

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR

Nimitz Education and Research Center
Fredericksburg, Texas

An Interview With

C. James Erickson

Newark, Delaware

August 10, 2018

U.S. Army

Company C

1st. Battalion

343rd Infantry Regiment

86th Infantry Division

Mr. Misenhimer:

My name is Richard Misenhimer, today is August 10, 2018. I am interviewing Mr. C. James Erickson by telephone. His phone number is 302-757-6566. His address is 392 Briar Lane, Newark, Delaware, 19711. This interview is in support of the National Museum of the Pacific War, the Nimitz Education and Research Center, for the preservation of historical information related to World war II.

Jim, I want to thank you for taking the time to do this interview today, and I want to thank you for your service to our country during World War II.

Mr. Erickson:

Long time ago.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now the first thing I need to do is read to you this agreement with the museum to make sure this is okay with you.

“Agreement Read”

Is that okay with you?

Mr. Erickson:

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now the next thing I'd like to do is get an alternative contact. We find out that sometimes several years down the road, we try to get back with a veteran he's moved or something. So do you have a son or daughter or someone we could contact if we needed to, to find you?

Mr. Erickson:

Not really.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Do you have any children?

Mr. Ericson:

Yes, 5 of them.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How about one of them, one of your sons or daughters? They would know how...

Mr. Erickson:

I don't really know their phone numbers.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Oh, okay. Is there anyone else you think could find you if we needed to?

Okay, well, let's go ahead then.

What is your birthdate?

Mr. Erickson:

January 21, 1926.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Where were you born?

Mr. Erickson:

New Kensington, Pennsylvania.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Okay, did you have brothers and sisters?

Mr. Erickson:

Yes, I had two sisters, one died when she was 3 years old.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Oh, okay. Your other sister was she involved in any way in World War II?

Mr. Erickson:

No, she was younger than I was.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Okay, what were your mother's and father's first names?

Mr. Erickson:

Bea, my dad, I was named after my dad.

Cornelius.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Okay, fine. Hopefully never need it, but you never know. You grew up during the depression, how did the depression affect you and your family?

Mr. Erickson:

Well, it was like everybody else, it was very difficult.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What was your father's occupation?

Mr. Erickson:

He was a glass worker, but for a couple of years, he didn't have a job.

Mr. Misenhimer;

How did you all get along then?

Mr. Erickson:

Well, he raised a lot of vegetables.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Oh, okay, you had a garden.

Mr. Erickson:

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then where did you go to high school?

Mr. Erickson:

In New Kensington.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And what year did you graduate from high school?

Mr. Erickson:

'44.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now December 7, '41 Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. Do you remember hearing about that?

Mr. Erickson:

Yeah.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How did you hear and what was your reaction when you heard that?

Mr. Erickson:

Well, I was working down in the workshop in my basement when I heard it on the radio. And I guess like everybody else I was offended.

Mr. Misenhimer:

So then when you finished high school, what did you do?

Mr. Erickson:

Well, I arranged to graduate a semester early in December and I went in to the Army ASTP program.

Mr. Misenhimer:

You went into what program?

Mr. Erickson:

ASTP, Army Specialized Training Program.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What date did you join that?

Mr. Erickson:

January sometime.

Mr. Misenhimer;

January '44?

Mr. Erickson:

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer;

Tell me about the AST program, what all was that?

Mr. Erickson:

I was sent to Lehigh University for a semester, they thought they were going to need more Army officers as the war went on, but after a semester, they realized they weren't going to need them because the war they thought was winding down, so they sent us all down to Camp Blanding for basic training and infantry.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Tell me about that basic training, what was that like, what all happened.

Mr. Erickson:

(laughter) A lot of wandering around in the swamps, and I was taking radio training so I had code work, learned how to climb telephone poles.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Was this during your basic training?

Mr. Erickson:

Yes, of course we had marksmanship and 25 mile hikes and all that sort of stuff.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Were your drill instructors pretty tough on you?

Mr. Erickson:

I'd like to kill the little bastards. *(laughter)*

Mr. Misenhimer;

What all did they do?

Mr. Erickson:

Oh, they were just generally mean.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Had they been in combat or anything?

Mr. Erickson:

I don't believe so.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Anything in particular stand out from basic?

Mr. Erickson:

Well, every Saturday we'd clean the huts. That's where we had to carry the cots out. One Saturday there was a lightening strike on a chimney and it came down and got two guys carrying the cots. So, that was the end of them.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now tell me about the radio training you had there.

Mr. Erickson:

Well, we just took code work and operated, uh, big old vacuum tube radios. They were heavy to carry around.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you have to learn Morse Code?

Mr. Erickson:

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How was it to learn that?

Mr. Erickson:

Well, It's just a skill. I think I got up to twenty-five words per minute or something.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then what happened after basic?

Mr. Erickson:

Uh, we got a two weeks leave to go home, and I was assigned to the 86th infantry division that was in training in Louisiana, so after leave I went to Louisiana and when we got there, the division was already gone, so they put us up in temporary barracks and then shipped us out to the Pacific. They were training in San Luis Obispo in California, and we were doing amphibious training figuring we'd go to the Pacific.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Tell me about that amphibious training, where'd you do that and what was that like?

Mr. Erickson:

Well, went out in ships and climbed down cargo nets in the LCVP, a small boat, then they would run that into the beach and you'd run all through the surf, pretend you were attacking an island.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Where was that at?

Mr. Erickson:

San Luis Obispo, California, it was a base. We took a ship out to Coronado Island, went in there, had an old battleship out to firing 16 inch guns, when those shells went over, it sounded like a freight train.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What kind of a landing craft were you training in there?

Mr. Erickson:

LCVP, Landing Ship Vehicle Personnel.

Mr. Misenhimer:

After that training, then what happened?

Mr. Erickson:

Well the Battle of the Bulge occurred. Eisenhower wanted more infantry, so we packed up and went cross country on trains, loaded on a ship in Boston, and went across the Atlantic. I was on KP most of the way, and nobody was eating, they were all sea sick it was a great duty. And then we landed in I think Portsmouth England and they ferried us over to Le Havre.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Do you know the ship you went over o?

Mr. Erickson:

No, I don't. I think it was an Italian or French liner that they used. It was much better and bigger than the victory ships.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now what outfit were you in at this point?

Mr. Erickson:

The 86th Infantry Division.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Okay, you were in the 86th.

Mr. Erickson:

Right.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Okay, how was that trip over? You say a lot of people were seasick on that?

Mr. Erickson:

Yeah, but uh, for some reason, I never got seasick. Of course you were sleeping on cots in the hold, five high. I spent as much time in the kitchen or on deck as I could.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Were you threatened by German submarines on the way over at all.

Mr. Erickson:

We didn't see any.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Were you in a convoy with other ships?

Mr. Erickson:

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then when you got to Le Havre what happened then?

Mr. Erickson:

Well, uh, it was almost completely destroyed. We went ashore and went by truck to Camp Old Gold in France, and we stayed there for I don't know, maybe a week or two. Then they loaded us on trains, in boxcars, they called them Forty Eights, forty men or eight horses. *(laughter)* Then we went up through Holland and then into Germany and uh, we replaced the 82nd Airborne Division in Cologne.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now about what date did you land in Le Havre?

Mr. Erickson:

I'm not sure. Sometime in April I think.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Okay, April of '45?

Mr. Erickson:

No, it must have been earlier than that. You're right, it was earlier than that.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Okay, the fall of '44 sometime?

Mr. Erickson:

Yes, I think that's right.

Mr. Misenhimer:

About how long after D-Day? Do you think you know?

Mr. Erickson:

Uh, yeah, a few months. You can look up the Battle of the Bulge

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yeah, okay, the Battle of the Bulge started in December.

Mr. Erickson:

Anyhow, it was after that.

Mr. Misenhimer:

After the Bulge, huh?

Mr. Erickson:

Yeah.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now what company were you in?

Mr. Erickson:

C Company. The 343rd infantry Regiment.

Mr. Misenhimer:

First Batallion?

Mr. Erickson:

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now what was your first combat?

Mr. Erickson:

Well, in Cologne, the Germans were across the river and they lobbed mortar shells over. I was surprised, you could see a mortar shell falling. But uh, we were in a basement of a house on the river, nothing happened except for the mortar shells coming. And then they

took the bridge at Remagen and crossed the Rhine, and they pulled us out and we went over the Rhine. And then we went into what they called the Ruhr Pocket and there was a self propelled 88 manned by SS that we seemed to follow all over. Our first casualty was a kid I'd walked guard duty at Old Cove, and he was really worried that I'd try reassure him. He was killed, and uh, we went through several towns and we had some tanks operating with us. One time we went up the hill to scout but couldn't see anything and waved the tanks, they came around the corner. The damn SS was hiding and they started firing in the back and of course we laid down fire. We kept chasing them, they kept running. We went into a town and my Lieutenant sent me down in an air raid shelter to see what was up, and I went down there was a bunch of women and I said sole alders.

And they said nein nein and I ran around a corner. There was a bunch of old guys in Wermacht uniforms. I guess the SS had forced them to be a home guard and they weren't going to have any of it, so I marched them out of the thing. They went back to a Prisoner of War camp, I guess. It's a shame. Course I guess the Germans bear a lot of responsibility for what Hitler did. So maybe it's not too much of a shame.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now what was your job there, were you a rifleman or what?

Mr. Erickson:

I was, yes, I was second scout in a rifle squad.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Okay, second scout.

Mr. Erickson:

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Tell me about the scouts job, what all did you do as a scout?

Mr. Erickson:

Well, we were out in front, scouting the scene, you know, anything out of order. I was at an eye hunt for Germans and the enemy, and a hole to get in if I needed it.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Go ahead, then what happened?

Mr. Erickson:

Uh, we went into another town, and we were supposed to confiscate weapons, you know, and the kids from the weapons platoon were attached to our platoon. He went into a house and found a 25 military pistol, and he came out, he was showing it to his Sergeant, he took the clip out, forgot about the round in the chamber, so he shot me. *(laughter)*

Mr. Misenhimer:

Go ahead.

Mr. Erickson:

Well, they called for somebody to take me back to the hospital, and while we were there it came in over the tank radio that President Roosevelt had died.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Oh, okay.

Mr. Erickson:

And this was Friday the 13th. Not my lucky day. Anyhow they made me take those sulfa pills to carry around. I'm allergic to sulfa. I got back to the hospital, here we'd been living on K rations and they had a chicken dinner that I couldn't eat. So from the field hospital, they took the bullet out of my arm and sent me back to Paris to another hospital. I spent, I don't know, maybe a week there, then they flew us out to the hospital to

Birmingham, England. Then uh, I was there on VE day and got a pass into town. That was a hell of a party.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did the party have British civilians as well as the military?

Mr. Erickson:

Oh yes. Not many military there.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now, how did you get wounded?

Mr. Erickson:

This kid shot me with his pistol he had, forgot to take out the round from the chamber.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Okay, so you were shot by a member of your group there.

Mr. Erickson:

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Okay, then what happened?

Mr. Erickson:

Well, uh, I took some leave and visited some English cousins, my mother had been in touch by letter, I spent a couple of weeks with them and they shipped us back to Le Harve. And when I got there, my division was getting ready to ship out to the states. They sent them back to the states and then out to the Philippines. So I went to see the captain of my company, but he wouldn't do anything to get me in there, so I ended up in a replacement division, and then went to Frankfurt where the army had a battalion and

because I was a radio man, I got assigned to the battalion switch board. And I was there until I had enough points to go home.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Were you staying in France or in England?

Mr. Erickson:

Germany. Army of occupation.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then when about did you come home?

Mr. Erickson:

January of '46.

Mr. Misenhimer:

After the 86th left, what division did you end up with?

Mr. Erickson:

I forget the it was just a armed occupation battalion. I forget the number.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you have much interaction with the German civilians?

Mr. Ericson:

Some, yeah. They had a club there of course, you could get a glass of champagne there for 10 marks, and of course there was German girls.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Were the German natives friendly enough?

Mr. Erickson:

Well, you know, they had almost nothing, they would go through the garbage cans in our mess hall to eat. A pack of cigarettes would buy almost anything.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you have much interaction with them?

Mr. Erickson:

Some. I wouldn't say a lot.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What's some other things that happened over there?

Mr. Erickson:

Well, one time I went skiing in Baravia.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What happened there?

Mr. Erickson:

I broke a ski on the expert slope and had to walk down the mountain. I wasn't really skilled enough to do that. *(laughter)*

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now how much actual combat did you get into over there?

Mr. Erickson:

Just what I described, maybe two or three weeks.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What would you consider your most frightening time over there?

Mr. Erickson:

Well, when the 88 opened up, it was a pretty tough weapon. Of course we slept in a rain coat in a slit trench. We ate K rations so it was uncomfortable, but that's about it.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What did you think of the officers you had over you?

Mr. Erickson:

Well, I think the company commander had it together. My pursuant officer was a nice guy, but I'm not sure he knew what he was doing all of the time, but I was in no position to judge.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What was your rank when you were over there?

Mr. Erickson:

PFC, and then while I was in the occupation, I got promoted to T-5.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How was the morale in your outfit, the 86th division?

Mr. Ericson:

I think pretty good.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What else happened while you were over there?

Mr. Erickson:

Not much. We shipped out of Bremerhaven coming home.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And you came home in January of '46 you say?

Mr. Erickson:

I think that's about right, yeah.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And where did you land in the states?

Mr. Erickson:

Uh, I think back in Boston again.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Okay, how was that trip back over?

Mr. Ericson:

Well, long. *(laughter)*

Mr. Misenhimer:

Okay. Now let me back up. In August of '45, they dropped the first Atomic bomb on August 6th. Did you hear about that?

Mr. Erickson:

Yes, I was in France in a replacement depot when we heard about that.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And what reaction did people have to that?

Mr. Erickson:

Well, some lieutenant gave us a briefing and said you can take an atomic thing the size of a pea and blow everything up. *(laughter)* I don't think he knew anything else.

Mr. Misenhimer:

May of '45, Germany surrendered. Did you all have a big celebration then?

Mr. Erickson:

Yeah, I told you I was in Birmingham, England, we had a hell of a party.

Mr. Misenhimer:

That's right, I remember now. Okay. Then August the 14th when Japan surrendered, did you have any kind of celebration then?

Mr. Erickson:

Yeah, more routine, we were glad it was over.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yeah, okay. Were they threatening to send you all to the Pacific?

Mr. Ericson:

The 86th division ended up in the Philippines, getting ready to invade Japan. I guess.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Anything else you recall from your time over there in Europe?

Mr. Erickson:

Nope.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you ever see any USO shows anywhere?

Mr. Erickson:

No.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you have any experience with the Red Cross?

Mr. Erickson:

No, I went to a Salvation Army facility in London one time, but that's all.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Okay,

Mr. Erickson:

When the Red Cross girls come over, they went with the officers. *(laughter)*

Mr. Misenhimer:

Right. I've heard that. Did you get home from World War II with any souvenirs?

Mr. Erickson:

No, that kid gave me that 25 mm pistol, and I sold it to some officer in the Birmingham hospital.

Mr. Misenhimer:

I see. Okay, now when you were over there did you hear Axis Sally on the radio?

Mr. Ericson:

No, I didn't.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Do you know of Axis Sally?

Mr. Erickson:

Yes, I've heard of her.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What date were you discharged?

Mr. Erickson:

Maybe two weeks after I came home, I'm not sure of the exact date.

Mr. Misenhimer:

So it would be January of '46.

Mr. Erickson:

Yeah.

Mr. Misenhimer:

January of '46. Did you have any trouble adjusting to civilian life when you got out?

Mr. Ericson:

Uh, not really, they had what they called a 52-20 program, you got \$20 a...

Mr. Misenhimer:

\$20 a week for 52 weeks.

Mr. Erickson:

52 weeks.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yeah, you got \$20 a week for 52 weeks.

Mr. Erickson:

Right. That lasted for about 2 months and my dad said "you're going to work, you don't take all this toll" so I got a job.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What did you do?

Mr. Erickson:

I worked in the glass factory where my dad worked.

Mr. Misenhimer:

When you got out, did you use your GI bill for anything?

Mr. Erickson:

Oh, yes. I got a degree in electrical engineering from Carnegie Tech back in those days.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Right, yeah, that GI bill was a big help.

Mr. Ericson:

Yes it was.

Mr. Misenhimer:

I think that's made a big difference in our country today, because so many people got educated that would not have otherwise.

Mr. Erickson:

I agree.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now when you got home, did you see many changes in this country at all?

Mr. Erickson:

New cars cost \$1500 dollars and I thought that was exorbitant.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yeah, right. Okay. Have you had any reunions of your outfit?

Mr. Erickson:

Yes, we did for years.

Mr. Misenhimer:

That was the 86th division?

Mr. Erickson:

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you keep up with quite a few people you were in the service with?

Mr. Ericson:

A few.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Are you still in contact with any of those?

Mr. Erickson:

No, uh, they've gradually faded away. I think the last reunion was, I don't know, maybe eight to ten years ago.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What else do you recall about your time in the service.

Mr. Erickson:

I wouldn't want to do it again.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What ribbons and medals did you get?

Mr. Erickson:

Oh, Purple Heart, European Campaign Medal, Victory Medal, Sharp Shooter, nothing outstanding.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Okay, you got the Purple Heart for being shot by that pistol?

Mr. Erickson:

No, actually, they told me I didn't deserve it because it was friendly fire. I got the Purple Heart for Korea.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you stay in... were you recalled for Korea?

Mr. Erickson:

Yes. I had taken ROTC in college.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Okay, and that got you recalled for Korea again, right?

Mr. Erickson:

Yeah.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And what outfit were you in in Korea?

Mr. Erickson:

92nd Engineering Searchlight Company.

Mr. Misenhimer:

About what date did you go into the service for Korea?

Mr. Ericson:

June of '50.

Mr. Misenhimer:

June of '50? The Korean war had just broke out in June of '50.

Mr. Erickson:

Well, it was a little bit later than that, I remember.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Okay, and how did you get wounded there?

Mr. Erickson:

Mortar shrapnel.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Okay, and how long were you in for the Korean War?

Mr. Erickson:

Uh, I was in Korea for a little over a year, but I was in service for almost 3 years.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Okay, but you were recalled for that.

Mr. Erickson:

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer

Now back in World War II, how many battle stars did you get?

Mr. Erickson:

I don't know, two or three.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What else do you recall from World War II?

Mr. Erickson:

I'm sorry, nothing really.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Well Jim, I want to thank you for your service to our country, and thank you for your time today. Is there anything else you thought of?

Mr. Erickson:

We all served the way the way we can.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Anything else you've thought of about your time in World War II?

Mr. Erickson:

Nothing.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Well, thanks again, Jim. We'll keep in touch.

(End of interview.)

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