

Rudolph F. Drenick
Veteran

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Interviewers

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Q: Could you give me your full name, date of birth, and place of birth please?

RD: My full name is Rudolf F. Drenick. I was born in Vienna, Austria on August 20, 1914.

Q: Okay, when did you come to the United States?

RD: In April 1939, just before World War II started.

Q: Did your entire family move to the United States?

RD: No, I came here with my brother who was a year and a half younger than I. And we were welcomed by my uncle and his wife who had come earlier.

Q: What was your educational background prior to entering service?

RD: I got my PhD in theoretical physics on March 5th at the University of Vienna. Left Vienna on March 8th, and crossed the border in Yugoslavia on March 13th. So it was a quick action.

Q: Did you know English at all prior to you coming?

RD: Not really. But I had to learn pretty fast. I think the attitude among the people who came here in '39 was different from the immigrants now. We tried to learn English as quickly and as well as possible.

Q: What kind of work did you do when you arrived in this country?

RD: First job I had was a camp counselor for the summer of that year, '39. And in the fall of '39 I got a job as an instructor at Villanova College. Just before the summer somebody advised me to send my resume to Catholic colleges in this country. And I did. And I got three types of replies. One was we have no openings, the other one was we'll pray for you, and one was well if we have nothing by September, come and see us, and that was Villanova College (laughs).

Q: Do you remember where you were and your reaction to the news about Pearl Harbor?

RD: Oh yes, I was at Villanova College, listened to a symphony broadcast in my radio when there was an interruption that said there has been an attack on Pearl Harbor.

Q: What was your reaction to that? Do you recall?

RD: Well except for being very excited, I don't remember any other reaction.

Q: Did you feel that we would be going to war with Germany also, coming from Europe?

RD: I probably did. But if anybody had asked me I don't think I would have expected Germany to be the one to declare war on us rather than the other way around.

Q: Were you enlist...Did you enlist? Or did you get drafted?

RD: I was drafted. I was told that I couldn't enlist not being a citizen. So I taught Navy V12 programs at Villanova College.

Q: Now what were the Navy V12 programs?

RD: They were the special program in which we instructed sailors in the US Navy in mathematics, physics, and navigation. And that was my job, including navigation, which was a little bit odd for me coming from the center of Europe never having seen the ocean until I was already 20 or some years old.

Q: How old were you when you were drafted?

RD: Well let's see it was '45. So I was 20 years old I would say. Yea, 20 years old.

Q: You were drafted into the army.

RD: Yes.

Q: Now, did they put you in any specialized unit since you had this educational background?

RD: No, at first I went to the infantry which is what I really wanted, you know I had a grudge against Germany and I was itching to get into the act. But then the president of Villanova College who had all kinds of strings he could pull in Washington, pulled some of them, and I was yanked out of the infantry to the dismay of my buddies and to mine too because I never got to do, practice firing on the machine gun.

Q: You really wanted to be in the infantry.

RD: Oh I really wanted to be in the infantry.

Q: What kind of grudge did you have against Germany?

RD: I was in the, active in the anti-Nazi movement in Austria for several years before the Germans moved in very much at the urgings of my father and maybe this is part of the story. He was paralyzed from the waist down and he knew that we would never leave the country without him. On the other hand he also knew he couldn't leave with his disability. So in the fall of 1938 he committed suicide, and that clinched the situation for us.

Q: Okay, what kind of specialized unit or training did you go into?

RD: I was first put in outfit called a technical attachment to the War Department and was stationed in Fort Meyers just outside the Pentagon. And there I was used to translate and evaluate captured German documents, technical documents. And from there I was moved to the Ordinance Department, first citizen member of the technical detachment, and there I got into the evaluation of the document captured at the proving grounds of the V2 rockets. And I was with that, finally as member of the ordinance department until I was discharged in '46.

Q: Let me ask you something.

RD: Yes, please.

Q: Because of your background and your education, why didn't they make you an officer?

RD: Because I was not a citizen.

Q: Oh I see.

RD: When I was drafted, I was drafted as a private. As I remember it, they must have, they did an IQ test on everybody, and I must have done really well on it because I remember being interviewed with a sort of and all by the interviewer. I don't know how well I did, but at any rate I still was a private (laughs).

Q: Did you remain a private the entire time?

RD: Yes, and I was quite happy being a private.

Q: Even with a Ph.D. degree?

RD: Yes, that's correct.

Q: Amazing.

RD: (laughs) And I think to some extent my early private career they showed me that there were not going to be any honor scheme to Ph.D.s I got KP of the worst kind (laughs).

Q: Now, could you tell us about the type of documents you looked at? A lot of these were from Peenemunde?

RD: They were, yes that's right, from Peenemunde. The way it happened is three enlistmen, all of whom technical people with the knowledge of German, were all of a sudden trans...shipped from Washington to Aberdeen Proving Grounds. And on the next morning, a major appeared with a staff car at our barracks and picked the three of us up. Now I don't know whether you have any notion of what its like to be a private and be picked up in a staff car and taken away, but I was. And the three of us were taken down to the firing line where there was a huge unused garage. And there was a soldier there with a side arm guarding the entrance and the major unlocked the garage and we were taken in. There was what looked like an acre of huge crates. And that was where the documents from the Peenemunde Proving Grounds and they were marked "rechecked fuses." Because as we learned later on the Ordinance Department didn't want the Air Force to know that they found them in the mine in Germany and quickly shipped them to the Aberdeen Proving Grounds and that's where we met up with them.

Q: So your job was basically to translate and then analyze these documents?

RD: Yes, it was sort of, the major said "Here, evaluate." So we got a crowbar, opened up the boxes, and started going through them. One of the problems was they were coded. Full of code names and we had no idea what they meant. So what we did is we wrote the code names on the floor of the garage with, in chalk and then piled the documents on them and gradually we began to gather what they meant. And then we also found a sheet in which one of the people at the Peenemunde complained about the misuse of the

code names and there he gave away part of the secret. So gradually things began to fill in their place, but progress was very poor. We finally realized that we needed help. Some help came from the Peenemunde scientists themselves. Five of them arrived at the Aberdeen Proving grounds. The war was still not over. Germany had collapsed, but the war with Japan was still in full force. So here landed these five German scientists, and the people in the Aberdeen Proving Grounds obviously didn't know quite what to do with the enemy aliens at the time. So they put them in the bunch of barracks way out on the spit sticking out into the frozen Chesapeake Bay, and there were about 3 or 4 GI's, me included, who had to shepherd them around. And we had to stoke the stoves in the barracks and take them to their meals in the limo (unclear) and of course to the garage where the documents were.

Q: Were they cooperative?

RD: Very. At first, there was a, how should I say, distance between them and us, but working with them we gradually warmed up and sort of (unclear) to it. One of the Germans had lost his whole family in an Allied air raid, and he became friendly with a man who had been delegated to work with us from GE and who was Jewish who had lost his parents to the Holocaust. These two men became especially friendly.

Q: Now, the GI's that worked with you, did they have the same type of background as you?

RD: Yes.

Q: And you were all privates?

RD: Yes, as I remember it. Certainly it was nobody above corporal.

Q: What was your reaction when you realized what these documents were telling you?

RD: Fascinated. Fascinated. In fact they changed the course of my life. I became interested in the application of mathematics to technology and that's really what I think, for the rest of my life.

Q: Did you ever meet Von Braun?

RD: No, I just missed him. One of the five Germans with whom I did work was his deputy, but I forget his name, sorry to say.

Q: That's okay. With these German scientists, they helped you then with the codes?

RD: Yes, but still it was a labor without end and then somebody had the idea of inquiring among German prisoners of war whether anybody would be willing to help with the work. About 150 or 200 did volunteer. They were set up in a special compound in Fort Eustis in Virginia. I remember going down there with an American major and we interviewed them. Most of them spoke English, some of them better than I. All of them quite interesting people and anxious to help the Allied cause. Their compound, which was a low security compound, was next to a high security compound. The German PW's from that came charging across the barbed wires, threats of what they would do to our volunteers when they got back to Germany. Our volunteers were quite worried. As it turned out, they were unnecessarily worried, when they got back it was

much, they had worries other than revenge, their worries were how to live with what they did (unclear).

Q: What did these German prisoners do?

RD: They evaluated the documents. They were shipped down there by the ton and worked on by the Germans who were as fascinated with the stuff as we were.

Q: Did you come upon any documents pertaining to the German's nuclear program?

RD: Yes a few of them did. Since I was a physicist, I was especially interested in them even though I was not well-informed, in fact knew nothing about the American program, but my impression was that the German program was a low priority program.

Q: You don't think they were close to developing an atomic bomb?

RD: I don't think so. The facility was in Norway. It was a heavy water facility and it was a much smaller enterprise than it turned out later on the American enterprise. The American really was drawn up in a very far-sighted and imaginative way.

Q: What was your reaction when you heard about the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan?

RD: I was probably delighted. I mean I was like most Americans. I really hated the Japanese and I felt they had it coming.

Q: What was your reaction to the death of President Roosevelt?

RD: Dismayed. Dismayed. I had a very high opinion of him, next to sainthood probably. Maybe too high in retrospect, but I was dismayed. I remember seeing the movies of his casket being transported and people standing on the sides of the railroad tracks. It was very touching, very touching.

Q: How did you feel about the Russians?

RD: The Russians?

Q: Yes. (long pause) I know there was some talk we heard that some of the German people thought that we would, when the war ended, join forces with them and go against the Russians.

RD: I think that's probably right. My favorite story about the post-war Germans doesn't bear on this terribly, but I'll tell it anyway. One of the Germans with whom I got friendly among those who helped us, was an ex judge who spoke seven languages or something like that. And he wrote me a few times after he got back to Germany. And one of his letters said, "Mr. Drenick, please tell me the truth. The Americans are making us eat peanut butter. The rumor is that they are stuck with warehouses full of peanut butter, they don't know what to do with them, and they now make us eat it. And we Germans feel it was bad enough to lose the war, but to have to eat peanut butter afterwards, that was going too far." (laughs)

Q: Now you mentioned in the memoirs that you wrote something about a Russian sea captain.

RD: Oh yes, that was during my stay early on in Washington at the Pentagon. It was at the South Post of Fort Meyers, which was a really grubby set of barracks, but they brought in a number of extremely interesting people. This Russian sea captain was one of them, and I remember two American prisoners, who had, prisoners of war in Germany, who had escaped from the German prison. How? By axing to death the guards, and they escaped that way. I was glad I was on their side at that point. Another fellow who turned up came from New Guinea, and his reason for being there was he was infected with molds and they were completely new to the medical profession here. They brought him back for that reason. So that is background for that.

Q: So you stayed in the military until 1946, September '46. After you were discharged, did you have any contact with any of the men you served with at all?

RD: Yes I did for quite some time. Because of the work with the German material, I was hired by General Electric and their guided missiles program. And another fellow who had worked with me in the army had gone to General Electric about the same time so for a couple of years we were very, quite close.

Q: Did you ever keep in contact with them after that. Anyone you served with after that?

RD: No, I don't think so. I left GE about two and a half years after I got there and went to RCA and then I lost track of this one buddy with whom I was in contact. The others I don't remember being in touch with very much.

Q: Now you said you thought your time in the service, because of working with these documents changed your life.

RD: Yes it did, yes it did. I was a theoretical physicist, I had met Einstein.

Q: Oh you did.

RD: Yea, because of my thesis. I think he took pity on me, truth be told. I was in the...are we shutting up? (laughs)...a seminar with another Nobelist Pauling because of the work I was doing. But after I went into the army I dropped physics until now really. Now I am toying around with it again.

Q: Okay now did you ever join Veteran's organizations?

RD: No, but as a fellow who is pushing the American Legion and who is giving with the magazine which I read regularly.

Q: Well thank you very much.

RD: Thank you for your patience.

Q: Our pleasure.