

Transcript of Oral History Interview with Willie B. Hunsaker

Interviewed by David Morrell, June 19, 2003

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David Morrell: It's my privilege this afternoon to visit with Willie Hunsaker in his home here in Brigham City. I've known Willie for many years, and I look upon him as a real patriot. He's been highly involved in the Veteran's of Foreign Wars and is still very active in this group. I'm sure he's put in thousands of hours working with school-aged children to help them learn respect for the flag. He goes to many Boy Scout Court of Honors and talks about the flag. When veterans die and are buried at the cemetery, they have a special military service for them. Again when we have the Peach Days parade it's always Willie there carrying one of the flags. So I appreciate this opportunity this afternoon to visit with Willie and have him tell about his military service. I'll just hand the mike to you. You might tell a little bit about your growing up in Honeyville, going to school, and your enlistment into the Navy.

Willie Hunsaker: This is Willie B. Hunsaker. I grew up in Honeyville, went to school in Honeyville from the first grade to the eighth grade, and then came to Box Elder High School for the ninth, tenth and eleventh grades. I was quite fortunate because my father was a bus driver, and in those days the bus drivers owned their own buses and they were paid so much a student to transport them to school. I've lived a great life. I've tried my best to be the best that I can to help others, and so I always give myself when it's needed.

When I was going to high school, World War II broke out when I was in my freshman year so we started what we called the Conservation Corps. We would have to go and harvest the fruit and vegetables because most of the workers were taken in the service. So it landed for us to do this. Then they needed workers for working at the Defense Depot, which we called Second Street. It was the DDO down in Ogden. We would go on Saturdays and Sundays and work there making sure that the troops got the supplies that they needed. All students, the young men, in the high school would go down there and load and unload railroad cars to keep supplies moving for the troops. Then in the summertime we would go down there to work during the whole summer from Monday through Sunday. Some of us had different hours of working. We feel like we did a lot to keep that supply depot going during WWII.

I don't know how I got the idea, but I got the idea that I was needed to help our country. When I became 17 years of age, I asked my mother and father to sign to let me go into the service to help protect our country. Now at 17, you're not too old. You might think you have a big responsibility, but it's not there. You are pretty young, so I know I put a lot of gray hairs in my parents' heads when I kept after them to let me join the Navy. For about two months, I think it was, every morning at breakfast I would bring the slip for my parents to sign to let me go in. I'd leave it at the breakfast table. Well, one morning they decided to let me go. They didn't think I would pass the physical, but I did.

My enlistment date is quite unique because it was 4-4-44 (the fourth day of the fourth month of the forty-fourth year of 1900), and I went through Boot Camp. When we got through with Boot Camp, they needed some people to go to Pearl Harbor for a special draft. I was on that draft, not

knowing what I was going to do. They found out in Pearl Harbor that I was colorblind. The officer giving the colorblind test was quite upset because he said, "There are no colorblind men in the Navy. I'm going to prove that you're telling a fib."

They took me in a room. It was about 25' by 15', and the ceiling was high. Inside they had pictures on the wall – great big ones. It seemed almost like a billboard, but it was probably maybe 8' by 4'. The first thing he said was, "What do you see there?"

I said, "I see an airfield. There's planes on the apron, and there's two planes side-by-side going down the runway."

Then he asked me what was in the other picture, and I said, "Well, it's a shipyard." There were two ships in dry dock. That part I remember. They were anchored just offshore. Then he said, "Well, what's in this picture right here?"

I said, "Well, they're igloos. It must be an ammunition dump with all the big igloos that they have there."

He said, "Apprentice Seaman Hunsaker, you are colorblind."

So that afternoon I was on a C 54 flying back to the States, and I had to go through Boot Camp all over again. Only this time I went in the Seabees. That's how I got in the Seabees, and I was glad I was going in the Seabees because I had been working in construction a little bit. My family had the Hunsaker Sand and Gravel Company. I had done work there, not a great lot, but I knew how to operate a bulldozer, and I knew how to operate dump trucks and such as that.

So I had to go through Boot Camp all over again, and I went back to Camp Perry, Virginia. Of course, I didn't have to stay in Boot Camp very long. They just made sure that I was physically fit. Then they moved me to Davis Field, Rhode Island, and put me in a Seabee unit up there. We were there for about a month, and they shipped us back to the West, and I got on a troop ship and went overseas.

We got to Pearl Harbor, and as I said, I'd learned to operate a bulldozer. I was operating a bulldozer in the volcano that became the Punch Bowl where they buried all the military who were killed during the invasion of Pearl Harbor. They just had little cemeteries all over. Maybe there would be 250 men or something like that in a small cemetery, and then they moved them all into the Punch Bowl.

After Marine training, I was put on a troop ship, and we went on the Invasion of Saipan. I was on Saipan and Tinian. After we established a beachhead, we were put to work. I haven't talked too much about this, but on the invasion we went in with the first invasion. We were supposed to go in on the second wave, and we were put in on the first wave, and it was fierce fighting. There were 1200 men in our battalion. Three days after we landed, they had a special muster to make sure how many men were still alive out of our battalion, and there were 345 of us left out of 1200 men. I've not talked about that too much because it still weighs pretty heavy on me.

Anyway we built the B 29 base on Saipan and Tinian. Now Tinian is an island about 22 to 25 miles from Saipan. You can see both islands, one from the other. We had to have the runways wide enough that three B 29s could take off at the same time. The wingspan of a B 29 will cover three-fourths of a football field. So you can see how wide each runway was so that three planes could take off at the same time.

On Saipan they were two lanes wide, so when they would go to bomb Japan, there would be five planes taking off at the same time down the runways. That's how they were able to get the big planes in the air and get them into formation because in formation, the B 29 was superior to anything that they had at that time. The fighters could just never get through and break up the B 29 formation.

On December 28, 1944 on the Island of Saipan, seven trucks went down to the lower base to pick up much needed food from the supply ship that had docked. The earlier supply ship was sunk. We were out of food. For our Christmas dinner we had coffee, marmalade and bread, so we were glad to see the ship.

On the way up the little Burma Road a Japanese Betty (medium sized bomber) dropped a bomb on our convoy. I was the lead truck so they were after me. The truck had an overseas cab on it so there was no top. The bomb exploded throwing the truck one way and me the other. I woke up 19 hours later in the base hospital. Later they flew me to the Pearl Harbor Hospital. I was there for two months and then I spent four months in the Oakland Naval Hospital.

They were going to give me a medical discharge, but I didn't want a medical discharge. I wanted a battleship discharge. That's the best discharge you can get from the Navy.

I was sent back to the Pacific, and I was there for another 13 months before the war ended. Now I operated many machines at that time. I operated four different sizes of draglines. The last dragline that I worked on was called a monagan. They used them in open-pit mining. It was so big that across the base of the boom it was 30', and the boom was 220' long. You could drive a jeep inside the bucket on that dragline, and turn it around and drive back out. You couldn't go in there and make a U-turn and go right back out. You had to back up and forward a few times before you could get situated to get back out.

I operated dump trucks; I operated a lay-down machine for asphalt, so I got a lot of training there that most people didn't get in their lifetime working in construction. We were going to put in a big water line on the island because this island was the crossroads of the Pacific. All planes going from the United States to Australia or to Asia stopped on Kwajalein to be refueled, and a lot of them for overnight stay. Now to put this waterline in, we had to dig the trench. It was called a trencher wheel. They don't exist today because we have what we call backhoes, so you had to do it with a trencher wheel.

I was operating this trencher wheel and cutting. It was so easy to dig in because we had built the island 7' above sea level, and we were just digging right in where we had laid some of this coral reef. All of a sudden my machine stopped and bucked a little, and then it started going again and working just perfectly. I happened to see this big chunk come off the belt and onto the ground

there on the rick. I stopped the machine and went over, and it was just a great big piece of rubber with a jillion wires inside. I had cut the transcontinental cable. That was the only communications the United States had with Asia – was telephone. Now this happened after August 14, 1945. The Japanese had surrendered, but it was before they signed the Armistice in Tokyo Bay.

Now I saw many many many officers. I mean the brass on their shoulders were so many. I don't know how many admirals, how many generals, but there were a lot of those and colonels and commanders. Every one was pointing their finger at me. I just knew that I was going to go to prison. They were going to put me in Leavenworth, Kansas, or in the Navy brig in San Francisco Bay. Everyone, even my commanding officer of our battalion, was angry at me. Nobody was speaking good to me. Can you imagine an 18-year-old man having everybody point their finger at him and tell him how bad he was? Well, it wasn't long before this C 54 plane came in and landed, and they were right on it to patch it. They sent people from Pearl Harbor; they sent people from some of the other places to patch this wire up.

It was a chunk of wire. I guess it was probably about 28" or 29" long. Of course it was over 10" in diameter, and there were wires and there was rubber coating, lead coating, rubber coating, lead coating, and rubber coating twice more. By this time, Admiral Bull Halsey who was over Operations in the South Pacific came, and they told me that he was there to talk to me. So they took me over there where he was. He had his office put up right there. I just knew he was going to have me hanged or shot right there. Well, as it came out, he asked me what had happened. I told him. He said, "Did you put those stakes out?"

"No Sir, I didn't."

He said, "Who did it?"

I said, "Our engineering crew."

He said, "Did you make the map?"

"No Sir."

"Who did it?"

"Our engineering crew."

He said, "All you were doing was following their orders?"

"Yes Sir."

He said, "I don't want you speaking to anybody, only me. If they come up and want to talk to you, you just tell them to go see Admiral Halsey. I'll do the communications between them and you. They're not going to get away with this. You're innocent, and I'll see that they won't bother you at all."

So I started feeling a lot better. It took a while before they got it patched. I think it was about 31 hours from the time they started until they had everything working again, and so I got to meet the head Admiral over the Navy Fleet and talk to him face-to-face. I thought that was quite an honor that that man came to me and told me that I was innocent and that he would see that they would not bother me any more.

I had enough time to get discharged because you had to have so many points to come home, and I got home in August of '46.

My military means the world to me. I wouldn't want to go through all the things that I went through for all the money world. But I wouldn't trade it either for all the money in the world.

DM: Willie, just a question or two. You talked about Seabees (CBs). That means Construction Battalion, right?

WH: Yes.

DM: Why don't you tell us about your activities now with the VFW, and what you're doing.

WH: I'm the Committee Chairman for the Boys Scouts of America for the VFW. We go to all the Eagle Court of Honors, and we fold the flag and read the 13 folds and present the flag to the boy. We do this for between 116 to 120 boys each year when they receive their Eagle Award. We're the only unit in the Veterans of Foreign War that does this honor. There are some of them that honor the Boys Scouts, but they don't do this ceremony that we do.

I also go and help with the military funerals of our fallen comrades and help with the flag folding at those funerals. Also I am the one in charge to see that crosses get put on the military graves of fallen veterans. I make between 100 to 120 a year of these crosses, and they go to the cemeteries from Deweyville south to Willard, Corinne and Bear River City. We have put some out in Howell and different ones, but they have to be ordered put on the grave. The family has to tell us they would like to have one of those put on their veteran's grave, and then we do this. I enjoy helping people.

DM: Well Willie, I appreciate this. You've had some interesting experiences. You actually cut Asia off from the United States there for a period, didn't you?

WH: I did. For a moment, they couldn't say a word.

DM: In addition to his military, Willie is very active in his church. He belongs to the Sons of Utah Pioneers. He sings in the symphonic choir. You name it, he keeps active.

WH: I'm also in the Mormon Battalion now. My great grandfather was in the Mormon Battalion. He was in Company D, and I happen to be in Company D in the Mormon Battalion.

DM: Well, again we appreciate it, and thank you for your willingness to help us out.