

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
DAVID DEAN  
USAF Photographer, Korea War Era  
1996

OH  
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**Dean, David.** Oral History Interview, 1996.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (30 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (30 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

### **ABSTRACT**

Dean, a Scandinavia, Wis. native, recounts his experiences as a Korean War era Air Force photographer serving in the Tactical Air Command with the 544th Recon Tech Squadron. Dean describes induction, basic training at Eglin Air Force Base (Florida), and the duties of an Air Force photographer. He relates his transfer to a base at Thule Air Base (Greenland) and recreational activities at this remote location. Dean briefly discusses high security photography at Offutt Air Force Base (Nebraska) and his decision not to reenlist. Technical problems end the interview abruptly.

### **Biographical Sketch**

Dean (b. September 2, 1930), achieved the rank of Airman First Class, serving as an Air Force photographer from September 19, 1950 until September 13, 1954.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells.

Transcribed by Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs staff, 1998.

Transcription edited by David S. DeHorse and Abigail Miller, 2002.

## Interview Transcript

- Mark: Okay. Today's date is February 20, 1996. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, doing an oral history interview this morning with Mr. David Dean of Madison, presently of Madison, a veteran of the Korean War. Good morning. Thanks for coming in.
- Dean: Good morning.
- Mark: In case you're curious, the Dean I interviewed several weeks ago is in fact, this is his brother here. I suppose we should start at the top, as they say. Why don't you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised and what you were doing prior to your entry into the military in 1950?
- Dean: I was born in Scandinavia, Wisconsin. It's a small community about central part of the state.
- Mark: It's right next to Iola.
- Dean: That's correct.
- Mark: I grew up in that part of the state.
- Dean: Oh, you did? Oh. 1930. And spent all my childhood and young adult days in that area. I went on to college after graduating from high school and after the second year the, it looked like I might be drafted and so my father who was in the World War, World War II, and my brothers were all in the military and my dad was very strong in favor of military service and encouraged me to enlist rather than wait for the draft, which I did.
- Mark: As far as your choice of services, you chose the Air Force. What reasons?
- Dean: The primary reason was I thought I was going to be a pilot. My brother was a pilot and I was always interested in airplanes and so I thought I was going to be able to get in as a pilot and the recruiting officer assured me that I would have an excellent chance of doing that. It turned out that I did start as a cadet and they gave me another physical exam and ruled that I was colorblind. Although I passed the colorblind test initially, after I got in the cadets they gave me another test and they washed me out so I never did become a pilot.
- Mark: Now, as I mentioned before, I joined the Air Force and went off to basic training and that sort of thing and these are some of the more vivid memories of my military experience. Why don't you want me through your induction process, from going to the recruiter to going into basic training and what happened in basic training?

**Interview Transcript (continued)**

Dean: I don't remember much about the recruiter other than it was in Waupaca and basically I had approached him because I wanted to enlist so there was no real recruitment involved there. I just signed up. I was inducted in Milwaukee September 19, 1950. And from there we went on a train to San Antonio, Texas which is kind of an interesting trip for me because I had never ridden on a train before as far as staying over, you know, sleeping on a train, or whatever. In San Antonio at that time, it was very crowded. There was a huge influx of Air Force trainees and after, I think it was two or three weeks, we were reassigned to another base and we never did finish basic training. Basic training there was just the very first part of it, with the marching and that type of thing, KP. I remember one KP that I pulled was an all night, a 24-hour KP actually, at the bakery. One of the staples at that time was lemon cookies and to this day I can't stand eating a lemon cookie. I was then assigned to Eglin Air Force Base in Florida and shortly after I arrived there they established a second basic training program. So those of us who only had the brief training in San Antonio were sent out to a, it was a peripheral base of Eglin, isolated from anybody else really, and went through the full basic training program at that site.

Mark: In terms of military discipline, how tough, or not tough, was your basic training?

Dean: I didn't consider it really tough. Discipline, of course, was very strict. I mean you were required to meet the discipline that was set up by the military. I didn't consider it excessive.

Mark: I had a Vietnam veteran in here just yesterday who described, he was in the Army, and mentioned that sometimes the drill sergeants might physically abuse them from time to time. Did anything like that happen to you?

Dean: No, never had any of that at all.

Mark: Did a lot of screaming and yelling, foul language, and that sort of thing?

Dean: Yeah.

Mark: Did you have any trouble making adjustments to this new life style I guess, or experience?

Dean: I don't recall as having problems adjusting to it. I guess the biggest adjustment was living in barracks with many other military people and not having experienced that very much. I had been in college for two years and so

**Interview Transcript (continued)**

I was used to dormitory living and that type of thing. I did not, I don't recall as being frustrated or having a very big problem with it.

Mark: Um, what sort of guys were entering the Air Force at this time. I would imagine they were all volunteers. I don't think the Air Force was drafting, was it?

Dean: That's correct. They were all volunteers and it ranged from college graduates to people that had not even had any high school education.

Mark: Different cultural backgrounds, ethnic backgrounds.

Dean: Yes.

Mark: Why don't you describe a little about where some of these people came from.

Dean: Well, I don't remember much about it other than one of my friends in San Antonio was from Tennessee and this was my first exposure to the Tennessee accent and that type of thing. But there were, you know, different races of recruits and so forth.

Mark: Well, now, see I was going to ask, the Armed Forces had technically been desegregated in 1947 but that process was often slow. So in your basic training you did, in fact, have Blacks and others--

Dean: Oh, yes.

Mark: --in your basic training flight, I guess is the term.

Dean: Right.

Mark: Everyone got along very well?

Dean: They got along fine. We never really had any problems.

Mark: You eventually went on to become a photographer?

Dean: Yes.

Mark: How did that come about?

Dean: Well, I was a photographer before I went in.

**Interview Transcript (continued)**

Mark: In college?

Dean: In college. I was a photographer on the Daily Cardinal and during the summers I worked for a photo finisher in Milwaukee and so I had some significant amount of photography background. So when, after I got to Eglin then I was assigned to cadets, that was in Greenville, Mississippi and relocated there, and I was there for probably two months because after I washed out I was still there before I was reassigned back to Eglin. So then when I got back to Eglin I got into photography because that was my background and they got me in.

Mark: And you had your training in photography there?

Dean: Yes. On site training. There were no formal classes.

Mark: Oh, I see.

Dean: I didn't go to a regular MOS school. They called it MOS at that time I guess.

Mark: It's AFSC now.

Dean: I think, I don't even know what it is.

Mark: So you didn't have other cohorts you were training with at the time?

Dean: No, other than my fellow workers in the laboratory itself.

Mark: Now, what was the mission of an Air Force photographer? I mean, what sorts of things were you photographing? Why were you doing it?

Dean: Okay. It was really varied throughout the four years that I was a photographer. At Eglin it ranged from shooting portraits of officers to shooting aerial pictures out at — one of the efforts at Eglin was to put on fire power demonstrations for the senators and other legislators and so they had a huge stands out there in one of these fields where the dignitaries could all sit and watch the demonstration of the fire power and the planes dropping napalm bombs and that type of thing and we would go up and shoot an aerial photograph of the stands and that would be rushed back to the lab and we would print out these huge pictures and distribute them to the dignitaries before the demonstration was over. We maintained all of the photography of accidents, any kind of news photography, basically just any type of photography that was required for a base, which is sort of a city in itself.

**Interview Transcript (continued)**

Mark: Uh hum. So you stayed at Eglin how long?

Dean: Until I went to Greenland, which was probably January or February of '53, so I was there from '51 to, about two years.

Mark: That's a considerable amount of time. Did you get off the base much? And what were your impressions of the South. This was your first trip down there. I would imagine it's a little different than the woods ...

Dean: Actually I enjoyed the South. It was different than what I was used to. A friend of mine had an Accord automobile and we used to have that in the hobby shop repairing it more than we really drove it but we made friends over in Gulf Shores area in Alabama and we each had our dates and we used to go over there frequently on weekends and we'd go down to the Gulf shore itself. I recently went back to visit that area and I wished I hadn't because when we were there, there was absolutely nothing on the beach. There were no buildings, nothing whatsoever and now it's all condominiums and motels. The people were, residents that we made acquaintances with, we got along very well. There were different types of things that they were interested in and different reactions. They were a little bit stricter I think than we are up North.

Mark: But not much "damn Yankees" kind of thing?

Dean: I did not run into any of that really. Well, we used, among the Air Force personnel themselves, we had our friendly spats because some of us were from the North and some were from the South and so we were constantly bickering about it but it was more in fun and sport than it was really antagonism.

Mark: Uh hum. Now, of course, the South is segregated at the time.

Dean: Yes, it was and one of the things that I did notice is that even the Whites that were in the lower economic class were really more segregationist than the more well to do people.

Mark: Um, now, of course, there's a war going on while you were in Florida. In Korea. I'm interested in the young airman's perspective on the war going on over there. Did you want to get over there? Did you want to avoid going over there? How, just in general, how did you view that war and I suppose to expand upon that, the larger Cold War with the Soviet Union at the time?

Dean: I don't really remember my reactions to that. Since I was, you know, doing the things that I liked to do, the photography part of it at the base where I was, I guess I didn't really have any interest in moving on. It's one of the reasons

### Interview Transcript (continued)

why I stayed so long. And then, finally, I thought that I really needed some experience so I volunteered to be relocated and when the Greengo, or when the Greenland opportunity came along I volunteered for it and participated in it.

Mark: Well, see, I was going to ask 'cause Thule's got that sort of reputation as sort of the back water of the Air Force, I guess. It's not a place too many people volunteer to go.

Dean: No.

Mark: I was kind of surprised to hear that you volunteered.

Dean: It's kind of remote. There's nothing up there and the tour of duty was only 12 months and it was specific so you knew that it was limited. Before I went up there I guess I didn't really have an impression that this was so terribly bad. After I got up there, it was isolated but we had things to keep us going and because I was a photographer I got around to all aspects of the base as well as participated in the Danish council and I even went out and shot photographs out at the local village. The local village was off limits and the prime reason for that was because of their immune system. They had never been exposed to diseases that the American troops brought in there so they particularly didn't want to be exposed because they just had no immune system. It would just wipe it right out. So I did meet the Danish ambassador to that area, it was at his home, and I enjoyed visiting with the family.

Mark: Well, there is an actual village of Thule.

Dean: That's right.

Mark: And there's the base I'm sure.

Dean: That's right.

Mark: But then there's actually a village.

Dean: That's right. It's a very small village but it's a typical Eskimo-type village but it is Danish, it was Danish at the time.

Mark: Yeah. It still is I think.

Dean: Yes. And we had a lot of other interests, too. For example, there were a number of us that were musicians, and in particular one individual had



### Interview Transcript (continued)

worked, I'm not sure what his position was but he'd been involved with Broadway productions, and was a musician that could produce music and so we got together and set up a musician area, a group, and produced a show called Frosty Faces of Fifty-three. This was musical entertainment with acting and whatever and it was so successful that we had to perform; I think it was either two or three, command performances for visiting generals.

Mark: What sorts of other things did you do to occupy your time? I would imagine it was a much more difficult task than in Florida.

Dean: Yes. I'm trying to remember some of the things. When we first moved into our barracks, the barracks were metal constructed cubes that were mounted on top of the surface. The ground was permanently frozen so you couldn't mount it on the surface. It had to have air underneath it. And so they were slapped together and all kinds of gunk and stuff were on the walls so a good share of our first efforts were to try to clean up our room, clean all the glue off the walls and we papered them up with pictures, and that type of thing. We did play poker. The floor was so cold that a case of beer would keep nice and cold under our bunk. We also had access to skis and that type of equipment. Several times friends of mine and I went out to the icecap, to the edge of the icecap where we went skiing. Can't think of anything else at the moment.

Mark: Yeah. And did the Air Force have any specific morale and welfare programs or anything like that?

Dean: Oh, sure. They even had their own radio station, local station where they played the type of music that we wanted to listen to and that type of thing. There were movies that you could go to, recreation rooms, hobby rooms and that type of thing. So I think the Air Force did in fact try to provide outlets for the staff because it, obviously in an isolated area like that people can start climbing the wall. One of the guys in the photo lab, for example, finally ended up with psychological problems and had to be sent back and so that type of thing did happen.

Mark: Yeah.

Dean: There was one case where somebody went off his rocker and grabbed a carbine and was shooting up a warehouse. Fortunately, nobody was hurt.

Mark: That sort of thing takes its toll on one's mind I guess.

Dean: Yes, I would think so. Majority of the troops, however, coped very well. I don't think we really had any very big problems.

**Interview Transcript (continued)**

- Mark: Now, you mentioned you keep a six-pack of beer cold. The availability of alcohol up there, where did it come from? Did the Air Force give it to you? And was it much of a problem 'cause isolation can sometimes exaggerate those types of problems, too?
- Dean: It was available through the NCO club or the Officer's club. I don't recall any real alcoholic problems when we were up there. It really was no worse than what it was at Eglin. I mean, at Eglin there was, for example, in my barracks there was one individual that was considered the local alcoholic if you will. That as soon as payday came along his entire paycheck went into alcohol and he was probably off work, not physically but mentally, for a long period of time and a lot of us covered for him and so forth which we shouldn't have done. I don't recall anybody up in Greenland, at that stage that I knew of.
- Mark: Yeah. Um, so you spent a year up there.
- Dean: Counting the days.
- Mark: That's what I was getting to.
- Dean: After the half-way mark you begin to start counting down instead of up and the last two months you start counting weeks. The last month you start counting days because we did want to get, I mean, we had enough of it. We were ready to go.
- Mark: And you went to Offutt then.
- Dean: Yes.
- Mark: Headquarters.
- Dean: That's right.
- Mark: Um, how long did you spend at Offutt?
- Dean: Until I was discharged.
- Mark: Which is about a year.
- Dean: About a year, almost a year.
- Mark: Just basically describe what that base was like. I mean, that's sort of the heart of the Cold War Air Force. I'd imagine perhaps discipline was a little stricter.

**Interview Transcript (continued)**

I was in the Tactical Air Command for a while. That was always their reputation, that it was real strict.

Dean: Well, yeah, discipline was strict. Security was of concern. Of course, at Eglin it was the same thing. Eglin was a strategic base as well and a lot of secret weapon testing. They had a climatic hanger there where they could change the temperature from tropical to sub-zero in a matter of a day or two and one of my photography things, for example, was shooting Polaroid pictures of the canopy of the B-47 to test the stress of it when it was 40 below zero and it wasn't easy to shoot photographs in that type of condition. At Offutt, I mean, I had to have top security clearance at Eglin and so there was no problem with security clearance at Offutt. The photography that we did there, that I did, was really laboratory work more so than actual photographs. We did an awful lot of mosaic printing of aerial photographs and mosaic printing them and restitution printing in order to get them to line up. And producing large maps. That type of thing. I wasn't really involved in any of the strategic security-type activity other than the clearance I had to have to handle those photographs.

Mark: Yeah. So you spent about a year there until your enlistment ran out.

Dean: Right.

Mark: Any thought of re-enlisting?

Dean: There was a strong effort on the parts of various Air Force personnel to get me to re-enlist. A lot of incentives were put out, financial as well as anything else. I guess I did not consider it. While I was in Offutt I also made friends with people in Omaha and in particular there was one individual that was a manager of Kohl-Collier Publications and so I had an off-duty, I worked at night at the base, and so during the day I worked for this guy selling magazines and was making extra money and this guy offered me a manager's position when I retired, there in Omaha which would have been fairly good money at that particular time, and I seriously considered it. I talked it over with my dad and he convinced me that, well, you've only had two years--

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