

2001 Oral History Project
Parents of the Baby Boomers, 1941-2001
Interviewee: Peter Douma
Interviewer: Michael Douma
July 6, 2001

MD: When and where were you born?

PD: I was born in Randolph, Wisconsin, [date removed], 1922.

MD: What is it like over there? What was it like when you were born?

PD: It's a nice spot to live.

MD: Nice farms?

PD: Nice farms, and I worked on farms in my youth.

MD: What was your family like—how many brother and sisters did you have? How did you work, and what did you do growing up?

PD: I had eight sisters and one brother, and I worked mainly on farms out there. My dad was a builder, so I helped him a lot.

MD: What was your first connection with the military?

PD: When I was inducted. I was inducted in Eugene, Oregon, and went to Fort Lewis, Washington.

MD: What did you start training as? What did they say you were going to do?

PD: They trained me as a tank battalion, as a tank driver.

MD: Was it for sure that you were going to go to Europe, or did you think that you might have gone to Japan?

PD: We were trained to go to Japan, the Pacific. But they changed their mind just before we got shipped overseas.

MD: Why do you think they did?

PD: I don't really know, I never did know.

MD: Where were you on December 7th, 1941, and what were you doing?

PD: I was in Eugene, Oregon, in the hospital with a double hernia operation, when they hit Pearl Harbor.

MD: What caused that, was it just working too hard?

PD: Yeah, I slipped and hurt myself.

MD: What did you do training-wise right before you got sent over to Europe?

PD: I went to weapons school, so I learned the maintenance of just about every gun there was in the Army. So, I was pretty well trained in that.

MD: Tell me about your transport over to Europe.

PD: We left New York on the Dutch ship Amsterdam. We landed in Glasgow, Scotland, and from there we went to Coventry, England. That was where we continued training.

MD: You have an interesting story about a cook that you met on the Neiuw Amsterdam, if you'd like to tell part of that story.

PD: We were going overseas, I was in charge of a KP detail. When I got down there, the crew were all Holland people. Being able to speak Friesian and Dutch, I got acquainted with the head cook and another young fellow, and during the trip over I had better meals than most of the fellows. I got white bread and they got dark bread. And so it was pretty interesting being able to talk with them.

MD: Can you think of any other times in the war where your ability to speak Friesian, which is similar to Dutch and German, helped pay off?

PD: After the war, I worked in the military government. We traveled from village to village getting the occupation of the people that lived there. During that time, I had a young girl

that the Burgermeister gave me to report all the occupations. She couldn't speak English, and of course, I was limited with what I could do. She would break it down for me, and I would break it down for her to figure out what the occupation was. It was quite interesting.

MD: What did you do during your stay in the British Isles? You said you went to Scotland, and I know you went down to England.

PD: They assigned me to some military police duty in the city of Coventry, England, so I did that most of the time I was over there. I didn't have to do any training. That was quite interesting also.

MD: What was it like in Coventry? I know you had some bombings that went on.

PD: That was the most bombed city in England. There was a big cathedral where we were stationed—we were stationed right behind that cathedral, and that thing was practically demolished.

MD: Was it mostly V1 rockets, they didn't have any...?

PD: No, it was bombers that did that.

MD: How did you transport from England to France?

PD: We went on an LST, liberty ship, through the channel, and we landed in Normandy.

MD: Pretty early on?

PD: Yeah, it was six days after D-Day that we landed there.

MD: Was it pretty rough fighting right off the start?

PD: The first night we got there, we went into bivouac. We went in there at night, and that night we got bombed right off the bat. That would be the first experience of being in the war.

MD: Did you see that people were thankful that the tanks, the tank division, the armor divisions were starting to come over and started to lead the way?

PD: Yeah, they treated us pretty good really. They were thankful for us to come there and liberate them. That was a nice experience really, that part of it.

MD: Tell us about your tank—I know it wasn't a Sherman, it was a little bit different.

PD: The tank destroyer is a little bit different than the armored tank divisions. Ours had an open part on the turret, and on that we had a 50-caliber machine gun which we could traverse all around. We could shoot right down into the sides of our tank. And then I had an M-36 with a forward V-16 engine, and it had a 90-millimeter gun on it. So it was pretty powerful. They maneuvered better than what the Sherman tanks did.

MD: How many of those do you think the Americans had in the war?

PD: I really don't know.

MD: A couple hundred?

PD: Probably at least I think.

MD: As you traveled through France are there any stories that stick out in your mind, comedy stories, or war stories?

PD: We were the first ones that were into Paris, and we were in the Paris Parade. That was quite an experience to see that city.

MD: And what division were you?

PD: We were attached to the 28th division, and we were a battalion, the 630th tank destroyer battalion.

MD: How did you get along with the French people?

PD: I never had too much problem with them. They always made believe they didn't understand us. That was about it.

MD: Most of them would help you out?

PD: Yeah, they helped us pretty good, when we asked them for things.

MD: You were involved in the Battle of the Bulge. Is there anything that you remember from there?

PD: Yeah, they actually broke through us first. There was the 106th infantry division and it had just come from the states. They were just a little bit north of us, and the Germans hit them first at night. They shelled, and shelled, and shelled them. An awful lot of those fellows gave up that night. They were just about completely destroyed by the Germans.

MD: I know you kept really good care of your tank, and you were proud of it. Do you have any stories relating to that?

PD: I had an awful good crew on my tank. I had a real good gunner.

MD: Do you remember any of their names?

PD: My gunner was Jerome Fliege.

MD: Do you know where they were from?

PD: He was from DeButte, Iowa. I don't remember where the other guys were from—some of them were from out East.

MD: I recall you telling me a story that you were the only ones that had gas in your tank and you were told to keep going until you ran out.

PD: They were short on gas and weren't able to supply us. I always made sure I had my tank full with gas so that I wouldn't have any problems. We were on the move, and they told us to keep going until we ran out, wherever we ran out. Finally we were all alone out

there in nowhere, and my sergeant on the tank finally stopped me and says, “This is far enough, were out here all alone.” So we turned around from there and went back to the other part of the outfit. I guess in a day or so we had more gas again.

MD: Do you remember any unusual stories, like prisoners, or anything special that happened?

PD: No, not too much. I did get two German prisoners myself. They were in a house. We had to go there to get some water and they were there. I captured those and brought them back to camp. I also was in Malmady, where they massacred about two hundred and fifty Americans there. We were there about thirty minutes after that happened.

MD: How did that happen?

PD: At that time—the Germans—they had a lot of them that dressed in American uniforms. They changed the signs on the road to confuse the Americans. But we figured it out and we got that way anyway. Then we came just about to Malmady, then we saw all these GIs scattered around the ground.

MD: So they just got tricked and mowed down?

PD: No, they just slaughtered them. Then we went into the town of Malmady, and there we saw an old lady sitting in a rocking chair, knitting, and they had shot her. Right in her chair there.

MD: Why do you think they did that?

PD: They did it to make it look like we were the ones that were to blame, because they had the American uniforms and they wanted to blame the Americans for it.

MD: That brings up a question to ask of how much you saw of the Holocaust, and what you remember, if you'd like to talk about it—you don't have to.

PD: Yeah, I saw it. I didn't actually go in it, the worst concentration camp. The 101st airborne was with us most of the time, and they had taken that. So we didn't get to go in it. But later we were going down the road and there was probably a mile long of bodies stacked four to five feet high—skeletons and bodies—that they had ready to be pushed into trenches that they had dug, but they didn't have the time to do it.

MD: And where was this, do you remember the name of the camp?

PD: I don't know exactly what the name of that place was.

MD: Was it is the German border, or was it in France?

PD: It was in the German part of it.

MD: Do you remember a different feeling when you actually entered Germany? Were you one of the first American divisions to enter?

PD: Yeah, we were one of the first ones. We were the first ones that crossed the Rhine. But there really wasn't much difference as far as landscape, except that in France there were a lot of hedgerows, and you didn't have those in Germany.

MD: I know you spent some time in Cologne. Do you have any stories from there?

PD: Yeah, we were in Cologne, and we had quite a battle there. We were right next to that famous cathedral there. One night we were supposed to get some replacements. I think there were fifteen young guys that came just from the States, and they were in front of that cathedral and a German shell came in and killed every one of them. That's what I remember about that mostly.

MD: What happened from there to the end of the war? Do you remember what you were doing?

PD: I was all over the place really. All over Germany, I was in Liechtenstein, Belgium, France, part of Austria. After the Battle of the Bulge, they sent us back to the Ruhr area, and there was big pocket there. We had to break, cut that up into pieces. I drove for three days and three nights without sleep, cutting through that pocket.

MD: How fast could you go in your tank?

PD: Top speed was about thirty-five miles an hour.

MD: Do you remember V-E Day, what it was like when you heard the news that the Germans had finally surrendered?

PD: Well, that was a pretty happy day. We celebrated a little bit, that was about it. We were just looking forward to coming home.

MD: How long did it take before you came home? What did you do for the first couple months after the war ended?

PD: I was in the military government, like I mentioned before, and I spent most of my time doing that. I forgot exactly how long we were there after that. The deal was at that time you had to have forty-eight points and then you would be one of the first ones to ship out. Well, we had forty-eight points, but we were one of the last ones that got shipped home. So we were all a little disappointed with that.

MD: Do you remember your trip home, what ship you were on and what happened?

PD: Coming back again, we were on another Dutch ship which was the Summelsdijk. We were out about three days coming back and a fellow walked across in front of me and I recognized him—he was the same cook that had been on the Amsterdam. He was really happy and surprised to see me coming back alive. I had a good time with him coming home.

MD: Made it through the whole war...

PD: Made it through the whole war, and he was really happy to see me alive.

MD: What was it like when you finally reached America? Where did you come in and land?

PD: We landed in New York—just about the same spot again. That was the happiest day of my life.

MD: Not a big fan of boat travel?

PD: I didn't mind it too much, I didn't get sick or anything, but a lot of the guys got seasick. Coming back on the Summelsdijk, we hit a storm, they called it a gale, the sailors did, but to us it scooped water up from...bobbed so much. That was a little scary.

MD: Do you remember when you finally got home, was Wisconsin still home, running into your parents after the war, and how it had changed? Was it a lot different?

PD: Yeah, we were separated in Fort Sheridan, Illinois, and then from there we went home. One of the fellows that was in the service with me, Swizlak, he was from Minneapolis, and another fellow was from someplace in Wisconsin. And Fliege was from DeButte, Iowa. We got on one of those Amtraks and that's the way we went to Milwaukee, and we separated there. That's the last I ever saw of them. Home was just about the same yet, as when I had left six years ago, before.

MD: Had anything changed, like your siblings moved off?

PD: Yeah, there was the next generation after I had been there. No, otherwise it was pretty much the same.

MD: Same dog?

PD: No, I didn't have a dog anymore. My dog was killed by a car when I was about sixteen years old.

MD: What happened when you got back...you decided to go back to work on the farm?

PD: Yeah, for a while, I went on the farm. I had a brother who had a farm, and after we worked together for part of that winter and spring. Then I got a job harvesting peas, and then I went into cement work for a while.

MD: Working with your dad?

PD: No, my dad passed away while I was overseas. And I never got to see him again.

MD: Did you get the news when you were over there that that had happened?

PD: Yeah, and I could have come home. But he was gone anyway, and I just had a short time to be there anymore, so I didn't do it, I stayed and went home with my outfit.

MD: How do you think the war changed you when you got back? Were you completely different, would you look at things different ways, you know, life is so great?

PD: Well, I'm more appreciable of the United States, I'll tell you that. There isn't a better country than what this is.

MD: When did you meet grandma and start your family?

PD: The fall of '46 that was. I came to Grand Rapids, and for a little while I worked in a factory. Then in the spring I went to work for a brother-in-law of mine who was in the brick laying business, and I learned the brick trade. I was with him for about nine and a half years, and then I started my own business and I did that until I retired.

MD: Did you have children? If so, how many? Did your spouse work? Was it after or during early childhood? Why? So, did you have children?

PD: We had three boys. David Lee, the oldest; James Douma, the second; and then we had Daniel Douma, but Dan passed away in 1995.

MD: And that was pretty rough. You can talk about it if you like or not.

PD: He had died of cancer, and he had suffered pretty much for about the last four or five months that he was alive. So, we miss him a lot.

MD: What hobbies did you do while you were married and working?

PD: I belonged to a bowling team and bowled for quite a few years; it was a church-affiliated league. At that time, we were members of Bethany Reformed Church, and quite a few of us bowled. And then I always sang in the choir for years.

MD: Which church was it that you went to?

PD: Bethany Reformed.

MD: For how many years?

PD: About forty-five years.

MD: Where is that? Grand Rapids?

PD: Yeah, that's on Earldon. It's now a Pentecostal Church, they bought that from us. We merged with Fairview Reformed Church, and now we're called Orchard Hill Reformed.

MD: Just Reformed, not Christian Reformed?

PD: No, Reformed.

MD: A lot of Dutch people?

PD: Quite a few, yeah. Most of them are, but there's a lot of other people too.

MD: After your children left, did you become more independent? What did you start doing, any vacations?

PD: We really didn't change much, traveled some.

MD: Because you were still working?

PD: Yeah, we traveled; go out to the lake and spend the day.

MD: So you liked to spend time in Holland and in the U.P.

PD: Yeah, we went up to the U.P. a few times and went out to Yellowstone National Park.

MD: That was with the entire family?

PD: That was with Jim and Dan.

MD: Because Dave was in college?

PD: Dave was in the service, during the Vietnam era.

MD: But he never went over?

PD: No, he was fortunate.

MD: Are there any stories you remember of your children that you'd like to talk about? Like when they were young or during college?

PD: No, there really isn't a lot to say. All three of them helped me, tending, when I was laying brick. Dave, of course, went into the service, and he wound up going to college in Minnesota.

MD: He got married and lived out there?

PD: He got married, and he has three children—two boys and a girl. Jim went to Ferris State to become an accountant. He has twin boys, and a daughter, and then a younger son.

MD: About five or six years ago, we got in touch with relatives from the Netherlands. Did you greet that with excitement? What did you feel about genealogy connections?

PD: That was interesting because I have a second cousin that lives in Bremton, Ontario, Canada. They came over here to Canada in 1946, and I never knew they were there until 1994. Somehow they had gone to Wisconsin, where I had lived before, and they knew some people that had come over with them at the same time. And they said there is a lot of Doumas around here. So my sister got his telephone number, but she didn't know the area code. She told me about it, and I called him, and he called me back, and we started

talking about making a family genealogy book. So between him and I, and two of my cousins in the Netherlands, we wound up making a Douma genealogy book, and that goes back to the 1630s, so that's a long time ago, and that's pretty interesting. And they came here and visited us a couple of times.

MD: What was that like the first time that you heard the Friesian language being spoken for fifty years?

PD: Well, that was pretty good. They both could talk English, but the one preferred to talk Fris, the Friesian language. To this day yet—he calls me and I call him once in a while—and we talk Friesian. But he can talk English real well.

MD: Is there anything else that you'd like to talk about?

PD: Not really, I'm kind boring. (laughs)

MD: Definitely not. I'm sure they'll use this. Alright, we're done.

[End of interview]