

Robert S. Avedisian
Cedar City Library Veterans' History Project
Interviewed by: Steven D. Decker, Library Director
Date: 2004
Final Edit: November 2010

Interviewer:

Ok Bob. Let's just start by stating and spelling your full name if you would please.

Veteran:

My name is Robert S. Avedisian. Avedisian is spelled A V E D I S I A N.

Interviewer:

You reside here in Cedar City?

Veteran:

Yes, I do.

Interviewer:

And where did you reside when you were drafted or when you enlisted?

Veteran:

I enlisted in the regular Army Air Corps June 8, 1939, and went on active duty immediately, and I lived, at that time, near Rochester, New York. And for the Korean War, I was a Cedar City resident and two days prior to the unit being called up for the Korean War, actually on the 17th of August 1950, at the request of the Battalion Commander, of the local Guard unit, I volunteered to go in as the Personnel Officer and Assistant Adjutant of the Battalion.

Interviewer:

Now, you were in the group in Korea, then, that came from this area under Colonel Dalley.

Veteran:

Yes, I was.

Interviewer:

Ok. We'll get back to that I'm sure as we go along. Branch of Service? Army?

Veteran:

The first, which is for World War II, was the regular Army Air Corps and for the Korean service was the National Guard, Army.

Interviewer:

Ok. You've already told me the years you served. What rank did you achieve? What was your highest rank?

Veteran:

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I was a Master Sergeant in the regular Army during World War II, and I spent my entire time in the Korean War as a Warrant Officer.

Interviewer:

Being not a military person I don't know what all the ribbons mean.

Veteran:

Well, there are so many I don't recall what they all are. I have many medals at home on a little display and some awards were ribbon only.

Interviewer:

Any specific decoration that you are most pleased with?

Veteran:

Yes. The Pearl Harbor Survivors Medal, and if I may I'd like to read the first and last sentence on the award of that, on the 50th anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor and this is from United States Senator Jake Garn. And it begins, "I am pleased to have the opportunity to congratulate you on your receiving the Pearl Harbor Congressional Medal of Honor." And the last sentence is, "On this solemn occasion, please accept my sincere gratitude for your exemplary service to the United States."

Interviewer:

Now, did Senator Garn present that to you personally?

Veteran:

No. It was the Mayor of St. George, Mayor Brooks, on or about the 50th Anniversary, which would have been 1991. But that was just a sample of some of the letters of commendation that I received over the many years.

Interviewer:

Now, you went in as a Personnel...?

Veteran:

I was the Personnel Officer of the Battalion and Assistant Adjutant.

Interviewer:

Is that a combat position?

Veteran:

No, it's not.

Interviewer:

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But you did see combat?

Veteran:
Oh, yes.

Interviewer:
Ok. Why don't you tell us a little about that?

Veteran:
Well, from the time we first got into Korea, the casualties, that we were made aware of, primarily were people on the road riding to and from various positions. And Major Fenton, the Executive Officer, decreed that I and my driver would go to every Battery, every day, seven days a week. And the one thing that I was a little disappointed with, mostly years later, was that day in May, when the Chinese were attacking two Batteries who were bivouacked in the same location, that's Able Battery from Richfield and Headquarters Battery from Cedar City, that no one had the presence of mind to say, "Bob, don't come. We're under attack." So my driver and I came in on it while it was still going on. It was still going on by the time I left there, about an hour later.

There was one other time prior to that, in April of 1951, when the enemy was attacking in great force; we were given word to evacuate immediately and head south. And they gave us a number of minutes that we supposedly had to complete that. Two officers, ranking above me, one of them said, about the mail, "Burn the mail." The other one says, "Drop everything except the personnel records and go!" And we were the absolute last group to leave to head south. While we were in the evacuation line, a certain Captain sent word back with his driver for me to pull out of the line and follow the Jeep back to where the 213th Field Artillery was bivouacked. And I said, "I will later tell that Captain, but you tell him that we are all going the same place." And I wouldn't bug out. Later, he was charged with running in the face of the enemy and pretty near took a court marshal. But the Battalion Commander and Executive Officer managed to get him a lesser penalty for his act. I, having experienced World War II, reacted in the manner in which I did even though all of my personnel were first time members of the unit.

Interviewer:
When you reflect back on your military service, what are the vivid moments?

Veteran:
The scary one was, the second bomb of World War II was a direct hit on my barracks, barracks meaning the place where we lived. We heard the first one, I had just got my breakfast....

Interviewer:

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Now, were these the atomic bombs?

Veteran:

No. This was years before. This was December 7, 1941, and I was in the process of carrying my breakfast back to my table when I heard a plane diving down and I knew, as Operations Sergeant, that we had no aircraft in the area and I couldn't understand what it was, and a loud explosion, which turned out to be the first bomb. And the second one was a dive-bomber and that direct hit just below my room on the third floor and into the mess hall where I just walked away from, and it demolished our building, a local resident, years later, who used to go over there, pretty near every year, said they never did rebuild it as late as that. They left it there as a memento of the destruction of the Japanese attack. That bombing and strafing continued for about two hours. After which, I helped carry out some of the dead and wounded. We lost more personnel than anyone else at Wheeler Field, the Fighter Command for the 7th Air Force, because we were the only barracks that was hit by the Japanese other than just incidental with machine gun fire.

Interviewer:

And that's at Pearl.

Veteran:

Yes, uh huh! We were at the center of the Island, but on their way from North to South to get to Pearl Harbor they attacked us first. Moments later they got Hickam Field, which is Bomber Command, and the third strike, of course, was for the ships anchored at Pearl Harbor itself.

Interviewer:

That's always been billed as a surprise attack, at least to the layman. Did you have any idea it was coming?

Veteran:

No. We had been on 24-hour-a-day-alert for a considerable length of time and just a couple of days before December 7th of '41 they said go back to routine duties, and so we, at the point of the attack, had no idea that that was coming.

Interviewer:

What about a humorous experience?

Veteran:

Humorous. In the National Guard, at summer encampment, up North here, at Camp Williams, we were having our review for the Governor. And Colonel Dalley gave the command "Right turn!" and proceeded to march off. I waited a couple of seconds and no one said anything, I was the Battalion Sergeant Major at the time, and so I said,

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“Battalion! Right turn. March!” and off everybody went, which is what he intended, but that made it kind of funny, I thought.

One of the cruel things that happened was in May of 1944, just days before my daughter was born, one of our non-coms came out while we were engaged in our exercise, as we called it, calisthenics, we were playing volleyball, and he came out and read what purported to be a special order transferring me to a Port of Embarkation for additional assignment overseas. I was the only one in our group here in Cedar City, at the College, who had been overseas. And it turned out to be a hoax. But it was a very shaking experience to have such a nasty trick played on me.

Interviewer:
When was that?

Veteran:
That was in 1944, in May. When my daughter was born, the end of May.

Interviewer:
Any particular moments of religious or spiritual experience that you'd like to share?

Veteran:
No. I don't think so.

Interviewer:
What was your family life like while you were serving?

Veteran:
Well, in World War II, I had been pretty much on my own for a few years before I went into the military and so I didn't really have any close ties. The only contact that I had with my family was my mail. By contrast, today they have computers and cell phones and all that. So it was probably, at least, ten days before my family knew that I was still ok.

Interviewer:
Were there any experiences...if you had your grandchildren sitting around your knee, what would you tell them?

Veteran:
Well, I've explained to them about earning the medals that they could see, that are on a little display case at home, told them what they were for, as best as I could remember.

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My two oldest grandchildren, one of them was thirty-nine years old yesterday and his brother was thirty-seven one day sooner, in July of 2004. And younger one served something over eight years in the local National Guard, put himself through college. His older brother, thirty-nine years old, put himself through college and voluntarily enlisted in the military and served a hitch and then was, later, in the National Guard, but neither one of those boys is a member of the Guard at the present time. They're old enough now that they can appreciate having seen what happened over in the East, currently and ten years ago, and they've seen movies too and they can appreciate what it would be like, to a certain degree, to be thousands of miles away from home for so many years.

I put in a total of eight years active federal service, that's 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week, and four years overseas, and never closer than several days travel, 'cause in those days we didn't fly around everywhere, we took surface transportation.

Interviewer:
What did you do in your civilian life?

Veteran:
Just odd jobs before World War II service, which commenced June 8th of '39. I was Branch Office Supervisor of the Department of Employment Security, here in Cedar, for a short period of time, and I was a policeman and an Iron County Deputy Sheriff for a number of years in Cedar City.

I wound up with twenty-five years at two iron mines, meaning Columbia Iron Mining Company and Utah International and retired from that. I still do quite a bit of volunteer work, which is kind of along the same line as law enforcement on a volunteer base.

Interviewer:
What were your feelings of support like during World War II and Korea? Support from home or from Congress or from the Government or from the people you knew?

Veteran:
Nothing specific other than the attitude of our public was so much different at that time – they all were behind us that I know of. A little sidelight, September 11, 1969, my younger daughter's husband died in Viet Nam and left a beautiful wife and daughter behind and the daughter is high up with the Leavitt Group, here in Cedar City, and she's going to the old library – she's going to be in charge of a group downstairs in the old library when it gets finished.

But the people, especially in World War II did more, did much more actually, than you might expect people to do to support the war effort. They were behind us. There were no insults to the military. It was very heartening to see that attitude.

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Interviewer:

Today we're in conflict in Iraq. Ten years ago we were too. Vietnam before that and the mood, historically, seems to have shifted a bit from the World War II or Korea days to the Vietnam era and forward. Is that true?

Veteran:

Yes. I think a whole lot of it has to do with trust that is coming out more and more in these past couple of years, that the fiasco, as I refer to it, has been going on. And they're finding out that things weren't what we were told they were by our top officials. And that's bad.

There were rumors after World War II that our President then, FDR, had a lot of information about this impending sneak attack from the Japanese that he did not enlighten the public about and that could have been avoided had he told us what was about to take place. We could have been in better position to not lose so many men and so many ships right on that first day and maybe there would not have been a war, and had we known ahead of time we wouldn't have had such an extended period of combat either. That's my true belief.

Interviewer:

This isn't necessarily on the questions that we've talked about a little bit before hand, but as a soldier, as somebody who has been out and been in military situations, are there situations in your lifetime that we should not have gotten involved in, in your opinion?

Veteran:

Really, the present one [War on Terror in Iraq]. I don't think it was justified at all. They...I don't know who to trust anymore. I'm so disappointed with our...all the way from the President [George H. W. Bush], and including his subordinates who are charged with our safety and our actions over there, I'm very disappointed with it.

Interviewer:

What were the physical conditions that you served in?

Veteran:

Well, it's more memorable – the primitive areas of Korea stand out more in my mind because it was, well, it was just terrible. It was either dust or mud. We were not foot soldiers as the infantry would be, we were artillery. Nonetheless, it was really primitive over there.

Interviewer:

Do you have regrets about your service?

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Veteran:

Yes, in a way. Had I known the way things were going to go in Korea I never would have volunteered to go. I checked with higher headquarters and asked face-to-face if any other artillery unit required the Personnel Officer to travel those roads daily as I had been. I was the only one. I was still proud that I did it, but I don't believe I would have had I known ahead of time that it was going to turn out that way. Some of the persons above me were extremely bitter for having been called up. They were actively still in the Guard at the time of the call-up, and they were quite bitter about it and, as I say, it probably could have affected my decision to volunteer and go with the unit.

Interviewer:

Has your military service, or how has your military service colored your personal views of politics or religion or current events or those kinds of things?

Veteran:

I've jotted a couple of notes here on that and I said: "One must learn to take orders before giving them and to be a credit to the uniform. Obedience, discipline, and patriotism helped win our wars and build this great nation."

The one thing that I have stressed in my lifetime, thus far, has been the Golden Rule – that if everyone made an effort to pretend he was in the other person's shoes and acted in that same fashion it would be a much nicer world.

Interviewer:

If you were standing in some great hall today and had the men and women of the service today before you and could address them, what would you tell them?

Veteran:

Pretty much what I just said then, I think.

A little note, whenever asked to wear my uniform for a parade or for any other thing, I still wear my World War II one. After all those years I weigh about the same now as I did then but I'm about four inches shorter at age 84.

One of the more recent calls was just before this past graduation class when a History teacher asked me to come and address two separate groups of his students. I was watching the faces on the individuals and I got the impression that they were disappointed that I wasn't flying an airplane just by virtue of having been in the Air Force. There were only a few who actually flew the airplanes, all the rest were support personnel. I don't think they were grasping that. They looked kind of disappointed that I didn't say that I'd shot down so many airplanes, or anything like that. There was a

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schedule for a third class and, so, in between classes I spoke with the teacher and I said, "I think they're expecting something a little different than what I'm able to give to them." It was getting close to noon and he said, "Well, if you'd like, why, we'll just cancel the third class," and I was pleased that he did because, as I say, they kind of didn't grasp the way of the military makeup.

Interviewer:

We started talking a little bit, before we turned the camera on, about the Merchant Marines and some of the other services, and you were telling me some incidents there. Why don't you go ahead and repeat those if you would?

Veteran:

Yeah. The one thing where I was actually quite likely to be accepted was, I started taking navigation classes at night after school, to be a Deck Cadet in the Merchant Marines. But over the years, from back in '35, and I wasn't very big or anything like that for my age either, but I drove the mail until 1939 when I was finally successful to get in anything. I wanted to get away – away from the farm, and I also wanted to be doing something where I wouldn't be subjected to what then was considered bad elements, and it is nothing compared to what today is with the drugs, etc., but I'd be turned down for various physical reasons, and when I was accepted into the regular Army, finally, I couldn't make the minimum weight. The Recruiting Sergeant said, "I'll give you some meal tickets and another pass to stay in a hotel. You, with your pocket money (that I had with me) buy some bananas and drink all the water and eat all the bananas you can and don't walk anyplace, just stay right here." And I helped out, I was a typist and so that encouraged him to put me to work and give me the meal ticket to eat on and a place to sleep. But I had a hard time getting in.

When the Korean War came there were two of us, two officers, I was one of them, who could not make the minimum weight and our Mayor, who was a military man and a physician, Doc Broadbent, looked at me and also with Dan Gillis and said, "Well, what do you guys want to do? You can't make the minimum weight. We can't accept you." And I said, "Fudge my weight." Which they did so, as I said before, at 152 in '39 and 152 for the Korean War in 1950, and almost exactly that same weight now at 2004.

Interviewer:

What have we missed? Is there anything that you would like to get on record that you'd like to say that we haven't gone over?

Veteran:

No. I don't think so. I can't think of anything specific, but to say the one thing again is I tried to impart in my military time, and also in civilian life is, put yourself in the other

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fellow's shoes and you have a better slant on life and a more pleasing attitude – take you a lot further.

Interviewer:

Ok. Thank you very much.

Veteran:

Thank you, Steve.