an end -- how did you get back home -- take a train back?

No, I drove back; bought a car and drove back home.

Of course you were married so you and your wife came home.

Yes, yes.

How was your readjustment to civilian life -- what did you do after you got out of the service?

I went right back to the grocery store -- I returned to meat cutting. I'd been cutting meat since I was about 15 years old and the owner of the grocery store sold and the fella that bought it had no understanding of butchering. So he came to school one day and asked if I would come to work for him before school and afterwards. I said that I had no transportation. He said well, you come in on a bus and work a while in the morning and at night I'll drive you home. Well, that was a good deal. So I finally started skipping school on the last period to go to the grocery store. And also in the morning, see, my parents kind of kept house for a lot of uncles, aunts and so on and we fed them during the Depression, because we were on the farm. And now, anyway, my cousin was staying with us and he was working in Plymouth and I would ride to Plymouth with him in the morning and hitchhike down to Argus where the grocery store was so I could get there before the bus came. This hauling me back and forth didn't last long. No, I turned 16 then and was able to get my driver's license, so my boss loaned me the money to buy my first car.

How nice!

\$250, yeah.

So you didn't have much use for school after that.

No, I finished school.

You did graduate high school.

Oh, yes, I did.

Okay, so you went back to that job –

For a short time. I wanted to get back into engineering – so I applied to several places but was accepted to S.H. Arnold, Inc. in Warsaw, Indiana – which was about 15-20 miles, I guess, from Argus.

What I'm getting at is did you ever go back to school under the G I Bill?

No, I did not.

You should have taken advantage of that.

I should have, but I was raising a family at the time and that was difficult.

Yes, it is. So you were just looking for a job, not going to school.

That's right. In fact, I was, later on, of course, I was made the Vice President and General Manager of two different Divisions, at separate times, without having a college degree.

Yeah, when you're smart, you're smart; don't always need college. People could see that you are an intelligent person.

Well, it's how you apply yourself too.

That's true too, and how you present yourself.

Yep.

So did you ever have any contact with fellow veterans over the years?

That's another story – Like I said, I was in Company B at Fort Devens, and there was a bunch of Midwestern guys – when I was 18 months old my Aunt named me "Pete".

Well, I went by the name of Pete until I went into the service. After I got out of service one of the fellas I'd been in with came through town and when he asked for me, he was asking for a Walt Warren – nobody knew a Walt Warren. They knew Pete Warren; they said there's a lot of Warrens around but nobody by that name. So I didn't get to see him.

So are you a member today in any veterans' organizations?

No, I'm not.

Not even here at Carillon - because they have a VFW here –

That's VFW –

Yeah, that's right - foreign wars.

We just donated a lot of clothes to the veterans – and Jim came over the house to pick them up. In fact I'm going to go out with him to the Veterans' Home on his next load.

Oh, to Manteno? I donate stuff too, books or magazines. Good.

Yeah.

Are you just going to see what it's like or to talk to the guys –

Talk to the guys – I'll take a bunch of crosses out.

Oh, yes; Walt makes these beautiful wooden crosses, which I have one of, I'm very happy to say. So he's going to take them out to the servicemen. When are You going?

I don't know, but next trip out – he says he goes once a month. Jim's a character –

Yeah, he is. Okay, so how did your military experience affect your life, do you think?

Well, I think it gave me the drive – allowed me to make Vice President –

The drive to succeed –

Yeah, because you don't necessarily do just your job; you do more than your job. And in fact that's what happened. I was production manager for a company up in Elk Grove Village, and my boss, he was the vice President, suffered a heart attack and as a result he left the company at that point. And they didn't replace him because I just stepped in, did his job and mine too. And after a period of time they woke up and said well, you're doing this job, we'll just make you the Vice President.

How nice. That was good.

Yeah, I was firing people that didn't work for me.

So basically – what life lessons did you learn from the military.

They gave me the drive to succeed.

So overall you have a favorable impression –

Of the military, oh, yes, yes.

That's good to hear. Well, thank you. If there anything else that you would like to add?

No, but after we get through here I can show you photographs of the boys and Bob who was killed, in uniform. They were all home at the same time on leave, and being a little town, only 1,000 population, this picture was in the candy store window – three different services.

Okay, if there's anything else you may think of that you want to add just let me know. I have to transcribe this tape and will send it off to Washington – but anyway, I thank you both for this interview and thank you for your service to our country.

Thank you for calling on me.

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