

**VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT**  
Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

**Willard K. Nelson**

Conducted by Deb Barrett

December 7, 2013

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in partnership with the Library of Congress

**This interview is being conducted on December 7, 2013 with Mr. Willard Nelson at the Indian Prairie Library in Darien, Illinois. My name is Deb Barrett. Mr. Nelson was born on My 29, 1922 in Chicago, Illinois. He is a retired pharmacist, having worked at Walgreen's, Michael Reese Hospital and owning his own pharmacy. He learned of the Veterans History Project through the Indian Prairie Library newsletter. Also with us today is Will's wife, Pat. Mr. Nelson has kindly consented to be interviewed for this project. Here is his story.**

### **Life Before Entering Military Service**

**So, Will, tell us a little bit about where you were living when you entered the service. What was your life like at that point? Were you in school?**

I was in school, although they finally said they didn't want us in school anymore. So they told us to come back later on when the war was finally settled.

**Where were you in school?**

At the University of Illinois pharmacy.

**The University of Illinois pharmacy in Chicago?**

Yes, in Chicago.

**What year was that?**

We graduated in 1941, so it was the later part of 1941, or maybe in 1942.

**Who told you to come back when the war was over?**

The people who interviewed us. There were several of us who went down at one time. When I say several, they were friends of mine. So we went down there.

**Down to the school?**

Yes. And they said they didn't want us there right now. They had other problems beside kids who wanted to go to pharmacy school. And at that time I had already started working for Walgreen's as an apprentice pharmacist. You needed your apprenticeship before you got into school.

**Were you living at home with your parents?**

Yes, at home with my parents.

**Brothers and sisters?**

I had one brother, and he was in the service also.

**Was he already in the service?**

No. He went in after I did. In fact, he's two-and-a-half years younger than I. But he's since passed away.

**Which branch of the service? Did you enlist? Were you drafted?**

We were drafted afterwards. But we went down to enlist and they didn't want us at that time. They told us to go back home.

**Did they say why?**

No. It was the Army.

**Induction and Training**

**So you went to go enlist in the Army and they said they didn't need you right now. What did you do?**

Well, about six months later they volunteered me! They sent me the note from the President to report for duty on January 1. So we went down. It was on a Sunday and we went down.

**Where did you go?**

I was inducted in Chicago.

**Where in Chicago?**

I don't recall.

**Tell us a little bit about what your induction was like? How did you get there?**

There were several of us and we all came in together. We were all invited to join the Army together. They swore us all in and sent us to Camp Grant.

**Tell us a little bit about what your induction day was like. Was it a room full of men?**

It was a whole group of people, and we took a physical.

**What was it like? Did you have you individual rooms? Did they just have a doctor go down the line?**

Yes, down the line. They said, “You’re okay. You’re okay. You’re okay.”

**Did you get inoculations?**

Not at that time.

**So no yet. Did you get your Army gear?**

They inducted us into the Army, although they sent us back home for seven days. And then we had to report to downtown. I don’t remember the building we reported at. But from there we got on buses and they took us to Camp Grant, which is in Rockford, Illinois.

**Was there a history of military service in your family, or not really? How did your family respond to your entering the service?**

Actually, we were drafted.

**Did they say it was the right thing to do? Were they worried?**

They said it was okay.

So they took us to Camp Grant. And all the rest of the people I went with – maybe it was about 20 or 25 who were all drafted together – we all went to Camp Grant and they got shipped out to various places. And they left me at Camp Grant.

**All by yourself.**

All by myself. They put me to work at Camp Grant giving out the uniforms to people who were coming to be veterans of World War II.

**Let’s back up a little bit. You got to Camp Grant on the bus. And what happened? You got off the bus and where did you go? What did they have you do?**

Well, they put us in barracks. They divided us up into groups and put us in the barracks.

**How many men?**

Probably about twenty of us.

**What was the barracks like? Was it one level or two?**

One level.

**Were there beds on both sides?**

Yes.

**So twenty beds in the one room?**

Yes, and our foot lockers.

And then you went through the supply line and got uniforms. They looked at you and said, "This ought to fit you."

**So you got all your gear, went to your barracks. Did you have to put it all in your foot locker?**

Yes. And we had to carry the foot locker over with our clothes in it. Then all the people in my barracks were shipped out to various places and I was the last one to be shipped out. They kept me there for maybe a month later after everybody else had been shipped out, and put me into supply.

**How long before everybody was shipped out? How long were you there?**

It was almost a month.

**What did you do for that month before everybody was shipped out?**

They put me into supply.

**During that first month?**

Yes. And I was giving out uniforms. And that's the first time I came across a youngster from down south somewhere. He could not read and could not write. I was amazed! I couldn't believe that anybody in the United States couldn't read or write. But this youngster could not. So it kind of flabbergasted me. I had to call the sergeant over to find out what we could do with this man. So I put an "X" down. He [the sergeant] said to put an "X" down for his signature, so that's what we did.

**So you're in this barracks. Did you get some training in this first month? What was your routine? What was a typical day?**

Well, we'd get up and march to drill. At that time I met my friend. I lived on Justine at the time and my buddy lived on Bishop or Laflin. Anyway, it was a block away from where I lived. We actually stumbled on one another. He was drafted a couple of days before me. Anyway, we palled around at Camp Grant. And they finally shipped him out while I was still there.

I stayed and helped in supply for quite a while – for about a month. Then they finally shipped me to Kearns, Utah.

**What was the name of the camp they sent you to?**

It was Camp Kearns, Utah.

**How did you get there?**

By train.

**Was it a troop train or a regular passenger train?**

It was a passenger troop train.

**Everybody on there was part of the military?**

Yes.

**Do you remember how long it took you to get there to Utah?**

I think it took us about five days. It was long!

**What did you do for those five days?**

You were just on the train. They fed us on the train.

**Sandwiches or hot meals?**

Basically we got sandwiches and a cup of coffee or something.

**Did you have any responsibilities, or was it just five days and you just talked with the guys and played cards?**

You looked out the window. And I had never been north and west at all, so I was fascinated with what there was to see out there.

**What fascinated you the most?**

Well, the one thing when we got into Denver, which is the mile-high city. That was fascinating to me. I don't know why it was.

Finally we got to Kearns, Utah and I stayed there for quite a while.

**What happened when you got to Kearns? How did you get to the camp? Did you get on buses?**

We got on buses.

**And when you got to camp, what did they do? Did they assign you to barracks?**

They assigned you to barracks. It was sort of a medical group I was assigned to. That's how I stayed in that. There's a picture of me on Iwo Jima and it says, "Willard had his own Walgreen drug store on Iwo Jima." Because I'd worked for Walgreen's at the time.

**So this was a medical group at the whole camp?**

Basically, yes. There was some Army, too. But I was assigned to the medical part.

**Did you get special training?**

Not really. I had already gone a year at the University of Illinois for pharmacy. But I had already worked for Walgreen's for so many years, so they just assigned me.

**What was your assignment?**

The funny part of it was, there was a group they put me in. They had spent a whole year in the Aleutian Islands up in Alaska. They put me in this group as a pharmacist. They gave me no training, but I'd worked for Walgreen's for so many years that I knew a lot and went to school for a while.

**So you're saying you went up to Alaska or this group was at the camp?**

No. They were in Alaska but I wasn't. They sent me to Kearns, Utah.

**So, how did you serve this group up in Alaska?**

Well, they came down from Alaska for the year. And from there we went. I joined the group. There was another pharmacist and myself. What they did, they divided the group in half and I went to Iwo Jima.

**That's how you ended up there.**

We were in the invasion of Iwo Jima.

**So you were part of the invasion.**

We were part of the invasion.

**Deployment to the Pacific**

**Let me back up a little bit. How did you get over to ...**

By train to Seattle, Washington and they put us on a boat.

**Do you remember the name of the boat?**

No, I don't. But the funny part of it is we were down below and there were five where we slept.

**The hammocks?**

Yes.

**And where were you?**

I don't remember that. But the funny part of it was I went upstairs because a lot of them were throwing up. We were in a pretty bad storm. It did not bother me, but it bothered a lot of people down there.

So I went up on deck and when I got up on deck they asked, "What are you doing up here?" And I said, "Nothing. I just wanted to get up from downstairs." So they said, "We've got a job for you." There was a group of non-commissioned officers. It was a Navy ship, incidentally. So he put me in and I served the non-commissioned officers – there were about twelve of them, I guess – and I served the non-commissioned officer's breakfast, lunch and supper that they got.

**Was it the same breakfast, lunch and supper that you had?**

I got the same thing! The funny part of it is, even our commanding officer who was a medical doctor, he would come and ask, "Nelson would you bring me out a sandwich or something. I can't eat the stuff they're serving downstairs!"

**What were they serving the regular men?**

What you and I would have here for lunch or supper or breakfast.

**And what were the officers having?**

I don't know what the officers were having – these were all non-commissioned officers. So I served them. And I had to wash up all the dishes afterwards. There were only about twelve of them. It was nice. I ate good all the way across!

**It sounds like it. How long did it take it take to get from Seattle?**

About thirty days. First we went to Hawaii. We didn't get off the ship. We were there, that's all.

**Did they just refuel the ship and things like that?**



Yes, and food and stuff. And then from there we went to Enewetok, and from there to Iwo Jima – on the outside of Iwo Jima. And when we got to Iwo Jima they had some small landing craft – maybe about the size of this room.

We had to climb down rope ladders off the ship with our field pack and got into these little ships. Then we invaded the island.

**Now, the marines had been there ahead of you, and you came in soon after.**

Yes. We were in before the infantry – they came in soon after us. The reason we had to come in – and they took everybody in our group because I was Air Force.

**You were Air Force?**

The Army Air Corps.

**So you climbed down these rope ladders. Were they shooting at you?**

We had to climb down the rope ladders.

**And you could hear the gunfire and could see what was happening?**

Oh, yeah. And we boarded these small landing craft and they took us into Iwo Jima for a landing.

**How did they prepare you for what you were going to experience when you got there?**

Lots of luck! That was it.

**Did they have you practice going down the rope ladders, or was it just “here you go?”**

They threw these rope ladders all the way down the side of the ship and you just climbed down into the boat you were supposed to go into. And when they landed they couldn't get all the way up. In fact, the ship I was on got stuck on a sandbar and the Japanese started firing at us. So then the US put a smoke screen on top of us so the Japanese didn't know exactly where we were at.

**Did any of the men who were on your boat get shot?**

Not at that time. None of us got shot. Maybe up on the side of the ship.

**Did you have a pack on your back?**

Oh, yes. We had a pack.

**What was in your pack?**

Well, I was in medical so I wore the Red Cross and the Japanese delighted in shooting at us! I was fortunate. We lost quite a few people. But we couldn't get all the way up to, and they finally pulled us off the sandbar. Then we had to go around.

**The Marines pulled you off the sandbar?**

Someone did. I don't know who.

**So they pulled you off the sandbar and you landed.**

We finally got around and went in another area and landed.

**And this was an area where the Japanese had been cleared, or was there still fighting?**

They were still shooting at us. One of my buddies was killed when we came in.

**For a kid from the Midwest this was ...**

I had nothing! All the people on my boat had guns. They had their rifles. I had nothing. But I did buy, before I left, a small knife – a hunting knife. And that's all I had.

**So you didn't have any fire arms with you when you landed. You were medical and that's all you were supposed to do.**

You were not allowed to carry a gun.

**So you finally landed on the island.**

And we dug in right away. It's all volcanic ash.

**Right. They call it 'black sand.'**

Right.

**So you dug in. How long did it take you to get off the ship and get to this area where you were finally digging in?**

Probably a couple of days.

**A couple of days to get that far?**

Yes. Because they were shooting at us all the time. You had to get down, stay down on the beach after a while. We had a little more protection on the beach.

**Natural things like rocks?**

Yes.

**And from that little dug-in area what happened next? Where did you go?**

When we finally dug down?

**You said you were supposed to lay down these metal strips. Was that for a runway?**

That was for a runway for the ships.

The reason we took Iwo Jima was because it was under 650 miles from Tokyo. So if our bombers or the small planes could take off from Iwo they could use two-gallon tanks on each side. They were P47 fighters and they would escort the bombers to Japan. And then they would have to drop the two-gallon tanks because they would use all the gas, because they didn't have enough fuel to get back to Iwo with the two-gallon tanks.

**So you were dug in and you said they were firing at you. When were you able to get these metal strips laid if they were firing at you like that? How did you do that?**

You just got out there and did it. We had flame-throwers with us. There are some pictures of the Japanese boxers in there who were up there firing. But we had guys with flame-throwers with us who would go up on the side of the mountain and burn them out.

**So they were sort of covering for you so you could get these tracks laid down.**

We didn't get the tracks down that same day. It took a while to get them down.

**How long did it take you to get all those tracks laid?**

It took us quite a while – I'd say maybe a week or ten days before the first United States plane could come in.

The Japs had one strip and that's what we were trying to repair. And we were trying to lay these strips down also. They interlocked with one another so the planes could come in safely.

**So you came in on the south side of the island?**

Yes.

**And you said the Japanese were hiding. I know they had caves and things. But the north side was really their stronghold?**

That was their stronghold.

**So you laid these tracks down on the south side of the island.**

Yes.

So the 34<sup>th</sup> and 35<sup>th</sup> Marine divisions came in ahead of us. The 5<sup>th</sup> came in on one side, and the 34<sup>th</sup> and 35<sup>th</sup> came in on the other side. So we were a little more protected than they were.

**During this time you were trying to get this done and you were under constant fire. How did you eat? How did you sleep?**

All we had at that time was a little cardboard box that looked like a Cracker Jack box. Our food was in there.

**And those were called ...**

They were the K-rations. And after the K-rations they finally had C-rations.

**What was in the K-ration box and what was in the C-ration box?**

The K-ration was all dry food. There was nothing meat or anything like that.

**Did you just eat the dry food or add water to it?**

Well, we tried to get water when we could. They did bring a water tanker in. And we'd filled up our canteens – we had our own canteens – and that's all we had.

**So how long were you on K-rations before you got to the C-rations?**

I'd say a couple of weeks or better.  
The C-rations had things you could burn.,

**Like little sterno cans?**

Yes. So that would warm up the C-rations for you.

**What was in the C-rations?**

They had meat in them, or food of some sort. I don't quite remember, exactly.

**Did they have meat and some vegetable and a dessert?**

Yes. You'd have some dessert. A cookie or something.

**Did they have cigarettes in the package?**

I know they did. I didn't smoke and I would trade my cigarettes for something.

**Were you able to communicate with anyone back home? Were you able to tell them where you were going or what was happening?**

No. You could write letters and they would mail them someplace I guess.

**So you were able to tell them, but not where you were going. Were you able to just say, "I'm leaving?"**

Well, Pat came to visit me in Seattle.

**Were you married at the time?**

Yes. She stayed with Shores – he was my buddy – and she stayed with his wife in Seattle.

**[Addressed to Pat] When he left. When his ship sailed did you know?**

Pat: No. He couldn't say where he was going.

**But he did tell you his ship was leaving.**

Willard: We didn't know where, just that our ship was leaving, but that was it. We didn't know exactly where we would land.

**Were you able to write any letters to her?**

Yes.

**[Addressed to Pat] Were they censored?**

Pat: I got letters, but there was nothing blocked out.

**Were you told of things you could or couldn't write?**

Willard: They told us we couldn't tell them where we were going. We didn't know where we were going, to be honest with you. I didn't know I was going to Iwo Jima.

Pat: But when he was on Iwo, I got a letter saying he was on Iwo. In fact, because it's volcanic and everything he found a flower. And he picked the flower and pressed it and sent it to me. So there's a flower that grows on Iwo Jima.

**[Addressed to Pat] So what did you think? What had you been hearing at home about Iwo Jima?**

Pat: Well, I heard it was a dangerous place for people.

**But you didn't know as much as we do today.**

Pat: No.

Willard: There were 30,000 Japanese soldiers on Iwo Jima. And the bad thing about it is none of them went home. We killed them all.

Iwo Jima was I think three miles by five miles or something like that. So it was a very small island. So if you took a prisoner you couldn't keep them. There was no room.

**There was no place to put them.**

Especially when there were 30,000 to begin with. To be honest with you, we put some of them on a boat and took them out into the Pacific Ocean and they all jumped overboard. There was no way they could swim to an island because there was nothing they could swim to. You were just out in the middle of the ocean. So they just swam until they could no longer do it and just drowned.

War is terrible to begin with. But we were not all that great either with prisoners. There was no way we could keep 30,000 prisoners on Iwo Jima. Three miles by five miles isn't very big. So they just went and took them out and let them drown. And there were a lot of sharks out there, too.

**You had some downtime when you could sleep and try to relax, anyhow. What did you do in that downtime?**

I don't remember any downtime. We were busy all the time.

**You wrote home?**

Yes. I wrote home. I wrote letters. It either to Pat or to my Mom and Dad. Once in a while some went to my brother. He was in the service at that time, too. He never got overseas.

**He stayed stateside?**

He stayed stateside, yes. He was one of the lucky ones. He was two-and-a-half years younger than I was, too. So he wasn't in as long.

**How old were you when you were on Iwo Jima?**

I was 23.

And from Iwo Jima we went back to Saipan. We were eight months on Iwo Jima.

**What was your rank at that time?**

I was a sergeant.

**So you went to Saipan on a ship.**

Yes.

**How long did it take to get to Saipan?**

To me it felt like it was forever! It was on one of these flat bottom boats. It was bad news on those boats.

**Was this after the fighting had finally stopped?**

Yes, then we went back to Saipan.

**Did you see the flag raisings? Did you witness those?**

No, I wasn't there for that. You're talking about the Marines. I wasn't there for that.

**You came after that.**

Yes. We came after that.

**So you went to Saipan when the fighting on Iwo Jima stopped.**

We got everything cleaned up on Iwo Jima and went back to Saipan. That was a big island.

**What do you mean by cleaning up on Iwo Jima? What did you have to do? Did you just finish the fighting?**

Yes. Although a year later they found one Japanese soldier who was still alive. He would come out. They knew somebody was coming out and taking food. But he came out at night and would sneak up, get some food and go back to wherever he was hiding. But he was on the west side of the island.

**So they finally caught him?**

Yes, they did. But I don't think they killed him to be honest with you.

**At that point there wasn't a need, probably.**

Right. We killed an awful lot of Japanese.

**Did you use whatever medical training you had on Iwo Jima?**

Yes.

**To do what? Were you a medic?**

When somebody got shot or burnt in some way we would be there. And we had quite a few plane crashes, too.

**Japanese or American?**

American. And we went into that one island because it was a troop transport ship. We went running in and found out that we were alongside a little bit of a hill. And we had to stay close to the hill because that wasn't mined. The rest of the area was mined.

**The Japanese had mined it?**

No. We had mined it. Well, I guess they had mined some of it, too.

**Did you have enough supplies for all the work you were doing – the medical work?**

Yes.

**You didn't run out of supplies?**

I had enough stuff.

**And they would bring in more supplies by ship?**

Yes. We had more than enough for our need. In fact, we had a general hospital there – well, it was like a mini-general. We had a dispensary.

Finally, toward the end, they built us a Quonset hut. And we were in the Quonset hut. And it affected those, too. Because if we had sick people, before we had a tent. When they built us a Quonset hut, the Quonset hut was metal. So we had like a 13-bed hospital there. So we didn't have to ship them into the main hospital if it wasn't serious enough.

**But I mean during the fighting.**

During the fighting it was just us in tents. Sometimes we didn't even have a tent. You had nothing over the top of you.

**Were the men just on stretchers?**



We had stretchers and we had some cots that we had. So we'd put them on a cot.

**There was a lot of fighting going on. How did you manage to accommodate all the wounded?**

Well, if they were too bad we shipped them directly to the hospital. We'd mark them and put them in one spot. If they were already killed they went to a certain spot. And people for the hospital went to another spot. We'd check them out and see how badly hurt they were.

**Did men ever ask you not to ship them back to the line, to send them to the ship?**

Probably. One did not want to go back. But we said, "You have to go back because you're not hurt that bad." We didn't make the decision. We had a doctor and a dentist in our group. So the doctor would make the final decision. And the funny part of it is, he was a good surgeon from New York City. But he liked to drink. We'd get a bottle of whiskey and he would try to get to the whiskey all the time. I had a little problem keeping that away from him. Because I was responsible for drugs and supplies over there.

**So how long were you on Iwo Jima?**

Eight months. And then I went back to Saipan.

**And what did you do on Saipan?**

I just took care of sick call, basically. And run the infirmary that we had. We had a big hospital there, too.

**How big was the hospital on Saipan?**

It was a general hospital. We didn't have a general hospital before. On Iwo we had our little 13-bed hospital or at the other hospital we had 50 beds.

**So you had the little 13 bed hospital on Iwo, and after the fighting stopped they built the 50-bed hospital?**

The were building it. They came on the island after we were on the island.

**And this was the Army Corps of Engineers?**

It was built by the Seabees.

**So they built the hospital after the fighting stopped or when it slowed down?**

They started building it when we got on the island and got a secure place for it. They had to make sure all the Japanese were just about gone. They were well guarded.

They were like a station hospital. A station hospital is smaller than a general hospital in the Army.

**How big a hospital was this? How many beds?**

I don't know what they had, but they had quite a bit. The station could take maybe a good 100 or so. But they had big tents to put the beds underneath. It was all camouflaged, too.

Now Chichi Jima was about 15 miles from us. And on a clear day that was the island the Japanese own. And they still own it today. But they would bomb us from Chichi Jima if they could get planes up. So we were always trying to bomb them before they could get their planes up. Our group would fly over them and drop bombs on them – try to destroy their planes.

**While you were on Iwo Jima did you ever come across any of the Japanese?**

Just the one that I remember. A lot of dead ones, yes.

I was back in the medics all the time. So I wasn't really shooting at the Japanese soldiers there. But a couple of times I witnessed where they would dig a hole with one of those big diggers and bury maybe 12 or 15 of them all at one time and cover them over.

**Like a mass grave.**

Yes. They weren't tagged, but we didn't know who they were, anyhow. They just threw them in and buried them.

**So you went to Saipan after Iwo Jima.**

Yes.

**And you worked in the hospital dispensary.**

We had a small dispensary there. Saipan was a little larger than what we were on Iwo Jima. It wasn't a station hospital, but we had more things.

We had a dentist. In fact, the dentist had a system – this was on Iwo Jima – the system would be he would pedal the drill.

**To power the drill. Hope he didn't get tired!**

Everybody was so used to electricity, but when we went to Iwo we had none.

**How long were you in Saipan?**

It might have been a good eight months or so. If I look at the book I can tell you more.

**While you were in Saipan, the fighting was winding down. Other than not being shot at all the time, how was your life different on Saipan than on Iwo Jima?**

Well, you weren't worried about getting shot at. That was the big thing!

**Were your meals the same kind of meals?**

We ate better on Saipan. We had a regular mess hall we could go to and eat where somebody else was doing the cooking.

**And what about your living quarters?**

We lived in Quonset huts. But on Iwo it was strictly in a hole in the ground. If we were lucky; what we did, too, with that hole in the ground, each one of us were given a half a tent. So Darrell and I ...

**Darrell was your tent mate?**

Yes, he was my tent mate. Pat stayed with his wife: Darrell Shores.

Anyway, the two tents laced together. I can't remember how they did it, but they laced together and we had that over the top of us.

**And sleeping bags on the ground?**

No, we were underneath the ground yet. Because we had the tent over the top. It ended up that we had quite a few bullet holes in the tent up above us! We knew that they were firing at us all the time.

**So when you got to Saipan you were in Quonset huts, on cots ...**

Luxury!

**I'm sure it felt like luxury at that point! What sort of meals did you have?**

We had regular meals like the Army would serve. In fact, we would go to the Army and they would serve us.

**It probably tasted pretty good at that point!**

It was very good!

**Things were a little calmer for you. What did you do when you did have some downtime – some off time?**

Well, on Saipan we had more entertainment.

**What kind of entertainment?**

Live, and movie stars would come: Bob Hope and Gene Kelly. We saw a couple of the ladies – I don't remember if it was Dinah Shore. So we did have a little more entertainment on Saipan. We had very little on Iwo.

**Iwo Jima as just writing letters.**

And they didn't want to come there, either, with the chances of getting shot at.

**So you had a little bit of entertainment. And you were still writing. Could you tell Pat anymore than you were able to tell her before? Was the censoring any lighter?**

On Saipan, yes. Although I don't remember being on Saipan as long as I was on Iwo. Saipan was a place where you got a number and whatever your number was they took you back to the States.

**So they were preparing you to go back home. You said you were there eight months?**

I was on Iwo Jima eight months. I was trying to think of how long I was on Saipan.

**Was it probably less than eight months?**

Yes, slightly; not much, but shorter.

**[Addressed to Pat]**

**Pat, did you know when he was moved to Saipan?**

No.

[Willard adding] All she knew was I was overseas. That's what you marked your letter – somewhere overseas or something like that.

**So all you knew was he was somewhere in the South Pacific.**

[Pat] Yes.

**From Saipan, was it a system of points before you could return?**

You had to have so much time, yes, in service. They did give you extra points because you were overseas. If you got one credit just being in the United States, you might have gotten one-and-a-half points for being overseas on Iwo or Saipan.

**If you were in a combat zone did you get more points than if you were in a non-combat zone?**

Yes.

**Do you remember how many points you needed to come home?**

No, I don't remember that.

**How were you notified that it was your time to come home?**

Well, when I was on Saipan they told us. We had enough points to go home, and my turn would be maybe a month or a month-and-a-half on Saipan.

Saipan was a nice place to be. It was a flat island. Iwo – of course, I have too many bad memories from Iwo. We lost too many people over there. On Saipan you didn't lose anybody. We got to eat in the lunchroom.

**More civilized living! So, do you remember what your rank was when you were on Saipan?**

I was a sergeant.

**You were a sergeant at that point. So did a lieutenant or a captain come and tell you that your time was up? Did they notify you somehow?**

I don't remember how we got notified, but we did get notified that our time would be up in a month-and-a-half or whatever and we would be going home.

**You must have been so happy when you got that notification!**

And how!

**Were you able to tell Pat you were on your way home?**

I don't think so.

**It was another long boat ride.**

Yes.

**The mood on the boat must have been a lot different than it was going out there.**

Yes, it was!

**A lot rosier, I'm guessing.**

Yes.

**What did you do on the boat on the way home?**

Basically, we didn't do much. The thing is, it was like thirty days going over there. And it was about five days going back.

**Because you didn't have to zig-zag and do all those basic maneuvers.**

No. And you could go by yourself. You didn't have to wait for a whole bunch of ships to guide you back.

**A convoy, like before.**

Yes.

**Where were you when you heard the war was over?**

I think I was on Iwo Jima, but I'm not sure if the war was over on Iwo Jima.

The one thing I do remember, the chaplain's assistant and myself, we got to be good friends. And because we were good friends I had built a lot of stuff when the war was over. So I didn't have to work too much in the medical. We just had our sick call in the morning and were off the rest of the day. So, the Quonset hut was built already – they gave us a Quonset hut for our church on Iwo Jima. And I went in and built an altar for the minister there – for my buddy who was the chaplain's assistant. And I built a pulpit for the minister to give his sermons.

My dad was a carpenter. And that was one of the things when I was going to school – I was a helper all the time. Because I was the oldest boy. So I got to learn a lot of carpenter skills. So I built the chapel inside. The two of us went and got some stuff that we'd throw over the top of the airplanes.

**Tarps?**

They weren't tarps. It was so you couldn't see what was down on the ground.

**Like camouflage netting.**

Yes. It was a netting of some sort. And I'd use that as background for the church. It turned out really pretty. In fact, I took the picture to our church in Chicago. And somehow or other it dropped out of my pocket and I lost it. I was so mad at myself because I only had that one picture of what I'd built on Iwo Jima.

**So you were on Iwo Jima when you were told the war was over.**

I believe so, yes.

**Do you remember anything about that day?**

Yes.

**What do you remember?**

It was the day I built the altar. And we were in church at the time. And I went and I went up and thanked the Lord for taking care of us. The war was over for us. I remember that.

**You must have been happy it was over, Pat, right?**

[Pat] Very much.

[Willard] I knelt down in front of the altar I built and prayed. That's how the day was when I found out the war was over.

**Do you remember how you found out?**

I think it was announced over the PA system.

**It must have been a very noisy celebration in camp.**

It was! The camp was very noisy.

### **Returning to the United States**

**How long after that was it before you left for home? You said you were on Saipan for several months.**

It wasn't that long on Saipan, maybe about five months before we went home.

**And you went home five days by ship. Where did you land?**

Same place – in Seattle, Washington.

**Did Pat know you were coming home?**

[Willard] I don't think so. Did you know?

[Pat] I didn't really know, no.

[Willard] I don't think we were able to say anything at the time, but I'm not sure.

**So when you got back to Seattle, were you still in the Army Air Corps?**

Yes.

**Where were you discharged?**

At Camp Grant.

**So when you got to Seattle did you get leave of some sort or debriefing?**

I don't think they gave us any leave there, although maybe on the weekends we could go into town.

**So how did Pat know you were back?**

[Willard] I don't remember.

[Pat] I don't remember, either. You just came back.

**You just walked in the door.**

[Willard] I knew she knew I was back in the States.

**[Directed to Pat] How did you know he was back in the States?**

[Pat] I think he sent a letter, and I think a call.

[Willard] I called or wrote her a letter or something.

[Pat] I knew you were coming because we decided to take a funny-moon. We hadn't had a honeymoon.

**So you took a honeymoon?**

[Pat] A funny-moon.

**So just like a weekend?**

[Pat] We went to New York. And the other time we went to Indiana.

**Was that after you were discharged?**

Yes, after I was discharged.

**So you were in Seattle. How long were you in Seattle?**



Not too long. We got back and they shipped us back to Camp Grant right away and discharged us pretty fast. It took a lot less time to discharge us than it did getting into the Army!

**It must have been quite a sight for you to see the shores of the United States when you returned home.**

It was. On the way back I didn't serve anybody. We just ate on the ship. They had different food for us. It was better!

**Much better food! So you went from Seattle – you were just there a couple days – and they sent you back to Illinois to Camp Grant?**

Yes, to Camp Grant in Rockford.

**How long were you there?**

Just long enough to get processed out. And then we went back to Chicago.

**How did you get to Camp Grant from Seattle? Was it a troop train again?**

Yes. In fact, it was a luxury to fly.

**Was it a troop train again or just a regular train?**

Yes, it was a troop train.

**Did Pat come back separately?**

[Willard] She was already back home.

[Pat] I was home.

**So you left after he came back home.**

[Pat] I came back to Chicago because I was working for the telephone company, and then I volunteered for the Red Cross.

### **Discharge and Returning to Civilian Life**

**So she was home, you came home on the troop train. You got to Rockford and they discharged you. What do you remember of your discharge?**

It was a wonderful feeling! I was so happy to be out. Although at the time I was worried about what I was going to do. I was only an assistant pharmacist at the time. But then I went back to school and finished up to be a registered pharmacist – licensed.

**So you got back to Rockford and were discharged. How did you get back to Chicago? Did you take the train again? Did you ride with someone?**

I think we just bussed back to Chicago. It's not that far. We got on the bus that came back to Chicago and that was it.

**I know Pat had seen you already. How did your family react when they saw you again?**

They were happy, especially because nothing happened to us. I mean, we weren't shot or maimed. Some of the soldiers came back and it was hard to believe how they were gob-smacked and all kind of problems. I was in the medical part all the time I was in the service. So I was either working in the hospital or someplace where I was dispensing the pharmacy.

**How old were you when you were discharged?**

[Willard] I was 22 or 23. I can't remember.

[Pat] I don't know. Maybe 23.

[Willard] Probably 23.

**So you'd seen a lot for someone who was 23.**

Yes.

**And you came back home. And after celebrating the fact that you got home safely, what was the next thing you did?**

I got a job. And I was fortunate because I'd worked for Walgreen's before. So they were happy that I was there. So I finished up school and was part-time with Walgreen's also: full-time at school and part-time at Walgreen's.

**So you went to school at the University of Illinois at Chicago, at the School of Pharmacy.**

[Willard] Yes. And I know there was another school of pharmacy, but I can't remember the name.

[Pat] I can't remember the name, either. But he went there.

[Willard] It was Professor Snow. I do remember that because of the snow. He was one of the people who was connected with the University of Illinois pharmacy school. You have to remember a pharmacy school when I first started wasn't as big as the library. The library was humongous compared to how big our school was.

**And when you got back ...**

When I got back it was very, very small. In fact, we were by the Cook County Hospital. We were at Polk and Wood Streets. Today it's a humongous place – not only hospital but pharmacy, nursing and everything is right there.

**How long did you have to go to school before you finished your degree?**

I think I had to go another two years or so.

**Did you use the GI Bill at all?**

Yes.

**So that helped you pay for your education.**

Tuition, yes.

**And you worked at Walgreen's and went to school. So you were earning a paycheck.**

Yes. It helped out.

**[Directed to Pat] And were you still working at that time?**

[Pat] Yes. I was still working for the telephone company.

**Now, you said you got married – you were married when you were in the service.**

Yes.

**Did you get married because you knew you were going in the service?**

[Willard] No. It was after I was in the service that we got married.

[Pat] Yes. You came home on a Thursday and we got married on the Saturday.

[Willard] We had been going together. Pat and I met each other in fourth grade in grammar school. We went to high school together at same high school.

[Pat] But we never went together or dated because he was always working and had no time for girls!

**But you had time to get married then.**

Yes.

**So you got home. Where did you end up living? Did you buy a house? Did you have an apartment?**

[Willard] We lived with her folks for a short time.

[Pat] Then we got an apartment. My girlfriend's father was a decorator, and he decorated big buildings for companies. He said there was a one-room apartment available on the east side, so we took it.

[Willard] 79<sup>th</sup> and Ingleside, I think it was.

[Pat] Yes, Ingleside. And it was \$27.00 a month! So we could manage that. I made \$30 every two weeks. So I made \$60 a month and he was drawing part-time pay. So we managed that.

**You started a family?**

[Pat] Our first child was born on our sixth wedding anniversary. So we made a plan: we'd have a cake with a candle for his birthday and a candle for our anniversary. And when he could first talk, with his little-bitty voice he said, "My mother and dad got married on the day I was born." You didn't do that in 1950! You kept it a secret. Anyway, we have three sons.

**So you continued working as a pharmacist at Walgreen's?**

Yes.

**And then you worked with Michael Reese Hospital?**

[Willard] Michael Reese was a lot after. But I started to working for Walgreen's.

[Pat] From when you were nine, didn't you? Because you were a delivery boy for them.

[Willard] Remember you'd come down on your bicycles on 95<sup>th</sup> Street to see me.

[Pat] And he bought us a Coke.

[Willard] I bought her the first large Coke she ever had.

[Pat] I'd never had a 10¢ Coke before. They were always a nickel.

**So you went on to work as a pharmacist.**

Yes.

**Did you ever join any veterans' organizations or keep in touch with anyone after the service?**

I belong to the VFW and the American Legion. It seems like there was something else I belonged to.

**Did you keep in touch with anyone you met in the service?**

[Pat] Not anymore.

[Willard] Keep in touch?

**Have you kept in touch with anyone you met in the service, or did you keep in touch with anyone?**

[Willard] Well, George \_\_\_\_\_ and I went to pharmacy school together the first time one of the guys said "Get out of here." He lived close by. We lived at 79<sup>th</sup> & Ingleside and he lived at 82<sup>nd</sup> & Ingleside. I had a car, a real old car, that I drove to school. So George would ride with me and a couple of other guys. So that way I got gas for the car – when it was running!

[Pat] George just has his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday and they celebrated in Harvester Park over here. It was nice. So we've been in touch with them for a long time.

[Willard] They had a real nice birthday party for me! We went to that.

**Do you go to any reunions from your time in the service?**

[Willard] No.

[Pat] But he did go on the Honor Flight.

**So you got to go see the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C.**

Yes. It was beautiful.

**I've been there. I was there when it opened.**

[Willard] That was very impressive to me.

[Pat] And he hears from the man who was his chaperone.

[Willard] I liked the Iwo Jima monument that we have there, too.

### **Lasting Impressions**

**So how did your experiences in the military affect the way you see the world today – what's happening in your life and what's happening in the world? I know it was a difficult experience, but what impact did it have on your personal life? Let's start there.**

Well, I don't know if it was so much the Army or the fact that I came from a Christian family. My mother always made sure we went to Sunday School and to church, to youth groups and stuff. I've been active in our church. I've been chairman of the council – the church council. And I've been chairman of the trustees. And one year I went on to the board of deacons. So I've been very active in our church, although lately I haven't done anything for the church. When you get up to 91 it's time to start quitting stuff.

And I've been active in the community. I've been past president of our Kiwanis Club. I was with that for sixty years. They gave me a certificate. The Lodge gave me a 50 year certificate for being in the Masonic Lodge.

**So how did your military service affect your life in general? Did it make you think or feel a certain way, or did it give you opportunities you didn't have?**

I think it opened up opportunities, yes.

**In what way?**

[Willard] Especially in thinking and trying to help other people. That's the big thing.

[Pat] Oh, the Boy Scouts. He's been very active in the Boy Scouts.

[Willard] I was active in the Boy Scouts for fifty years.

And at Christmas time we'd work for the Salvation Army for many years – either ringing the bells for them. And down in Arizona – we were fortunate to live in Arizona for about twenty years and spent our Christmas down there. And down there we would work for them. And people would register their boys and girls, tell us what size shoe they'd wear or sweater. And we'd write it down and they'd come back a week or two later and pick up the stuff. Salvation Army would buy it for them, of course, but we'd just help them out.

**How did your time in the service affect the way you see things in the world today – the conflicts and things like that?**

I don't know if it affected me. I don't really know if it affected me one way or another, to be honest with you. You got a lot of training in the service, and I think that was beneficial for everybody. And you got the GI Bill from them. That's about it.

**Is there anything we haven't covered that you'd like to add before we finish the interview?**

No. I appreciate the fact that I was able to be invited and that it might go down in the archives someplace – somewhere. Maybe it will help to keep the world straight.

**Thank you!**