

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
CHESTER REITZ
Radio operator, U.S. Army, World War II
2014

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Reitz, Chester., (b.1923). Oral History Interview, 2014.

Approximate length: 1 hour 3 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

Chester Reitz, an Appleton native, discusses his service with the United States Army in the Pacific Theatre during World War II, as well as his life before and after the war. He comments on how he and his family felt about his draft into the Army. Reitz mentions his basic training at Fort Devens [Massachusetts] and then advanced training at Camp Edwards [Massachusetts]. He explains that he was stationed at Camp Stoneman [California] before being deployed to the Pacific; first landing at Sydney, Australia in 1944. Reitz describes the work that his unit was doing there and mentions attending radio school. He discusses traveling to Manila and then San Fabian as the war drew to an end, and later being stationed at Nagoya, Japan following the Japanese surrender. He comments on the use of the nuclear bomb in Japan and how he felt when World War II ended. Reitz also reflects on the impact of the military on his life and describes an Honor Flight he recently took to Washington D.C.

Biographical Sketch:

Chester Reitz (b.1923) was drafted into the Army in 1943 and deployed to the South Pacific in 1944. Reitz served 13 months in Manila, San Fabian, and Nagoya, Japan until he was discharged at Fort McCoy [Wisconsin] in 1945.

Interviewed by Rick Berry, 2014.

Transcribed by Brianna Weinberger, 2015.

Reviewed by Claire Steffen, 2015.

Abstract written by Claire Steffen, 2015.

Interview Transcript:

Berry: Today is May 30th, 2014. This is an interview with Chester Reitz, who served with the US Army during World War II. This interview is being conducted at the Wisconsin Veteran's Home at King, Wisconsin. The interviewer is Rick Berry. Chet, could you first off let me thank you for agreeing to do this oral history interview. The Wisconsin Veterans Museum really appreciates that on your part. Tell me about your background and life circumstances before entering military service.

Reitz: Well, I grew up in Appleton. My birthdate is 6-14-23. And--

Berry: How about your family. How many brothers and sisters and so forth?

Reitz: I had two younger brothers. One of 'em is, uh, well they're both gone. And I'm the only one left of my family that I grew up in. And, uh, my mother died and she was only fifty. My dad was six days short of sixty-one when he died, and my brother next to me died in January, I don't remember the year, I'd have to look it up. I've got it but I don't have it all.

Berry: Okay, how much of schooling did you have before entering service?

Reitz: I went through--I was in my eleventh grade in the Appleton school system when I quit.

Berry: Ah.

Reitz: And I was kind of between, I don't know, how can you say it? But it was--I was working and going to school, too. And I couldn't do both, so I quit and took the job. Got a full time job and worked on that ever since. In the summertime, when I was a teenager, I'd go out on my grandfather's farm in the town of Ellington--in Outagamie County. And I spend the summer out there and just--all I got out of it was enough money to buy my school books that I needed and equipment I needed and a few pieces of clothing. And, uh, then I worked in--during the winter months, I worked in the bowling allies. I started out watching foul lines and when they go over the line I had to push a switch and stop it. That one right there [points to picture]. And they would take care of it from there. So that all worked out like that. I also a little later, started setting pins for bowling which I could make more money at.

Berry: Were you working in the bowling alley then when you entered military service?

Reitz: No. I was working for Kimberly Clark then already. I was working at the old Atlas Mill, down in the flats in Appleton.

Berry: Mm-hm.

Reitz: It is now called, uh, the—people that were high up in the paper business, in their places. And then I went into the service in January 26th '43.

Berry: Were you drafted?

Reitz: I was drafted.

Berry: How did you feel about that?

Reitz: It didn't bother me. I knew it was coming and I figured it was going to be probably over with before I got to be drafted.

Berry: How did your family feel about you being drafted?

Reitz: They didn't like it. They didn't like it that we had to go. But I went. I was drafted. I took my basic training in--started out in Fort Devens. Which is only a short distance from, uh, Boston. And later on we were transferred to Camp Edwards, which was down on the Cape.

Berry: Did you take your entire basic training there?

Reitz: Well I took some at Fort Devens, and we went to the other camp that I just mentioned and finished it up there. And we did--we were there for the summer until September of '43. Then we went down to Florida about to [inaudible]. And we finished up our engineering thing that we had to build a bridge to get to know what the engineers do.

Berry: So this is really a part of your advanced training then--.

Reitz: Yeah--.

Berry: After basic--.

Reitz: After basic.

Berry: Did you have any sort of choice with the respect of going into the Corps of Engineers or you were assigned there out of basic training, how did that work?

Reitz: Uh, the outfit I was in wasn't trained to do that. They put us through it. But we didn't do any of that at all. We just built that one bridge and then we were there for the winter and then the summer. The spring of '44, we went to Camp Stoneman which was our debarkation point on the West Coast for the Southwest South Pacific--

Berry: So you stayed with the same unit right after basic training through your deployment?

Reitz: Yeah. And while we were in the States yet, we were trained on landing craft boats to take and unload the ships in the harbor and put it all on the beach. No dock space. And we had to take and put the people on that came over and they-- we had to take them and put them on the shore and they could go their way and food and equipment and all that kind of stuff--

Berry: Do you remember what kind of boats they actually were?

Reitz: Landing craft boats.

Berry: Ah.

Reitz: They were the ones that you run them up on the beach, drop the ramp and--.

Berry: Did you call them Higgins boats or--.

Reitz: Uh, the--

Berry: L-C-V-P maybe?

Reitz: Uh, something like that--.

Berry: Yeah--.

Reitz: I don't remember the exact deal was on it, but the Higgins boats would only hold thirty-six men. Where the boats that we--those were the boats that we trained on. But the bigger ones, the fifty-six footers, and you could put a six-by-six truck, a tank, or any big equipment like that. But you could haul it and you could haul quite a few more people on those, too.

Berry: What sort of crew did they have on that boat?

Reitz: There was four men on that kind of a boat. And there was a coxswain was the commander of the boat. And there was two people that worked with the engines. And there was one that was just a plane's private. And he was the lowest one on the totem pole. And we trained the 4th Division, which was a Texas--it was like the 32nd Division here, same thing.

Berry: So it was an infantry division?

Reitz: Yeah.

Berry: Ah.

Reitz: And it was that kind of a deal and--when the war ended, I don't remember the day it was, but it ended at midnight. The Japanese finally surrendered.

Berry: Were you still in California then?

Reitz: No, we were in Philippine Islands in Manila.

Berry: So you deployed--your unit deployed from California to the Philippines?

Reitz: No, we went to [laughs] Australia first.

Berry: Okay. So let's talk about where you went. You went from California to Australia.

Reitz: Yeah.

Berry: And when did that happen?

Reitz: That happened in '44.

Berry: Okay. Where did you land in Australia?

Reitz: Sydney.

Berry: Sydney. Okay.

Reitz: The ship we were on was too big to pull into Brisbane but where we were supposed to go. And for the reason is Brisbane is about ten miles inland. And it was on a river. But the river wasn't big enough for that boat to turn around in.

Berry: Mm-hm.

Reitz: And it took us fifteen days to go from San Francisco to Sydney, Australia—in fifteen days, unescorted. So, it was a pretty fast trip and it had two five inch guns for [inaudible] and then they had out around the top of the boat--ship that was, there was ten thousand troops on board. Approximately six hundred WACs, plus the officers and everything.

Berry: What sort of quarters did you have on the boat?

Reitz: Oh, they had them stacked in there so tight that you couldn't move very much [laughs]. And all the trips that I took after we left the States, I got sick. Each time we moved, and so I got sick twice on the boat when we left San Francisco on and went to Australia with--And the first three days I was so sick I couldn't hardly move. I figured well three days not eating, I'm getting kind of out of it. So I figured I'd better go down and get something to eat. So I went down and I got

myself something to eat. And when I got done eating, I turned and headed for the garbage cans to get rid of the--what I hadn't eaten, but I didn't make it. And it was only a short distance away from it. And it came up just that quick. It all went in the garbage can [laughs]. From then on, I was in pretty good shape until a few nights later we had a little rough weather and I got sick again. Only went once in one of the bathrooms and went there and got rid of it and from there on I was okay, the rest of the way. We were there for thirteen months. We built oil cargo utility barges. Some reapers, these are freezers built on barges. They're our own. And they moved around, they picked up the food wherever they could find it or get where there was plenty of it and spun it around to the troops that were scattered in the islands. When the war ended, we got to Manila, on that trip I got sick once, that was okay. We stopped at New Guinea two nights. We never got off of the ship. Because we were heading for Manila and we got there fifteen days after we left, uh, it's an island just north of Australia.

Berry: New--.

Reitz: New Guinea.

Berry: Yeah.

Reitz: We went from--we were only there a short time. Those two nights then we headed for Manila. It took us fifteen days to get there. I got sick once on that one. Then we were in Manila a couple of months and we went out on a practice run with all of our boats. And I was the radio operator on the last boat of the convoy. And we were coming in, we were about fifty-sixty miles out to sea yet. And the maintenance boat was with us and had to stay overnight at Subic Bay for repairs and all of a sudden on the way back in to Manila and all of a sudden my radio started up. It was the maintenance boat trying to call the command boat. And the command boat didn't answer so we knew--I knew they had shut down. I went out on the boat and they [long pause] the maintenance boat that they stayed in Subic Bay overnight and got their boat fixed and were catching up to us and I looked around after they told me that the Japs were talking about surrendering. This is after the first atomic bomb was dropped. So we had to go from Manila to San Fabian. I don't know if it was all the same island in the Philippines or not, that much I don't know. But anyway, when they called and said the Japs were surrendering, he told us--told me anyway what happened. And they flashed it on the screen and we were watching a movie and--got it on their [inaudible]. They went out on the deck in the boat in the back end there where I was, and I told the [long pause] and then I went out the guy that was running the boat that the Japs were surrendering. He says, "The hell you say?"

Berry: [Laughs].

Reitz: I said, "No." I said, "The maintenance boat just called and told us that--told me that the Japs are starting to talk because the atomic bomb did such a bad job for them. And it was a good job for us because a couple days after that then they dropped the second one and that was the end of it. That happened at midnight, Manila time. And we had been there a couple of days by then and he used our boats to unload and the ships out in the harbor would take it and dump it on the beach. And the people on the beach needed that stuff. They come and got what they needed out of it. Food and clothes and all that kind of stuff.

Berry: These are the people from the Philippines?

Reitz: No, these were our people.

Berry: Ah.

Reitz: Every once in a while they get--run into beer and booze. We pulled it away and slam it against the boat and break it into pieces. Those went down in the engine room [laughs].

Berry: I'll bet that didn't go over too well with the--.

Reitz: The officers didn't like that at all. They didn't get enough of their booze and beer [laughs]. We got little of it. And after we were there for a while--and we went to San Fabian and took them different outfits and put them back on the ships again and send them up to Tokyo. We got that job done then we went up to Japan. But we didn't go to Tokyo we went to Nagoya. We were there only a short time and the war was the worst for those of us that started with the outfit. When we started it in '43, February. It was just a new outfit being formed.

Berry: Do you remember what the name of the outfit was?

Reitz: It was, oh jeez, I don't have that.

Berry: No problem.

Reitz: Wait a minute.

Berry: There's no need Chet, that's fine.

Reitz: Is there--I've got a book with part of it in it.

Berry: What sort of job did you have on the landing craft?

Reitz: Radio operator.

Berry: Ah.

Reitz: And uh--.

Berry: Did you receive training for that or--

Reitz: Yeah. I had to go to school for that.

Berry: And did that happen in the United States--.

Reitz: No--.

Berry: Or after you deployed?

Reitz: That happened in Australia when I went to radio school. See, when we were done with our boats, rather than building the barges, we had to--quite a bit of time and they had to keep us busy and there was nothing for us to do, but we did a lot of close [inaudible] drill. And other things--.

Berry: Did you have any time for recreation there? Where you could go into Australian towns and so forth?

Reitz: Oh, yes. There was a place we could go. They'd take us there every--we'd be there three days, called Coolan--Coolangatta. And it was right on the ocean and we would go there and--for a few days. The only officers that were allowed in there were the MPs and doctors.

Berry: Now when that happened, did your outfit go as a unit or did you go in there individually on leave--.

Reitz: No. We'd--a couple of truck loads.

Berry: But you'd go there with buddies from your unit?

Reitz: Oh yeah.

Berry: Did you make any lasting friendships?

Reitz: Uh, no. But it was kind of funny in a way. Before my wife passed away, they built a restaurant in Appleton. It's like fast foods, all this. I went through the menu and I said, "This isn't Australian!" and I got through the book looking through it. And my wife says, "What do you mean it's not Australian?" Because they don't have *steak and eggs* [said in an accent] on their menu. And they served that a lot down there [laughs]. Next time we went there, it was on the new menu [laughs].

Berry: And how did you personally feel when you learned that the war was over?

Reitz: Oh, we were all happy. Because boy, did things ever roll after that. We got up to Japan and we were only there a very short time. And they put us on a ship coming back. And we came back in Tacoma, Washington and where Fort Lewis is. And that's where we came in. And we got in there late in the day and when the ship got up to the harbor, the docks, from the minute the ship got within three feet, the guys were jumping up on the railing of the ship and jumped off and on to the dock and into town[laughs]. They didn't care if they had OD's on or sun [??] clothes. It was in January when--January of '46, when we got there.

Berry: So you spent a long period of time then in the Philippines after the war ended.

Reitz: A couple of months. It wasn't long. Because we had to go up and as we went up and loaded the outfits that were already won, back. We went and took care of it that way.

Berry: And your whole unit came back as a unit--.

Reitz: Yeah.

Berry: Back to the United States?

Reitz: Only--we went to different places. Some--those of us—it was quite a few people. We got there--got back into the states, one guy went and got a hold of the colonel [inaudible]. It was an [inaudible] ship with us. And one guy went to him and says, "The guys are all jumping over the--onto the dock here and going into town." And he says to the sergeant, he's tired, and he says, "I'm not going to worry about that." He says, "There won't be a man missing in the morning." They were all there. They were holding each other up, but they were all there [laughs].

Berry: Everybody made it back to the ship.

Reitz: Everybody made it back to the ship. Because we had to be out of there--I started unloading at six o'clock in the morning. And I was in the clean-up crew. And we started from one end to the other end. And as fast as we went through that thing, to get it cleaned up, we really worked our tails off to get out of there before noon. And we just made it.

Berry: Were you discharged then in California?

Reitz: No. I was discharged in what is now Fort McCoy.

Berry: Again, did your whole unit come back?

Reitz: Just those of us that lived in our area. The others, some went to the East Coast, some went South, on the West Coast, Texas, and along the East Coast. There was a big bunch of them from the state of Wisconsin. There was I think seven of us from Appleton, Kimberly, Kaukauna, um, Combined Locks, Freedom, and they were all--went through McCoy. Then when we left there, we had to go to Milwaukee. We couldn't go straight across the state to get to Appleton. As far as I know, there's only two of us left that were all drafted at the same time from this area.

Berry: Have you joined any Veteran's groups?

Reitz: No. I did belong to the Legion for a while. But my wife didn't want me--to get involved in something. And she just, for some reason or another, she didn't want me active in anything.

Berry: What did you do after you left the Army?

Reitz: I had a couple of different little jobs, they didn't turn out. I worked for Kimberly Clark at the old Badger pulp mill for about four years. Then, I applied for a job with the Postal Service. And I got it. I worked there--I started in March of 1949 and I retired January 3rd, 1985.

Berry: Did you enjoy the work with the post office?

Reitz: Yes and no [laughs]. I enjoyed the people I worked with and I enjoyed the people on the street. But I didn't enjoy the work.

Berry: Were you a postal--a letter carrier?

Reitz: Yeah.

Berry: Yeah.

Reitz: And now, I got to wear this.

Berry: Knee brace? Yeah.

Reitz: That thing really sings a song when I start walking on it.

Berry: How about family sorts of things? Did you and your wife have children?

Reitz: We had two children. We had a girl first and a boy nine years later. I never expected to see two kids with that much between them--time between them to get along so good. They were a joy for me. I was brought up--my mother, when something happened with one of us, she would not take care of it. You wait 'til your dad gets home. And he didn't use his hand either, because that would start

stinging him after about the third whack. This other way, he had, if you were a farm boy, you know what a pulley belt is. And he had a piece of belting about that wide. On one end he cut it out like this so he could get a good grip. And he could swing just as hard as he wanted and as long as he wanted. If it weren't for my mother, he'd had us black and blue all the time. So when our daughter was born and she got a little older, one night she's out here with us. And my mother was dead then already. He says, "I hope you don't mind if she does something wrong that we spank her." I says, "Dad, I don't want you to lay a hand on her." He says, "Why not?" I says, "I want her to love you. Not hate you." And I says, "That's the way I want it." And he never laid a hand on her. Because I knew what I went through. Mother didn't take care of it when she was supposed to. Now, with my wife and I, we didn't let the kids get between us very often. Once in a while they got away with it, but very seldom. As we were always right there. So, the kids grew up being pretty good citizens.

Berry: Well, you should be proud of that.

Reitz: I am. And when my wife caught something, she took care of it, I stayed out of it. And if I caught something, I took care of it and she stayed out of it. My son one time, I had come home from work and walked in the house, where you go in the back door, there was a detached garage that went down to the basement. This way you go in the kitchen, there's a pair of ice skates there and they're not supposed to be there. I says to my wife as I saw her in the kitchen, I says, "Uh, where's Paul?" "In his room." "Okay." Didn't say another word to her. I put my jacket and hat away before I went in our bedroom. I went to his room and says, "Hey Paul, where are you ice skates?" He says, "They're laying by the back door." I says, "Where are they supposed to be?" He says, "Well, I'm going to use them tonight." I says, "What?" He says, "I'm going to go ice skating tonight." One of the neighbors two houses down from us, we all had acre lots, so there was a big backyard back there. And they poured water out there and made an ice rink and he was going to go ice skating that night. I says to him, "Oh," I says, "That's what you're doing, why they're laying here." He says, "Well," I says, "You can go ice skating." But I says, "Skates can stay home." And oh did he put up a fuss. He says, "Mother help me here." "Uh-uh," she says, "You don't involve me in this at all. Your dad caught this one. He's taking care of it." And when he couldn't get any help from his mother, he tried working with his sister. [Both laugh] She said, "If you think for one minute that I should get into this and get myself in trouble," she says, "Uh-uh, I'm not going to get in trouble that way," she says, "I can do enough of that myself, I don't need your help." [Both laugh] He didn't go ice skating but he went and put the skates away where they were supposed to be. Because on the basement, the steps you go down in the basement,

right a few steps down, I build a shelf back there for our rubbers and boots and ice skates and stuff like that so nothing is laying on the floor. Because if you wouldn't notice it and run down and roll down them steps, ooo, I wasn't going to have that working against me too. But that's how we made it.

Berry: Looking back on your military experience, what impact did that have on your life?

Reitz: I--.

Berry: View it as a positive sort of experience?

Reitz: It was in a way. But, I never got into a shooting war. So it was duck soup for me. I was a lucky guy. My brother, next one younger than me, uh, he went to Germany. He didn't get to his outfit until later in the year. I was drafted in January, and he was drafted I think in November.

Berry: Of '43?

Reitz: Of '43. And he caught pneumonia. And he didn't get to his outfit where he was supposed to go right away, so he was in the hospital for a while. How long, I don't know. He never talked very much about it. But he had some official of a town, sign some papers and my son had to sign it to verify his signature. When he wrote his name down and the last name we have has got the "i" is supposed to be sounded. Because in German, the vowels, two vowels together, the second one is sounded, not the first. My name is R-E-I-T-Z, is pronounced, "Reitz". And he says, "Donald Reitz". He looked at my brother and he says, "You're a German?" He says, "Yeah," he says, "I am." He says, why aren't you fighting for the Fatherland?" He says, "Germany is not my country," he says, "I'm third generation. Born in the United States," he said, "That's my country." And I'd like to go over there. I've got into genealogy a little bit and I got that black book up there with a hole in it. That's the maternal side. The part that--the paternal side, my daughter has it. And she's working on that, re-doing that.

Berry: Chet, is there anything else that you'd like to share with us? About your military experience?

Reitz: There really isn't that much because of the circumstances we were under to really tell you anymore. But it was a lot different. Had to get used to the way the guys talked and their language they used. I never used it.

Berry: The military tends to be profane, doesn't it?

Reitz: Yes.

Berry: Tell me why you decided to do this oral history interview. The museum is certainly pleased that you did so, but why did you decide to share your experiences with us.

Reitz: I thought maybe, I had done this once before for a teacher over in Appleton, Appleton North High School. And I did that a few years ago. I was supposed to get a tape of it and all that stuff. And I have yet to get anything.

Berry: Well I will make sure you get a copy of your interview today. That will happen.

Reitz: It's been fun. A lot of good times I had in the service. But at the same time, it's not the kind of a life I would want for myself, for my life. I wanted to live the way I was before.

Berry: Is there anything else you'd like to share with us before we conclude?

Reitz: Ah, I want to find something.

Berry: Okay, let me pause the tape here. Hey Chet, you were apparently involved in an Honor Flight? Can you tell us about that?

Reitz: Well, it was one of the first times I ever flew in an airplane [laughs]. We flew from here to Milwaukee and changed planes in Milwaukee and flew from Milwaukee straight through to Washington DC. We got there mid-morning and we started the day--had I think three busses, these big coaches. Got to--

Berry: Did you have a chaperone that went along with you?

Reitz: My grandson went with me.

Berry: Oh, that's just wonderful.

Reitz: I took him along. He's the one that took all the pictures.

Berry: Mm-hm. Yeah, we're not going to really be able to refer directly to the photos because--.

Reitz: Yeah--.

Berry: --it doesn't work in an oral history interview but we can sure try to talk about them in general.

Reitz: Yeah.

Berry: So your grandson, how did your grandson enjoy that experience?

Reitz: He loved it.

Berry: I'll bet he did.

Reitz: He loved it because he's [laughs] a history buff anyway.

Berry: Looks like you met with Senator Dole?

Reitz: Uh, no.

Berry: Oh, okay. So tell us what happened there. I mean you went to the various monuments and so forth in Washington?

Reitz: Some of them. We went by them. We went to Arlington. And we stopped at-- where the Tomb of the Unknown, they were changing the guard at the time.

Berry: Oh wow.

Reitz: I didn't go over there, my son did, or grandson. He went over there and he's got some pictures of that in here. So he got a big kick out of it. The last place we went to before we went to the airplane to come back. We didn't get back here until 9:00 o'clock at night, because we were held up for an hour down in Washington.

Berry: Did they have any sort of ceremony for you when you came back?

Reitz: Oh yeah [laughs].

Berry: Tell us about that.

Reitz: It was a lot of noise. A band playing and everybody blowing whistles and all that kind of stuff was going on. And it was a while before we could even get out of there [laughs].

Berry: Did you enjoy that?

Reitz: I was surprised, very much. And when we got through the whole thing and it didn't take long for us to get through it and out of there, and then come home. That was quite a job [laughs]. But, and I was relieved. We saw, there's pictures of it in there, Air and Space section, there it's got a--.

Berry: Air and Space Museum?

Reitz: Yeah. We saw that. We were walking around in there and some of the planes that were in there. The Enola Gay is in there.

Berry: Mm-hm.

Reitz: And we got pictures of that. So, that was just a wrap-up. And we got to the airport, got on board train, and aboard the plane, and it started to rain. And they held us there for an hour.

Berry: Hmm.

Reitz: Because they didn't want us to fly. And we got up when they let us go. And we got up, we were flying above the clouds already and all of a sudden, we were going like this, down.

Berry: Turbulence.

Reitz: And he brought us back up again and went a ways, and down again. And boy you should have heard the women especially [laughs]. But, those were experiences you don't get very often.

Berry: Mm-hm. Purpose of the Honor Flight is to honor your service, so. Good program.

Reitz: I'd like to go again. And I'd take the other one, the other grandson.

Berry: Okay, well is there anything else that you'd like to share with us?

Reitz: I don't think so.

Berry: Well Chet, on behalf of the museum I'd like to thank you for taking time to do this oral history interview, really appreciate it.

Reitz: Thank you.

[end of interview]