

Manuel Perez
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I(Interviewer): Could you give me your full name, date of birth and place of birth?

MP: My name is Manuel Perez and I was born in Mexico-of all places-that's quite a distance from here. My parents moved to New Jersey back in 1927-I guess it was. My father came to New Jersey. He was a miner. He came to work in the mines of New Jersey in the zinc mines. Shortly after he arrived in the states he sent for his wife, which was my mother Carmen. Both she and I came to the United States and, basically, I grew up in New Jersey.

I graduated from the Franklin High School in New Jersey in 1943 and it was the same year that I volunteered for the Army. I didn't wait to be drafted. I volunteered.

I: Do you remember where you were and your reaction when you heard about Peal Harbor?

MP: Oh yes. That was a Sunday, of course, as we all know. I was going to a local football game. This was about noon that I got there and, lo and behold, during this football game in Ogdensburg, New Jersey that was the day that we were notified that the Japanese had attacked us in Pearl Harbor.

I: You heard that during the football game?

MP: Yes.

I: Do you remember your reaction to that?

MP: Well I was astonished because I was surprised, of course, because as you know we were, more or less, staying out of World War II at that point in time until we were attacked by the Japanese.

Of course, after that, Roosevelt got the ok from the nation to go to war because we were, more or less, pacifist at that time in my opinion.

I: So you volunteered shortly after you graduated from high school you said?

MP: Yes.

I: Why did you pick the army?

MP: Well, I wanted to get in the United States Air Force. I always loved to fly model airplanes and I thought I would get in the Air Force. Therefore, I joined the Army to be in the Air Force. But, unfortunately, because I was born in Mexico, they were only commissioning Second Lieutenants (who were) citizens of the United States. I passed all of my tests to become an aviation cadet but, unfortunately, I never got there simply because I wasn't an American citizen at that time.

That was kind of a unique thing because I was very disappointed because I ended up in the Infantry and after I volunteered it was a (unclear) because I volunteered basically to be in the Air Force but I was in the infantry.

My infantry experience started in Fort Jackson, South Carolina where I joined the 106th Division. It was activated in February of 1943. It was a brand new division and I was put into that.

We went on maneuvers in Tennessee. After maneuvers in Tennessee we ended up in Camp Atterbury in Indiana. While we were at Camp Atterbury, the division -the 106th- as I knew it broke up because there were anticipating the Normandy Invasion and, of course, they wanted more replacements.

They took me out of the 106th and sent me overseas as a replacement for the upcoming D-Day invasion. After that, I had gotten to England and this was in....

I: Did you go in a convoy?

MP: Yes. We sailed from Brooklyn out of Camp Kilmer. We were stationed at Camp Kilmer and departed from Brooklyn Navy Yard.

I: When did you arrive in England?

MP: I arrived in England in the latter part of June. Of course, the invasion was June 6th – the Normandy Invasion. I didn't get into Normandy until July 17th at which time I joined the 30th Infantry Division. The 30th Infantry Division is the division that I served primarily in Europe and we fought through Normandy.

In July 25th, we broke out of Normandy after the breakthrough at St. Lo at which time there were about ten thousand bombers that saturated the front lines and then the 3rd Armored

Division-Patton's Army-the 3rd Army, they were able to break out of Normandy.

Prior to the we were, more or less, in a stalemate situation in Normandy fighting in hedgerows and we really didn't make very much progress because, as you all well know, D-Day was on (June) 6th and we were still confined to the Normandy beachhead area until July 25th when we broke out of Normandy-after this bombing. At which time, a lot of our troops were killed with our own bombers.

On July 25th, we pushed out of Normandy. Then we went down to the Mortain area which is near the Brittany Peninsula.. During that time in Mortain, the Germans made a big push to drive us back into the ocean under Hitler's orders at all costs. My outfit, the 30th Infantry Division, 2nd Battalion, 120th Regiment was...it was surrounded. We were surrounded for seven days by the Germans at Mortain. They tried to push (us) to the sea at Avranches- I think was the name of the place.

Fortunately, we held them. During that seven day period we were cut off, of course. The only way they got supplies to us was by dropping artillery shells filled with medicines and batteries for our radios.

That was quite an experience because we had very limited medical supplies and we suffered a great deal of casualties but we held our positions. We never surrendered. The Germans offered us, you know, to surrender and they'd take care of us but we didn't surrender.

Seven days after being encircled by the German forces, we were....they broke through I think it was the 35th Division finally broke through and we were... we were no longer encircled. We put up quite a bit of resistance there.

I: What kind of food did you have at that time?

MP: We didn't have very much food. They parachuted food to us. Of course, all of that food....most of it landed in German hands but we appreciated what food that we did get. It was quite an experience.

I: It was probably K-rations right?

MP: K-rations. Yes. That's what we probably had.

After that experience....for that effort, our unit- the 120th Regiment- got the Presidential Unit Citation.

After that effort by the Germans to break through and throw us back into the sea was not successful, of course, we pushed across France quite easily.

The Germans were caught it the Falaise Gap and they suffered a great deal of casualties there.

Patton's 3rd Army broke across France into Paris on August 25th when Paris was liberated.

Then it was pretty easy going from that point on until we hit the German, no Belgium. We came to Belgium first.. This was in September. Of course, that was near the Siegfried Line. This was in '44 I believe it was.

I: How long were you in the front lines?

MP: Well, the life expectancy of an infantryman is not very long. We used to see replacements go up there one day, two days and those poor folks were gone. The infantry turnover was quite.....drastic. We suffered an awful lot of casualties being infantry folks. Fortunately, I'm lucky. I consider myself very lucky.

But then, I am probably not getting all of this right, about December we were outside of Aachen. Our unit was outside of Aachen. On December 15th, the Germans made one last ditch effort which we all know as the Battle of the Bulge.

The Germans pushed into the Battle of the Bulge and penetrated quite deeply into our lines. Ironically, the 106th division- which I first served with in the United States- they had arrived in Europe and were sent to a site in the Ardennes which was very quiet. Because the 106th Infantry division was new they put them in that area but, unfortunately, the Germans attacked during the Battle of the Bulge in the sector which the 106th Division was in.

They took 6000 American prisoners at that time and just punctured a big hole in the American lines.

I, of course, at that time was in the 30th Division up near Aachen in the 9th Army but they sent us down south to push the Germans out of the Battle of the Bulge-the so called bulge.

The 30th Infantry Division, of which I belonged to at that time, was sent down to that sector which was the 1st Army sector. We fought there with the Germans beginning in December and spent Christmas there during the Battle of the Bulge

Then, in January, we were attacking the Germans to try to push them back out of this bulge on the 15th and that's when I was captured.

The Germans threw a hand grenade into a building in which a lieutenant and myself and several other soldiers were in. The hand grenade exploded, of course, and killed the lieutenant next to me and wounded the other soldier there and myself. I had shrapnel in both legs at that time. I was on my back and the Germans came in and asked us "(German for surrender)", "(German for surrender)" that means surrender in German. Of course, we had no choice at that time. This was the 15th of January.

The German medics put me on a stretcher and took me behind their lines and then, at that

point in time, they asked me if I had belonged to the Air Force. I don't know why they asked me that because I was in the infantry. But anyhow this German doctor said to me "you know why you are very fortunate that you don't belong to the Air Force" because they had it in for the Air Force because they were bombing the living daylights out those poor folks. He says to me "if you were in the Air Force, I would kill you right here on this table. Because you are in the infantry, I will take care of your wounds"

So, he did remove some shrapnel out of my legs and, after that, they sent us back to the interior on a train. I ended up in Stalag 11B which is between Bremen, Hamburg in that area in the northern part of Germany.

I: Did you have any winter equipment?

MP: Not per se. We didn't have any good winter equipment. We had overshoes over our combat shoes. That was about the best winter equipment that we had.

The Germans had camouflaged jackets, you know. To blend into the snow it would be white.

I: Were you wearing an overcoat of what kind of jacket were you wearing?

MP: Oh, just a fatigue jacket. You see, in that respect what they used to do was whenever we were not pushed forward we would be supplied with overcoats – woolen overcoats- things of that nature. Normally, we left the overcoats behind.

I: So you were placed in Stalag 18B?

MP: 11B

I: 11B

MP: I remained in Stalag 11B until April 17th. While we were in Stalag 11B, we got word that the United States President Roosevelt had died in April. I think he died on the 13th of April. So we got word of that.

I: How did you hear that?

MP: On a radio. We had radios. I don't know....there were a lot of British prisoners in this Stalag 11B that I was in and those folks had communications pretty good with the outside world. How they did it, I don't know. But, we were notified that Roosevelt was killed.

I: What were your feelings when you found that out?

MP: Well, we were kind of heartbroken because he was our leader at that time-Commander-in-Chief and you well know. This was on the 15th of April and on the 17th

of April, the British 2nd Armored Division liberated our camp and the Germans had left... left us there by ourselves.

We were always grateful to the British 2nd Armored Division who coincidentally were known as the Desert Rats because they served in North Africa with General Montgomery going from Suez to El Alamein or someplace.

I will never forget that they were the British Desert Rats that liberated us.

I: Did you ever have much medical treatment when you were in the camp or was it just the initial treatment that you had?

MP: Basically, it was just the initial treatment. You know I am very grateful to the Red Cross because during my stay – and I was very fortunate that I was only a prisoner for 3 months – if it had not been for the parcels that the Red Cross sent over, a lot of us prisoners would have certainly died.

In this same prison camp, there was a Russian contingent there and everyday we could see cartloads of Russian corpses being wheeled away in these carts. They were dying from malnutrition. So, we were very grateful for the fact that the Red Cross provided the Red Cross parcels.

I: What kind of food did the Germans feed you?

MP: The Germans had us on very meager rations. It probably was one serving of potato soup per day. So, what we used to do in the spring at that time of year. We used to go out and gather dandelions and put them in with the German potato soup that the Germans had prepared for us and that supplemented it a little bit.

Wow, that's about (unclear). Shortly after the liberation, they put us on C-47's and flew us to Brussels and from Brussels they flew us to LeHarve. From LeHarve they put us on a troop ship and sent us back to the United States.

I remember very distinctly that we were on the high seas in May, about the 8th of May, when the Germans surrendered in Germany.

Of course, being one of the first GI's to get back in the states, were treated like heroes when we arrived in the country. You know, the war was just over and those poor guys in Japan were still fighting the Japanese.

I was lucky that I came to the United States early on and I was treated like a prince.

I: Did you have to be hospitalized at all?

MP: Yes. Very shortly for some of the shrapnel that I had.in both legs.

Basically, that's s brief synopsis of my experiences. I hope that I didn't talk too long

I: Now you stayed in the service until November. Were you hospitalized until then? That's when you said you were discharged.

MP: I was hospitalized for about two weeks in Fort Dix at which time they removed more shrapnel from my leg. When I was discharged from the Army, I was granted a 30% disability but, unfortunately, during Eisenhower's administration which surprised me because he made drastic cuts in the VA (Veterans Administration) at that time. He took my disability away from me from 30% down to 10%.

This happened in 1959 and, I guess, I was quite bitter about the whole thing. I appealed it but it didn't to any good.

(Unclear) I don't know what it makes but this is the truth and this is what happened. In '59, I was cut down to 10% disability but, you know, all things turn out for the best because recently I have been reevaluated. Now I am very grateful under Bush's administration the POW's have been treated very well. They have reevaluated most of the POW's and, as a matter of fact there are 7000 POW's who we are still looking for. The VA would like those POW's to come forth and claim some of the benefits that are truly theirs for the asking.

So, that's a statement that I would strongly like to make to all former POW's

I: After you were discharged, did you make any use of the GI Bill?

MP: Oh yes. After I was discharged, I did make use of the GI Bill. I went to Paul Smith's College in Upstate New York. Unfortunately, I dropped out after the first year and then I got an opportunity to-under the GI Bill still-to take an apprenticeship as a printer and I became a journeyman printer through the GI Bill.

I: Did you every use the 5220 Club?

MP: Oh yes. Shortly after discharge everybody who had a (intelligible) of course was eligible to receive the 5220 Club. I didn't take the full amount because I went to college up at Paul Smith's but I did participate in that.

I: Did you join any veteran's organizations?

MP: Well, I was pretty bitter after what happened to me in '59 when my disability was reduced such as it was. I stayed away from them until just recently I became a member of the American Disabled Veterans and Former POWs . I belong to both those organizations at the present time.

I: Did you every join the VFW or American Legion

MP: I joined the VFW back in the 50's. They were my advocates for my claim. I was just denied it. They tried to help me but they were not able to at that time.

I: Did you stay in contact with anyone who served with you?

MP: No, I did not because the 30th Infantry Division was deactivated shortly after it got back to the United States and apparently never had very many reunions. I looked in a lot of publications and never found any of their reunions whereas the 106th Infantry Divisions (unclear). Those guys are always meeting.. They have regular reunions frequently.

The reason that I keep track of those fellas is because I was a originally a member of the 106th also.

I: How do you think your time in the service had an effect on your life?

MP: Well, it had a great effect on my life. It taught me a lot of things. It taught me to be responsible and to be considerate of people and things of that nature.

I: OK. Thank you very much for your interview.

MP: [holding a picture of himself in uniform]. This was taken on maneuvers in Tennessee in 1944.