

Paul E. Reed

Interviewer: Jennifer McPherson and Reid Chapman

Summary by Erika Gosser

While living in Toledo, Ohio, Paul E. Reed was drafted into the United States Army in 1941. After going through basic training in Ft. Eustace in Virginia, he was transferred to an organized unit in Hawaii, serving in the 98th Coast Artillery anti-aircraft mission. This time in Hawaii would be the site of the “biggest moment of [his] career”—experiencing the attack on Pearl Harbor.

When the bombing occurred on that fateful day, Reed was asleep in Schofield Barracks. “It was 8 in the morning on a Sunday, the one day we didn’t have to get up,” he recalls. “I missed breakfast because they packed the kitchen as soon as the attack started. All I had for that entire day was two half pints of milk. No emergency food rations. The whole thing was totally unexpected.”

Within moments, “the whole island was in an uproar. It was a big upheaval.” Reed describes the attack as completely disrupting the routine the soldiers on the island were used to. “It was an immediate turnover to an entirely different situation,” he says.

In the uproar after the attack, Reed served as a chauffeur operator for a car for his commander. The unit moved around constantly, with disrupted hours. “We ate and slept whenever and wherever we could,” he remembers.

The events of Pearl Harbor would change Reed for life, and would convince him of the necessity of having ready troops at all times. “My attitude is that we were caught short in 1941. Ever since that day, I’ve been a Teddy Roosevelt: ‘Walk softly and carry a big stick.’”

As things began to settle down on the island after the attack, Reed became a radar operator. Since radar was such a new technology at the time, no one in his company knew how to operate the radar equipment. Reed was one of the handful of soldiers who were chosen to learn the new technology. “I learned how to operate it out of a book,” he recalls. Reed would become highly proficient as a radar operator, and would retain that title until his separation with the military in 1979.

After being re-trained in 1945, Reed was transferred to work in the European Theater. Reed was in Europe for the end part of the war, when the Armistice was signed in Germany.

In Eastern Europe, Reed worked with a field artillery unit that had been pulled out of a combat line, and used as guards around liberated areas and POW camps. “The Germans had incarcerated thousands of Eastern Europeans,” he remembers.

Three days after the war’s end, Reed arrived at a German POW camp that had been established since 1939. He recalls the camp as being loaded with Eastern Europeans that

had been imprisoned for years and wanted to go home. The French, American, and Canadian POWs that had been imprisoned in the camp had been allowed to go home; the Eastern Europeans, however, were forced to stay within the confines of the camp since the surrounding environment had been turned into a dangerous battle zone.

Conditions inside the POW camp were cramped and unhealthful, Reed says. Prisoners were hungry and restless. Before Reed's unit arrived, POWs had sporadic access to food. What little food was available was often unrecognizable. "I remember seeing blackened bricks that were the size of building bricks," he recalls, "They were black and looked like they had been grass. I came to find out they were compressed cabbage, juice squeezed out, dried and used to feed these prisoners. They would reconstitute this and feed the prisoners cabbage soup. That's all they had some days."

Amazed and distressed by the despicable living situations inside the camps, Reed and his unit went to great lengths to provide food for the POWs. The Army soldiers would feed the prisoners government-issued ten-in-one rations, which Reed describes as similar to today's MREs (Meals Ready to Eat). The soldiers gave the POWs canned bacon, canned peaches, and other rations that were kept in a Quartermaster storage area nearby.

Supplying food to the thousands of incarcerated POWs was Reed's main job. Although the camp was administered by the prisoners themselves, Reed and his company were responsible for obtaining food from the local economy. "We would get food for local bakeries, breads, canned and preserved foods," he says, "They'd arrange the distribution." This work was especially difficult due to language barriers. "It was an eye-opener," Reed recalls, "We had eight French-speaking truck drivers, driving American trucks, working with German and Eastern European people. I couldn't speak any of the languages except English."

Although conditions inside the camp improved drastically after Reed's company arrived, the prisoners of war would still occasionally try to escape. Reed remembers one night when hundreds of prisoners escaped and went to the railroad. "They got into a train in there and found a supply of 'bird bomb juice'—wood grain alcohol," he says, "We lost 300 of those guys. They all died from drinking it."

Reed describes the POW camp as being made up of a series of long, wooden barracks. There was very little heat; each structure held 100 people, and was heated by one central stove. The POWs bathed in a community shower, which was only used one day a week. "The latrine areas were unhealthful," he remembers, "The odors were terrific." He also remembers seeing a "crematory incinerator" on the premises, though he doesn't recall anyone being "burned or destroyed in any way. Nobody ever mentioned it, but they did burn old, dead, bodies. There was no cemetery to speak of around there."

After his experience at the POW camps Reed was transferred to a Persian camp that was mostly war criminals and SS troops. This experience was very different, he recalls. "We didn't have any one-on-one with any of them. They were just a herd." This experience opened his eyes, though, to "what locals and German SS felt about us. It was obvious."

For his bravery and excellence during World War II, Reed received a host of medals, including a bronze service star, a good conduct medal, a World War II victory medal, and European, African, Middle Eastern campaign medals.

After the war was over, Reed decided to stay as long as he could in the reserves. As the Cold War developed, Reed became more and more convinced that his help was needed. "I stayed until they told me I was too old anymore," he recalls with a laugh.

Reed retired as a first Army sergeant in 1979. He looks back on all of his experiences in the Army with great pride. "The unit I made up and served in was among the first called in the Gulf War. They needed no further training, and left from the United States immediately. That was a thing I was proud of: that I took them from scratch and made them up."