

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
ELMER "STRETCH" JAEGER
Clerk, Army Air Corps, WWII
1995

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Jaeger, Elmer, (1927-). Oral History Interview, 1995.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 21 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Recordings: 1 sound cassettes (ca. 21 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract

The Milwaukee, Wis. native discusses his World War II service with the Air Force stationed throughout the United States. He talks about growing up in Milwaukee, impressions of the war while in high school, enlisting in the Air Force at age 17, and attending college at Michigan State until he was eligible for basic training at age 18. Jaeger touches upon his reasons for choosing the Air Force, training in Mississippi, and weather training at Chanute (Illinois). Stationed at Kearns Field (Utah), he comments on working as a clerk in the mailroom, dating Mormon women, the attitudes of airmen at the end of the war, and use of the GI Bill to attend the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Biographical Sketch

Jaeger served with the Army Air Force during World War II. He was in basic training when the war ended, and spent his time in service at several Air Force bases in the United States before being discharged in 1945.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1995.

Transcribed by Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs staff, 1997.

Transcription edited by Adam Salm and Abigail Miller, 2003.

Mark: Today's date is February 10, 1995. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Veterans Museum, doing an oral history interview this morning with Mr. Stretch Jaeger, Elmer Jaeger of Madison, a veteran of World War II, Army Air Force. Good morning, Stretch, how you doing?

Jaeger: Good morning. Doing fine. Thank you.

Mark: Good. Let's start from the top. Perhaps you could tell me a little bit about where you grew up, a little bit about your upbringing and what you were doing prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor in '41.

Jaeger: Well, I was in school. I grew up in Milwaukee and I don't recall precisely what I was doing on that date, I remember it was a Sunday morning and I don't have any strong memories of anything other than the message.

Mark: Now you were kind of a youngster at the time? You were in high school?

Jaeger: '41 I was 14-years old.

Mark: What part of Milwaukee did you grow up in?

Jaeger: It was outside of Milwaukee, it was north of Milwaukee, the town of Milwaukee. It was a rural area.

Mark: Is it part of the City of Milwaukee now?

Jaeger: Its part of Glendale now.

Mark: I see. These were the depression years. Did the depression effect your family terribly much?

Jaeger: Yes. It effected my older brother, ten years older than I am, obviously more than it effected me or my sister who was seven years older. But yes, I remember a lot of the things that went with living in a time of depression.

Mark: Like what?

Jaeger: My first job was working for one of the neighborhood truck farmers and I got ten cents an hour and the guy doing the same thing who was 22 years old, got twenty cents an hour and he was trying to--he was married and had a child.

Mark: What did your father do for a living by the way?

Jaeger: He was an interior decorator.

Mark: I suppose there wasn't much market for that in a depression.

Jaeger: Those were lean years.

Mark: So as World War II was going on then you were in high school, going through the grades and those sorts of things. As a young person watching this war from a distance, do you remember what you thought about the war? Did you have any particular feelings? Did you hope it might be over by the time you were 18 for example? I'm interested in what a teenager might be thinking in a time like this.

Jaeger: I think I was hopeful that there would be a quick victory. I felt that we were in a-- that our entry into the war was probably necessary although there were some differences of opinion on that score with some of my relatives.

Mark: If I might interrupt for a second. Jaeger isn't exactly an Irish name.

Jaeger: No, no. Its a Kraut. [Laughter]

Mark: And we were fighting the Germans. I don't know how close you were to your German ethnic roots. Was it a factor? Is that what you were alluding to earlier?

Jaeger: No. I had a grandfather who was born in Germany, but that was obviously a couple of generations removed. But, Milwaukee is a very German town and it was even more so back then. But I think for the most part, I think most of the German people I knew were in agreement with our war policy after Pearl Harbor.

Mark: You volunteered for the service in 1944.

Jaeger: Yes.

Mark: Were you still in school at the time?

Jaeger: No.

Mark: You had finished high school by that time?

Jaeger: Yes. I guess I was the youngest kid in the graduating class.

Mark: I was going to say you were born in 1927. You were by far the youngest World War II veteran I have interviewed thus far. You must have graduated when you were 17?

Jaeger: Just barely 17.

Mark: And you went to service how long after graduation?

Jaeger: Oh lets see. I was not eligible for basic training until age 18, therefore I went into an Air Force Reserve and they sent me to college at Michigan State for six months or so.

Mark: Did you have to have your parents' permission to do this?

Jaeger: I have forgotten. My father was very concerned and was not anxious for me to go into service, however, the choice was infantry or Air Force and I figured I might be a pretty big target, better off in the Air Force.

Mark: The Air Force was very popular.

Jaeger: Army Air Corps back then.

Mark: Many of the vets I've spoken to tried to get into the Air Force and couldn't speak of the romance of the flying and all kinds of things. Was your decision to join the Air Force simply that, you didn't want to be a ground pounder or was there more to your selection of the Air Force? And perhaps, why not the Navy or something like that?

Jaeger: There was a preference. I'm not sure I can pinpoint all the reasons for it other than the one I gave you. I think it seemed the best of the available choices.

Mark: When you went to Michigan State, then this was before basic training, before the hair cut and boot camp and all that business, what did the Air Force have you doing at Michigan State?

Jaeger: Studying Engineering and we were in uniform. We marched to classes, between classes, after classes. There was a lot of military. We were not paid, but everything was free.

Mark: What sort of classes again? Did you say?

Jaeger: Engineering courses.

Mark: After you turned 18 then that you went to basic training?

Jaeger: Yes.

Mark: Where was that?

Jaeger: Keesler Field, Mississippi. You've seen Neil Simon's Biloxi Blues? I think I was down there when he was down there. I didn't meet him. [Laugh]

Mark: Probably were busy with other things. Could you perhaps describe your voyage to Biloxi and then your first initial entry into the world of the military? I remember mine very clearly.

Jaeger: I guess I went to Ft. Sheridan.

Mark: In Chicago.

Jaeger: Yea, I think that's where I started and it was a train ride to Mississippi. The military at this point, wasn't all new to me because I'd had six months in the military. Oh, I guess you could compare it to an intense ROTC program of today. I had some--so it wasn't all new at all.

Mark: A lot of the guys going to basic training. Were they in situations similar to yours? Were they older guys?

Jaeger: Mixture. Draftees and very few people coming out of Reserve programs like I had.

Mark: Do you remember then your first entry into the basic training? Getting off the train and having a drill sergeant there? For example, I remember getting off a plane and there was a guy in a Smokey bear hat who started yelling right away.

Jaeger: I'm sure it happened but I don't recall the details.

Mark: Do you recall how long your training was? And what it consisted of?

Jaeger: It was basic training and I don't know what was it back then? Two, two and a half, maybe three months. You know, the usual, marches, rifle training, drills, typical basic training.

Mark: Was this your first trip out of Wisconsin or the midwest?

Jaeger: No, no.

Mark: You had traveled previously?

Jaeger: No. I had traveled with my family.

Mark: What I'm getting at is basic training is often a mixture of people from different parts of the country and sometimes there are culture clashes. Do you recall any such things? Like northerners and southerners, southerners fighting the civil war is the one I always hear.

Jaeger: There was a little of that, but for the most part, it was a very positive thing. It was kind of fun when you get to know people from different parts of the country and different backgrounds and attitudes, different accents. I didn't have any problems with that.

Mark: Did you get off the post or base or whatever it was called at that time?

Jaeger: Not a whole lot in Mississippi because we were restricted for the most part.

Mark: Where did you go after basic training?

Jaeger: Chanute Field. The war ended while I was in basic,

Mark: Oh, is that right?

Jaeger: And I was all set for pilot training and that program was disbanded at that point so they sent me to Chanute Field for--to Weather School. And I don't know, I guess I was there a couple of months.

Mark: After the war ended, how did you view your service? Did you want to get out or did you want to do your what was it your four year or two year enlistment?

Jaeger: No. The enlistment was for the duration. It wasn't for a specific period of time and obviously, I wasn't going to be discharged before those who had come back from overseas duty. I was anxious to get out because I wasn't doing anything of any significance in my opinion after the war ended, and yet I realized the older fellows who had seen a lot more service were entitled to get out before me.

Mark: I see. Your training at Chanute lasted how long?

Jaeger: Oh, a few months I suppose.

Mark: Weather training was probably a lot of classroom.

Jaeger: Ya.

Mark: After Chanute you went to Utah.

Jaeger: Went to Kearns Field, Utah, which back then was an overseas replacement station.

Mark: I'm not sure where that is in Utah. Is it Near Salt Lake City?

Jaeger: Very close to Salt Lake City and for some reason I didn't go overseas. Maybe it had to do with the illness of my father, I don't know if there was any connection or not but I ended up working in the post office.

Mark: You were a trained weather technician and then you worked as a clerk?

Jaeger: Ya, they promoted me. [Laughter]

Mark: So to speak. So, Kearns, Utah was your first real duty station then. After all your training?

Jaeger: Ya. I guess so.

Mark: How long were you there?

Jaeger: I was probably there nine or ten months.

Mark: And then you were discharged.

Jaeger: From nearby Hill Field.

Mark: What did your duties consist of?

Jaeger: Being a file clerk, sorting mail.

Mark: So you were in the mail room, you weren't in some sort of administrative office.

Jaeger: Yes.

Mark: Did you get off the post much there?

Jaeger: Oh ya. That was Mormon country for the most part back then. It was my first experience with Mormons and I found them to be very warm and delightful and just wonderful people.

Mark: I was going to say Utah is known as a rather Spartan area. Soldiers are often known to be a little less Spartan. What sort of activities did you do off base? Did you go out to night clubs, were there such a thing?

Jaeger: Well if you dated a Mormon girls, night clubs were not high on their priority list. The few gals that I dated were genuinely nice people, good families and we'd end up at family picnics and go to movies. They didn't drink, they didn't smoke, back then everybody in service smoked. You didn't smoke around them. It was just nice to get out of the base.

Mark: Now we're going through a period of military down-sizing right now and I assume that it was the same sort of thing when you were in the service right after World War II. Did you notice any sort of - did you notice that this was going on? Did you have any particular recollections of this?

Jaeger: Well, remember I had no thoughts at all of staying in the military. I was merely putting in my time until I got out and I was trying to do the job that I was assigned as well as possible and make as few waves as possible and go on to the next chapter in my life.

Mark: The people who were also at this base, are they in the same position as you? Late comers who want to get out real quick?

Jaeger: Most of them had the same attitude I had. The older ones particularly who had started careers or who had families were obviously very anxious to get out in most cases. There were a few regular Air Corps people. There were a few others who had done reasonably well in the service, had been promoted, and were contemplating a career, but most were in my situation, anxious to go on the next chapter.

Mark: What kind of base was this?

Jaeger: Kearns?

Mark: Ya. Were there air planes there, or just administrative

Jaeger: Administrative.

Mark: And so then you finally got your discharge. It had to be in '46.

Jaeger: Ya. It was late in '46, I've written down the dates. I went into active service in July of '45 and got out October '46.

Mark: You went back to Milwaukee?

Jaeger: Yes.

Mark: Now this is the area that I am interested in - my own scholarly interest. And that's the post war period. When you got out of the service, what were your first priorities? What did you want to do to get your life back on track?

Jaeger: Well, in transferring credits from Michigan State to the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, they didn't transfer 100% so I had to take one freshman course to complete my freshman year and I did that as soon as I got out. Then I think I worked at a packing company to make enough money so that combined with the

GI Bill, I could easily go to school. My sophomore year was at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee and my last two years were up here in Madison.

Mark: Was this Milwaukee Teachers College?

Jaeger: No. It was called an extension division of the University of Wisconsin.

Mark: Let's talk about that school a little bit first. As for the student body, were there a lot of veterans such as yourself using the GI Bill or--

Jaeger: Yes. A fair number of returning vets under the GI Bill.

Mark: Did you find that the GI Bill covered your expenses adequately? You mentioned you had to work.

Jaeger: Well sure I worked for 3—2 ½ months in the summer. It worked out fine. I didn't have to borrow any money to finish college. I was very lucky.

Mark: Was it different when you got to Madison then? It's a much bigger school.

Jaeger: You mean as to the percentage of vets? I would say the percentage might have been very close. There were a number of returning vets in my classes and in my dorm. Again I don't know what the percentages were but it was significant.

Mark: Did you have any trouble finding housing?

Jaeger: No. I lived in the dorms.

Mark: It wasn't a problem to get in there?

Jaeger: Nope.

Mark: Same thing in Madison here?

Jaeger: No. I lived in the dorm in Madison. In Milwaukee I stayed at home for that one year.

Mark: Some vets had trouble finding houses, this is more prevalent with people with families. So you were going for what degree?

Jaeger: Well I ended up with a major in Sociology and a minor in Psych which is a long way from Engineering. [Laughs] It worked out all right.

Mark: You finished college then in?

Jaeger: 1950.

Mark: Then you moved on to--

Jaeger: My first job was in Personnel work at Oscar Mayer. I was there almost four years. Then I went into real estate and I've been at that ever since.

Mark: After you finished college, there were other aspects of the GI Bill. There was a housing provision for example. Did you use that to finance your first home?

Jaeger: Actually, I used it for the second one.

Mark: How late was this? I don't mean to get too personal. But I'm curious as to the timing.

Jaeger: It was about 1956 I think.

Mark: There were various state programs as well, did you have any contact with State veterans?

Jaeger: I used the programs for customers of mine but I didn't use them for my own benefits.

Mark: The last area of questioning--I sometimes ask vets if they had readjustment problems that we associate with Vietnam veterans but since you weren't a combat veteran it's probably not a—probably had not psychological problem readjusting back. The last area I want to cover involves veterans organizations. Did you ever join any sort of groups--in college for example, I know there were some active on campus and then later on in life people start to join groups or attend reunions and those sorts of things.

Jaeger: I joined the American Legion. I might have been one of the youngest guys in the American Legion..

Mark: Was this in Milwaukee?

Jaeger: In Milwaukee. Maybe it was Shorewood. I guess the reason I joined is because a couple of my buddies from high school had joined and they had a good pool table and good poker games over there.

Mark: Was this Post 23 by some chance? That's the one some guys always talk about in Milwaukee.

Jaeger: I forgot.

Mark: So it was a social thing.

Jaeger: Totally social.

Mark: Did you stay active or did you sort of drift away?

Jaeger: No. I came to Madison and never continued.

Mark: That's kind of short but that's all I had. Do you have anything you'd like to add?

Jaeger: Nope. It was not a most a thrilling chapter in my life but it wasn't all bad either.

Mark: Well it's a nice experience, that's the way I look at mine too. It was a small part.
Well, thanks for stopping in.

Jaeger: Your welcome.

[End of Interview]