



Roger E. Salamon
World War II
U.S. Army

Homefront
Infantry Replacement
Training Center,
Camp Robinson, Arkansas
Corporal



Roger Edward Salamon

Veterans
History
Project
Transcript

Interview conducted
December 22, 2016

Niles Public Library
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Veterans History Project Transcript

Veteran: **Roger E. Salamon** Rank: **Corporal**
Branch of Service: **U.S. Army** Theater: **World War II**
Unit: **Infantry Replacement Training Center**
Camp Robinson, Arkansas

Interview Date: December 22, 2016 Place: Niles Public Library
Board Room

Equipment: Philips 9600 Digital Pocket Memo Interviewer: Neil O'Shea

This Veterans History Project interview is being conducted at the Niles Public Library here in Niles, Illinois, on the 22nd of December, a Thursday, in the afternoon at 3 o'clock in the Board Room in the year 2016. My name is Neil O'Shea and I am a member of the reference staff here at the Niles Public Library. I am privileged to be speaking with Mr. Roger Salamon. Mr. Salamon was born on October, the 27th, in 1926 in Chicago and now lives in Lincolnwood

I am going to ask Mr. Salamon how he learned of the Veterans History Project ... (Interviewer's words)

Through a cousin (Veteran's words)

And did he participate in the Project?

Yes, he had done it probably a year before he even told me about it. And he asked me just casually had I been on the Honor Flight. I said, "Yes I had," and he said to me, "Well I suppose you have been in the interview business that's going into the Smithsonian." I said, "I don't know a thing about it." So he said, "OK, I'll give you a number when I get home and you call them." Hello!

Well, we're very happy that you did.

I'm glad to be here.

May I call you, Roger?

Absolutely.

Roger, do you recall when you entered the service?

March 19, 1945.

And where were you living at that time?

I was living at the University of Michigan.

So you were a student in Ann Arbor?

Yes.

What was your major?

I was a Pre-Med.

Had you attended high school in Chicago?

Yes, I went to Lake View High School at Ashland and Irving. What happened was when I graduated in June, my father wanted me to get as much as college as I could. They were having three semesters at that time, three quarters – instead of two, there were three so I went in the summer portion and I finished almost my first year before they pulled me out.

So you were then drafted?

Yes, my home at that time was in Detroit, the reason being that my father was working for a company and they transferred him to Detroit so I naturally had to change my record. So as soon I graduated from high school, he moved me out of there to Detroit with my mother, of course.

So, you found yourself joining the United States Army?

Yes.

Did you have an opportunity to choose a branch of service?

Yes, but it didn't mean anything at that time. It was perfunctory. They would say, "And which branch would you like to be in?" And you'd give them an answer and they'd say, "Fine, you're in in the Army." Typical, the way the Army works.

So you were inducted in Detroit?

In Detroit, yes. But I ended up coming to Ft. Sheridan anyway so I ended up coming home.

So you still had a family home in Chicago?

No, but I had family.

When you were studying at the University of Michigan, did you feel like looking over your shoulder because you were going to get drafted?

Oh sure, we were all waiting for the other shoe to drop. That was the normal thing in those days. A lot of the guys were pulling out. They gave up. We all felt the same way. I mean what's the point. We wanted to go in. You can only imagine how we all felt.

If you weren't in service, you wanted to be. That was the way it was. Pearl Harbor and Bataan all those things that were occurring at that point. I mean we felt like slackers, walking around in civvies. Why aren't we in anyway? I suppose I could have enlisted. But I never really thought about it.

So did you find the Basic Training, a big change from being in college.

Oh sure, being in the Army is a big change. Your whole life is different. It is the way it works.

So you are sent to Fort Sheridan and then you go to a Camp

We did our Basic Training; I was sent to Camp Robinson in Little Rock. It was a camp so that indicates it is not permanent, otherwise, as you know, it would have to be a Fort. But that was what they call an IRTC, Infantry Replacement Training Center. I stayed there after my Basic because I could read and write. So there were nine of us who were kept out. We thought we were in trouble. They don't tell you

anything. The unit shipped out, and the nine of us are sitting there. And for two weeks we sat there. And then they finally came told us that we were going to be part of the cadre as it's referred to or a training Sergeant as they call them now. It was a good break. I mean I was in a place where I wasn't going to get killed – although I wanted to go with the group. I felt like a pariah.

So you were chosen to participate in this training group ...

As a trainer.

Did you get a promotion as a result of that?

I ended up a Corporal but I should have had Sergeant stripes. The war was, takes time, and I didn't want to fill up the table.

So you got your Corporal stripes in Arkansas?

Yes. As I say I should have had Sergeant; it was supposed to be coming down any day but Harry dropped the bomb and then it wasn't there anymore. So I didn't need it at that point. I did have other plans, though at the time. I got very friendly, I worked with a couple of officers who were happy with the fact that I could read and write so that I did a lot of things for them that they didn't have to do for themselves. Of course, that was my job. So one of them said, "I can arrange it for you to get an interview to go to OCS (Officer Candidate School). Would you like that?" I said, "Yes, I would." "Then you will stay in a while?" I said, "Yeah, sure." Then I realized that I hadn't called home and I told my mother what I wanted to do. And that was the end of that conversation (chuckle). But looking back at it now, it might not have been a bad idea.

Would you have been able to be an Officer and be a Doctor also?

No, as it was, by the time I got through with four years of college and two years of the Army - I've had it. I just got my degree.

So you were training young people

There were old people too, guys like 35.

Were they hard to train; everybody's different.

Well, it was hard for me. I was talking to people ten years older or maybe more.

Did you train in anything particular or in all aspects?

We had a training schedule every week. It was posted. It was a regular like they do in school.

Did you enjoy one section of training as opposed to others?

No, no it was hard work, very hard work.

If I could digress for a moment. I was interviewing one veteran and I was inquiring where he went to high school because for somebody like myself in the far distant peanut gallery trying to appreciate it I thought that the veterans must have had a good high school education

Not necessarily

Yes, that's what he said, He said that the reason those guys were good, he was a training sergeant, "We trained those guys." He took great pride in that. Mr. Horstman.

Well, there were people you got in there and the only way they could know their left from their right was when you put a rock in their hand. And I'm not kidding. It was the first item in my life that I ever ran into people who couldn't read. It was a revelation as far as I was concerned. I didn't know anybody who didn't know how to read. I thought everybody in the world knew how to read. But it's not so.

The fact a person couldn't read or write didn't mean they couldn't be a good soldier?

No. It just means they can't read a training manual and they wouldn't be in position to do anything in the way of that if they were going to give a course.

Would there have been a large percentage who couldn't read and write?

I can't give you percentages, but I ran into a lot of guys. I suppose there was a small percentage but we had them in the Army, and don't forget the infantry got everybody. You didn't have to be special to go in the infantry.

So do you think the reason you were singled out for this was because of an IQ test?

No, the fact that I joined into a lot of things, did things during my Basic Training and I reacted to things that a lot of the fellows who didn't have the same background, couldn't react to. When you watch a group, there's always one or two that just by accident are outstanding, not outstanding but different, better and also there's always one in every group that absolutely doesn't have a clue as to what's going on.

So your time in the service then, most of it was at Camp Robinson in the Training Center?

Most of it, until the war was over.

Was there a big city near there that you

Yes, Little Rock, not a big city but a city, nice

So if you got a break or pass from Camp

Oh, yes. There were buses. Furloughs, I went home. But on weekends, if I was off, or even at night some times, but during the week, most of the time, I stayed in the camp.

*So when you say your unit division was IRTC, that was Infantry Replacement Training Center at Camp
Camp Robinson*

Because the other camps might also have the same cadre

Yes, exactly the same.

You said that you would have made Sergeant, but it was because the war ended.

Yes, I was slated for it. I had already send in the papers. But then what happened was VE Day and everything stopped in the camp I mean it was like somebody pulled the curtain down and you couldn't do anything. There was nothing to do. We weren't training any more for Europe. So we had a new program that to be developed so rather than develop a program for fighting in the Japanese home islands they decided to gather up all the trainers the whole camp, all of us, and the ancillary people who were still around - we were "going over." They figure we're trained. We can do the job better. We were part of the half a million they were going to send over, OK. And we were sitting in the stands, and this was after a couple of weeks, of sitting around, not doing anything, and we had an area where, it was like an amphitheater, crude, but an amphitheater. It was early morning. This full colonel, "bird" colonel, walked

up and said, "Men, listen up! Look to your left. Look to you right. One in three of you isn't coming back." That's just what he said. That's the way it was. It was interesting. That was the thought. So we were going to prepare for our push. They had to do it. We were running out of men. By 1946 they were running out of men. They were taking men, as I was telling someone this morning, men, like 1-C with family. They were taking guys like that. So it is not a bottomless pit if you don't have any more people. So they were going to use us. That was the sensible way to go. They weren't going to spend another 17 weeks spending a bunch of people who were still green after they were trained so it made sense.

So if the war in the Pacific hadn't ended you would have headed

Oh, we were on the way.

for Operation Coronet?

Yes, we were on the way.

You would have been in combat.

Oh, yes – no more training, that's it.

So VE Day is in early May, 1945 and the bomb is dropped early in August, 1945 so I imagine there was great relief then

To say the least! You know it's a funny thing. Young people, at least in my experience, don't look at death the way that older people look at death. There's a different approach. Now I am 90 years-old. We're losing 600 veterans a day so I am resigned to the fact that it's going to be my turn, but not when you're 19 – a whole different ballgame.

So as a trainer, teacher, instructor, down there in Camp Robinson was there any aspect of it you disliked.

Oh, a lot of it. But you know you put up with it because is part of the program. It was for me; what could I do. I was fortunate. I had a good job and I got along with all of the officers. And I was an NCO myself so I had no problems.

That wasn't that the first time you were away from home?

No, I was away from home at college.

And it wasn't the first time you met lots of different people from different parts of the country.

No, that was the first time, with people from all over.

Oh, exposure to those people who couldn't read and write.

There were people from all over.

Was it easy to stay in touch with your family.

Sure, letters. Telephones weren't too popular. It was hard to get to a phone. I got a couple of furloughs during the course of my service so I could get home.

And was that all the way to Detroit or Chicago or it depended on...

Depending where somebody was. Mostly it was Detroit, my mother had gotten hired when we moved. She was sharp. She was hired. She worked the main Ration Board in Downtown Detroit so she had a good job during the war, too. By good job I mean, not money-wise, but she was able to lend a hand.

Did you say there nine of you who came or were kept back for the training cadre?

Yes, I think there were nine.

Anybody who had joined up from Michigan?

Yes, one of my buddies – a good deal of a fluke. He was kept too.

So you had a friend there ...

Yes, we could lean on each other. It isn't that you need anything special. It's just comforting. The unknown is always a little harder to cope with.

So any of the men that you trained, did they go to Europe?

I'm not sure. I couldn't answer that. I don't know. I have to assume, now at one point, let me go back to during my training, they were talking about sending us to the Battle of the Bulge. But then they couldn't find enough ways to get us there so we never made it. It looked like we were going to go. But that was in about the 14th week. Normal Basic Training was 17 weeks. If there was a problem and they needed men sooner, they could it lop off at 14 weeks. Nothing less than that. They couldn't send anybody out with less than that.

You couldn't be trained

I mean there were things you just had to learn: bayonet tactics, handling different weapons. In the infantry you have mortars, machine guns, rifles, carbines... you got handguns. There's a lot there.

I noticed on the Biographical Data Form that you also demonstrated the use of the "snooper scope."

Yes, that that's they called it. It was actually the infrared, now. They have glasses for that. It was a canister they mounted on top of a carbine. And I wore a battery pack. And it worked the same way that your night vision goggles work, but now it is through goggles, instead of this big heavy thing. So I went all over the camp and showed how they would sneak around in areas they were watching and then I would say, "Oh, he's over there; oh he's moving." Nobody got a chance to use it, but they could see that it worked.

I wonder who manufactured it?

No idea.

You were also awarded an Expert Infantryman Badge.

Yes, that was an additional thing, you had to go through, after I became a cadre man. I was talking to the Captain one day. He said to me, in fact, I am wearing in that picture it's on my chest there (pointing to medal in picture), that is similar to the combat one only except without the wreath and it pays five bucks a month. We had to go through a course. I mean physically go through a course. It was a bugger, quite a ... He wanted all the non-coms to go through it, but only three of us made it.

That rifle would have been an

M-1 It wasn't anything to do with shooting, it was crawling up and over, you have seen guys going up ladders made of ropes with a 30pound pack over walls.

You've always been fairly fit.

I was fairly athletic; I enjoyed that. And I wanted that badge. I didn't have any medals but I had a badge.

So when you qualified for the badge you were

I was a cadre man by that time.

And then you took that additional course.

Were there any particularly humorous or memorable or unusual events in camp that you recall?

Good question, I guess. Humorous? Screw-ups, you mean (chuckles) No, off-hand, I can't think of anything.

There really wasn't anything to laugh at there, really. It was serious.

I notice that you were also at Fort Knox, Kentucky.

Ok, then, after training had ceased, they didn't need the IRTC anymore. It's over. They got to the point where they were going to start closing it out, move all the personnel out, take all the equipment out and I don't know what it is now. I haven't been to Little Rock in a long time. I assume it's either a housing project or it is an empty lot, but I had time on my hands so I took a USAFI course – United States Armed Forces Institute which means I was going to get some college credits. And what I thought I needed was typing. I figured that was the best thing I could do for myself. So I started to take a typing course and I had time to go and do it. I made arrangements. I learned to be a pretty good typist at that time.

So one day we're sitting, after I had been in Fort Knox already. We were transferred out. I was transferred out to, I want to give you the exact names of things, I am digging deep here and, tank destroyers, the ones that picked up tanks that were to be rehabilitated. So anyway the first sergeant said "Any of you guys know how to type?" I said, "Yeah, I can type. He says, "They need somebody down at the Motor Pool so grab your stuff and take a walk down there and report to the Warrant Officer" so I went down and reported.

"Can you type?" he said, "Yeah, I am not 90 words a minute but I can type. He said, "Alright your new job is to make sure that all the vehicles get serviced properly." I said "That's easy." No tricks, you had file cabinets. You knew what you had. If it needed to be greased or oiled, tires, whatever, and that's what I did until I was separated.

So you had over a year from the Japanese surrender at Fort Knox until

about eight months. I was separated in Fort Knox and I was sent home.

You didn't find it difficult to reacquaint, adjust yourself to civilian life?

I had a few minor, minor problems, I had a backache that bothered me but it went away.

And that was a result of something in the Army?

It was a different life.

But overall you were happy to be

I wasn't unhappy. I wouldn't say I was happy in the Army but overall.

I mean you were happy to return to civilian life.

(Roger's mobile phone rings, playing Glen Miller) I'm not going to take this. I'll turn this off. I'm sorry.

You were thinking of going back to school then.

Oh, definitely.

You didn't have to worry about getting a job.

No

Were you able to use the G.I. Bill?

Yes

At the University of Michigan.

Yes.

That was a funny story which I will tell you in a minute. No, that was my plan if I wasn't going to stay in the Army I was going back to school.

But I got home and I had a backache that bothered me. It wasn't real serious but that was my little problem. But it went away My folks were good people and I'm an only child. They didn't coddle me but they were very helpful.

And the GI Bill was helpful?

Yes, oh that was a wonderful thing. And then you had the "52-20 Club." Did anybody ever tell you about the 52-20 Club?

I don't think so

52-20 Club was well, they called it a club but it wasn't really a club. If you didn't go back to school, the government gave you \$20 a week for 52 weeks. Did I tell you something new, Neil?

Yes, you sure did and I have spoken to a lot of vets.

Well, if they didn't go back to school, and couldn't get a job or didn't want to get a job. They had the 52-20 Club. Or we called it a club. Crazy, huh?

But you wouldn't have been in the club because you were in school.

No, I went right back to school when I got back.

And you were just as good a student as you were beforehand.

It didn't affect me too much. The only thing that bothered me was that I knew I wasn't going any further. I had just had it.

So when you indicated possible interest in going into Officers Training School.

That was before I got out.

Before you got, that was in Arkansas or Kentucky

It might have been in Fort Knox. I don't recall.

But by the time you decided to leave the Army that idea was

I could have gone to ROTC if I wanted to and got my commission that way if I had wanted to I'm glad I didn't because I would have gotten pulled for Korea, the next war we had. I definitely would have been in that so I guess I did myself a good term by doing that. In fact, during that particular situation, I had thought that I might be recalled because my MOS (Military Occupational Specialty) was Infantry. I tried to get a different MOS when I was separated but I couldn't do it. I thought if I have to go back I'd like to go back as something besides a ditch digger.

Did you make any buddies during the service that you stayed in touch with?

No, I made a lot of buddies. A couple of them we saw subsequently. One of the boys came through well after I got out and stayed in our home, spent a couple of weeks with him. But that all dissipated.

Did you join a veterans organization or anything like that?

I don't belong to any veterans organization. I give money to it. I get mail from the American Legion which I don't care about, but there are other veterans organizations. I support them. I did become a Mason and took my Masonic Degrees and ended up 32nd.

That's really high isn't it.

It is not as high as you can go but you have to be very active to make 33rd.

I sense we're coming the end of the interview.

The Army stuff wasn't that exciting. Neil I didn't do a hell of a lot, I mean I did was told to do but I didn't feel that I necessarily accomplished a hell of a lot. I took somebody's place and they went off to fight, I guess.

But you were there when your country called. You did was asked of you and you distinguished yourself.

There's always two questions that we pose to the veteran at the end of the interview. How do you think your military service and experiences affected your life?

I think it is more important now that when I first got out. I've been very lucky to be involved with things because I am a World War II veteran. We weren't the "greatest generation" when we all got out. But they didn't spit at us then. But there's a lot of little pluses that happened, especially, when people know that you are a World War II veteran.

Your experience in the military, has it influenced your thinking about war?

Well, one thing I know is that wars are fought by young people. It is not for old men. And, of course, to advocate war, I'd get a shrink. I mean if were to say to you that war is great. I mean, I know people they don't care. They love war. It's not fun. It is a very serious situation, and it is deadly.

And you have a positive opinion about the military in general.

Well, when you're there, there are always things that happen and you think "typical army?" "Hurry up and wait" was one of them, for example and there's a lot that ...especially if you get involved with an officer who is really, that you can't reason with, you know he gets an idea about something and you're stuck with it. And you can't sass him back and you can't tell him "No." So the military has its faults but I think we have a pretty good army.

Good equipment, good training, and we certainly hold our own against anybody. I don't love the army but I sure don't hate it.

Did you, I was just thinking, you didn't pick up any bad habits like smoking or gambling in the army.

Everybody smoked in those days. Watch the movies from the Forties even baseball players, athletes, everybody smoked. See a movie; everybody smoked. Yes, I smoked in the service.

Had you smoked before you went into the service?

Yes but minor. And cigarettes were cheap During the war you couldn't get them.

I think you used the term NCO so did you have any privileges for good beer or club

I'm not a beer drinker. I never cared for beer. Here I had gone to college and belonged to a fraternity and I hate beer (chuckle) We used to go on Friday, you know, TGIF "let's have beers." My daughter same thing, went to school four years –she can't stand beer (chuckle)!

Being an NCO is better than being a private that's for sure, I mean I am not saying you get a lot of things in your favor, but there are a few and, you know, like anything else you take advantage of these things. I mean if they're there you do it.

Were there any famous entertainers who came through the camp?

No, nothing there. It was strictly IRTC, that's it. That's all there was.

So you would meet individuals for 17 weeks and then

They were gone or you could be in that 17 weeks and you'd be gone

Did anybody flunk Basic Training, wash out?

Yes, I talked about that one. Yeah, they sent him home. He just couldn't measure up at all. But if they're just partially not with it then they got punished and they get with it. That's it. They give them extra duty like KP or latrine duty, stuff like that. I had a guy who was a real smart one, he thought. He gave me a lot of sass one day in front of a lot of people. It came to the weekend and he found out he was on KP and he wanted to know why he was on KP and he was told that I did it so he came looking for me. I said, "Next time, watch your mouth. You're not going to make me look like a fool in front of all these guys. If I put up with it from you, then I am going to hear it from them." I said, "I might as well get out of here because my job is over. Just watch your mouth." That's was it.

You know, you can't have them flunk things in front of you, not in front of me but in front of everybody else. It just doesn't work

Is there anything you would like to add that we have not covered in the interview.

I worked hard. I worked hard. I worked with the training manuals. Every one of the steps in the 17-week program had a training manual. It was exactly what they call SOP, standard operating procedure, and that's how you do it.

One of the reasons probably why he kept me was because I used to come in every week before the following week and ask for a training manual. So I could see what the hell we were going to get into. I didn't want to be surprised, and look like a jerk – "forewarned is forearmed." You know that.

And the Army food was ok. You don't lose a lot of weight in there or anything?

I ate whatever they gave me. We were hungry, worked hard. About the only thing that changed, I came from an environment of, as a milk drinker. And if I wanted to eat my cereal, I wouldn't have any milk to drink. That was when I first started drinking coffee. That was my first experience with coffee.

Did you stay with coffee?

Yes. But I didn't then. I had never tasted coffee until I got in the service. My mother didn't believe that coffee for a child was what he should have. But the Army felt different. When I asked for more milk, they laughed at me, "Get out of here, you!" (chuckles) I don't know if it's different now.

You know the old adage about "know the right people" didn't change in the Army. There were 2 people that you had to know to get along without any problem. The first one was the Mess Sergeant and the second one was the Supply Sergeant. If those two guys were on your team or you were on their team. You had no problems. They could solve everything. That's the way it was.

Do you remember their names?

No, and it's a game. Life is a game. If I had to do it over again, I would go again, not now but I mean

And there wasn't any chance of being called for Korea?

Korea, yes, there was a good chance. I was a little concerned about it. As it panned out, it never happened.

Did you continue with your pre-medical studies?

I continued with them I got my degree. I have a B.S. in Zoology, but I just didn't want any more school. To be a doctor, and I have a son-in-law who is a doctor. He and my daughter got married after he got out of medical school. But he still had a long road to go before he was doing really what he should be doing, could be doing. So I am not unhappy about that. It would have been nice. But had I had my buttons now that I look back and hindsight is always 20-20. I would have gone and been an optician, a couple of years of study. I had had the basics so I only needed a couple of more years to be something in that nature, especially the eyes so I never thought of it.

Your eventual career choice wasn't affected by your Army experience?

Oh, I guess it was. Yes. I went to work for my father. It seemed like the right thing to do. It was the wrong thing to do. Don't work for a relative even though I am an only child. He was set in his ways and I was young and you have different ideas about things. As they say, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks."

I was thinking your aptitudes and abilities as a teacher as a trainer would have

I never had a calling to be a teacher. Although now that's funny you say that, because I've become an instructor for the AARP Safe Driving. I wanted to do something constructive. I didn't stop working until I was 85. And I was at a loss after I stopped.

You still don't look 85 by the way.

I'm 90.

Do you find this interesting?

I find it fascinating. I feel like I was raised on World War II.

There's quite a series on Public Television about World War II. I just got through watching it. It brings back some memories.

Did your wife ever see you in uniform?

No. I still I have my uniform. I can't fit into it anymore. I had a 30-inch waist. Now I have a 34. I am not too bad from where I was.

Well, Roger, I want to thank you for coming in for the interview.

Well, I want to thank you. I enjoyed the interview and going over this. It brings back a lot of memories. I just wanted to make sure there wasn't anything else I wanted to tell you.

If you think of anything we can add it. Sometimes a gentleman will go home and talk to their families and a daughter will say, "Dad, did you tell them about the time?" It's ok. We can get it in there.

Well as I say my time wasn't terribly exciting. It was a day-to-day job, basically. Teaching a guy how to protect himself, use the equipment he had to try and save his self. Some guys just didn't want to listen. Some guys who couldn't listen and then there were other people who could.

Thank you, Roger

OK. Thank you, Neil