Donald Oppedal Interview

May 24, 1985

This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Donald Oppedal, and the narrator is Mr. Oppedal. The interviewer is Betty Turnell. We are making this recording at the Decatur Public Library on May 24, 1985.

Q. Well Mr. Oppedal, I'm going to call you Don, because we are good friends. You had a career in the armed services, I believe. In what branch did you serve?

A. United States Navy. I was in the medical department of the Navy.

Q. You are retired now, I believe. In what status did you retire?

A. I retired as Master Chief Hospital Corpsman. That's the highest rank of non-commissioned officer. To many people it would be E-9 in today's vernacular.

Q. Now, you're getting a little technical! You aren't a native of Decatur, I know. How did it happen that you stayed in Decatur after your retirement?

A. As you know, we are very mobile in the Navy as personnel. We go to sea, then we come back ashore. I came back from a ship on which I had been on board for three years. I was transferred here to Decatur to take on the Medical Department at the Lake Shore Naval Reserve Center in 1956.

Q. It could be almost odd to think of the Navy in Decatur. Does our lake qualify for work in the Navy?

A. Believe it or not, many naval training activities go on with the use of our lake - such as diving and some boating. I

haven't been close in the last few years, but I'm sure they're getting wet now and then.

Q. There are branches of the Navy here in Decatur right now?

A. Oh, yes - I understand they have a full complement.

Q. And they conduct these tests that you mentioned?

A. They have many other activities. They are a basic training center. The young men who come into the Naval Reserve from this community receive their basic training there at the center, both in theory and practice.

Q. Where is this center?

A. Down on Lake Shore Drive - a beautiful site, right next to Mueller Park.

Q. Is it open to the public?

A. They have open house days annually. It's announced - or you can go down, and I'm sure they wouldn't turn you down.

Q. You just decided you like Decatur?

A. I'll have to tell you that when I first reported to the station, I hit a bunch of boys there with a negative attitude about Decatur. I always remember when I entered Decatur from the West; the sign there said "56,000 residents". I was impressed by what I saw in Decatur. I wouldn't stand for that bad-mouthing, but I could understand. They were younger, and they were sailors, and they weren't getting the kind of life they were used to getting in the large naval areas on the east coast or the west coast! This is a dry-dock here! I didn't pursue it further, but I always did like Decatur. I thought it has a

good balance of the things good people like. For myself, it was a natural in every way. I had children eligible for school, and the schools I wanted them to go to were almost next door. My wife was interested in the things that she liked - almost in the neighborhood. All in all, it was a plus to find Decatur. I never knew about Decatur in my life until I got my orders to come here. There is a Decatur, Alabama, Decatur in Indiana - Decaturs all over. I didn't know what I was getting into, but I liked it when I was here. I had four years of duty here.

Q. I'm sure Decatur has benefitted from your staying here. We'll talk about that later, but let's go back to find out how you got into the service in the first place. Were you drafted or did you volunteer?

A. My fiancee, who became my wife the next year, and I were on the highway on December 7. We were returning home from the hospital where my father was lying.

Q. Excuse me - is this December 7, 1941?

A. Yes, 1941. We were coming home from the hospital when we got the news on the radio. Of course, I had had an inkling before that. I was a little bit older than the average young recruits at that time - about four years older.

So I got home, and my first thought was getting in the service. There wasn't any question about it. I had a brother and a sister. My brother couldn't get in, but he didn't object to my wanting to go. There was a terrific loyalty in those days - a patriotism that I haven't seen since. Everyone wanted to go.

At the recruiting station, I enlisted even though I was carrying a draft card.

Q. Where was this, Don?

A. Mason City, Iowa. Believe it or not, I asked if I could enlist for 20 years! The recruiter thought I was out of my mind, but I did take six years and that set the course for the rest of my career because the war did not last six years - so there I was, the last of the Mohicans, still having to go to work.

Q. Were you sorry?

A. Not at all. The others were the ones who were sorry because it wasn't so good outside. They wished they had never left the Navy. There was lack of work and things after the war were disjointed and disorganized. Everybody had come out of a regimented life and missed it. I had the good fortune of advancing rapidly. In 1946 I was top non-commissioned officer. We only had seven grades at that time. I was in the naval hospital at St. Albars, New York, and we were full house - two to three thousand men who were still hospitalized as casualties from World War II.

Q. Let's go back to your early life - where you were born and grew up and where you went to school. Was that in Iowa?

A. Right. As they say in Hee Haw, I was born in a town of 250. It's Stanhope, Iowa, a little town almost dead center of Iowa. It's practically a family town. I don't know if there is anyone who isn't related to many others there. I went on from there to enter a Bible school for a while. I wasn't able to finish because my father needed me at home. This goes before World War II...I had

always wanted an education. That was my goal in life ever since I was a young kid in elementary school. I would have been one of those professional students if I could have gotten away with it. I enjoyed school. I excelled in all the classes and it was just fun for me. I'm a product of a one-room school.

Q. So you think you gained a good background there?

A. I think I did. I felt that I was running with the rest of them who were supposedly in better schools - better equipped, etc., but I never felt shorted. On the other hand, I have never quit studying either. I love to read. I love to associate with well-educated people. Of course, as a person in the medical department, I was associating with doctors and nurses, people who had college degrees, and I felt very much at home with them.

Q. Let's go into your experiences in World War II. After you enlisted, what happened to you?

A. My first job was to go through the training school for the medical assistants at Great Lakes. My first permanent assignment was Chelsea Naval Hospital near Boston. My first assignment in the hospital was surgical assistant. I was trained to assist the surgeons in operations; it didn't make any difference where it was. It so happened that I took a real interest in brain surgery and became the chosen one for one of the best brain surgeons in the country - Dr. White. He has probably passed away now. We did many, many cases. I worked with some of the renowned doctors from Boston, both in orthopedic and general cases.

I also have a first in that hospital. My chief of surgery was a man who was always exploring. We had an emergency appendectomy come in one day. Everything was full except one little operating room. I had one nurse. She was circulating. I was scrubbed up to assist the doctor. I went up to the table and went on the assistant's side. He told me to get over on the other side. I knew right away what it was. I was to operate. I had never put a knife to anyone in my life, although I had seen it done a thousand times. Would you believe? We started and finished that operation in fifteen minutes. Everything went my way. I opened up, and the appendix popped up like it was on a spring.

Q. And, of course, the doctor was watching -

A. Oh, absolutely! I had assisted him so much that this was the time he was going to put me to the test. This is one of the high lights in my life.

In that same hospital, I had another life-saving experience. We were called on an emergency about two o'clock in the morning - a Caesarean. Everything went fine. We delivered the little one, a little boy. We put him over in the incubator and started to close up the surgery when the circulating nurse - the one who moves about to bring the instruments and so on - yelled out, "The baby's blue!"

Without a second thought, I broke scrub. I took my gloves off, ran over to the incubator, and picked up the child and did artifical mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. We hadn't even

heard of that yet! Then that little baby screamed. The girl just panicked. To me it was a real experience.

Q. And what a thrill for the family.

A. A thrill for the family it was because that mother was there. She had seen me and known me from the times before she was given a little anesthesia. The day she was taking the baby home she had to come back to find me to thank me.

Q. Were these casualties you mentioned - of course, not the mother, but cases such as the emergency appendectomy - were they casualties that happened some place in the Navy where they were flown in or were they people from around that area?

A. There's a mix. These large naval hospitals are always located in a very densely populated naval area - ports with a lot of ships or a naval base where a lot of people live. There is a mix from the run-of-the mill illnesses in navy families to the emergencies flown in.

I want to keep with Chelsea for a little bit because that was the first association I had with what was going on in the world. If you recall history, we were transporting supplies to the North Sea by Greenland and the Straits over to Russia. We were using merchant marine ships - navy guards. Up by Newfoundland they used to call it "German Submarine Alley." We were getting the casualties from ships hit by the submarines - men thrown out into that ice-cold water. What they had was submersion and over-exposure. I saw gangrene setting in - we had to deal with that.

Q. Were these men flown in to Chelsea?

A. They weren't flown - that was before that good day. We didn't have helicopters then. They got there eventually, but some time it wasn't soon enough.

But that was my first hands-on-experience of what the war was about. I had been pretty well sheltered. I was a year and a half at the Naval hospital at Chelsea, and became pretty well dug in there. At that time the ancillary departments like the laboratories, surgery, etc. were special. To be on a team like that made you special. I never felt special, especially getting up at 2:00 in the morning. That didn't seem special at all, but we never fussed about it. I never recall where I had to take someone by the nap of the neck and take him to work.

In surgery, we were housed in one area. I would come down the hall at 2 a.m. yelling, "Emergency!" and they would be out just like that. It was the same down in the laboratory - that goes hand in hand any time you have an emergency, the laboratory is involved.

Q. After that year and a half at Chelsea, then what?

A. I was sent to Williamsburg, Virginia. It was Camp Perry, exactly, to join up with the ~~C.B.'s~~ Sea Bees.

Q. To people who aren't too familiar with that term, it means?

A. Construction Battalion. Generally at that time they were going to the South Pacific. They were going there before the Marines were there - to build docks where there were no docks and that

sort of thing. I hung in there, but I learned something again about our country, right quick. Going from Boston to Virginia, I rode a train. I got to Maryland, and there was the biggest commotion you ever saw on that passenger train. All the blacks were going back to the back of the train so all the whites were going forward. That's the first time I had personally known about the Jim Crow law. Where I was born and raised we just never tolerated that - so that when I saw that I was so ill at ease, but I was sensitive enough about the situation that I knew there was no use trying to do antyhing, but I felt so bad because here I was in a country that was going to war against all sorts of "isms", yet here we have this going on in our own country.

Q. Of course, that was before the Civil Rights law, wasn't it?

A. Oh, yes - it was back in 1943. When I got to Virginia, I went to Richmond the first weekend because I had left my wife in Boston, and I was in search of a place to live. I knew I was short - I knew I was going overseas before long, but I thought, well, make the best of it. In Richmond I found a realtor. He had a little shop or office - an old Southern gentleman. He had a snow-white beard, snow-white hair. He looked like the Kentucky colonel. I made my point that I was looking for a place to live for my wife and myself. He didn't respond by saying he didn't have one - he just said, "You're one of those damn Yankees, aren't you?"

I said, "Thanks a lot." and just left him. That was my first experience with that.

I had a notion to see Richmond. I was all by myself and was walking up the main street. Everybody was dressed in his finest - it was around the church hour, and there were quite a few blacks. When I came down the street, if they were coming toward me, they would step off the street. Right there again they let me know the situation.

I had a little inkling of it from what I had read, but if you don't think it was enforced, you should consider these rules: "Don't get caught down town after dark", etc.

Well, I have seen that develop all the way to what we have today, and we have a long ways to go - but that's not what we should talk about now.

Q. You went to your new assignment then?

A. I didn't go to the ~~C.B.~~ Sea Bees. 's. For some reason, many times in my life I have been favored. I was delegated to go with that CB unit, but at the last minute something happened - and I'll tell you what. They were holding a bond drive, and the personnel officer of the base where I was assigned as personnel was the bond officer. You remember those bonds during the war? Well, my wife and I were buying bonds but my wife was doing the buying so I wasn't interested. He hurried up my orders and put me on another slate, and I was transferred up to Norfolk. There they were forming a hospital unit to send overseas to North Africa, and that's where I went.

Q. You must have had experiences there.

A. Oh yes. It was in September of 1943, and I came back in August of 1945. I was slated to be in charge of the operating room. I went over there and all we had were rocks and stones. There wasn't a single thing up, but eventually the good CB's came and set up Quonset huts. I was given three Quonset huts to arrange. I had almost to design the interior as far as partitions and cabinets were concerned. That was going to be the operating room.

Q. What part of North Africa was this?

A. It was six miles from Oran - that's in Algeria. It was referred to as a naval base hospital there. Oran was quite an active port for navy transports. They were bringing a lot of supplies in both for the Army and Navy. The Army had already come through. The big names in the Army expeditions there - Eisenhower, Rommel, the "desert fox" were there.

We were assisting at that naval base in treating some of the emergencies for the Army. They were swamped there for a while - they were sending them west, and we would get them to a point where we could evacuate them.

End of Side A. Begin Side B.

"Mash" - that was like it was. We acted goofy sometimes. We were so tired. I can remember that that operating room was almost exhausted of supplies and dirty as the dickens. We had been on there almost 72 hours, the whole crew - no rest - the chief of surgery the same as everyone. I had a supply of the highest proof alcohol which we used for antiseptic purposes.

He jarred me no end. He said, "Go get some grapefruit juice" when we were so tired. He permitted me to pour out some of that alcohol in the grapefruit juice. I don't know if we got rested or drunk, but it helped.

Again, I am always so impressed by the dedication we had there in those days. We had a contingent of nurses there - 19 nurses - and that was it. There wasn't another female, and they were really almost locked in. They had two or three quonset huts where they lived and then they walked to work. I've seen them so desperately lonesome, so desperately exhausted that they were almost wishing to be destroyed. That's how stressful it was for them.

I never got into that state of mind - a good thing because I could give them a lot of consolation. We had five of the total number of nurses in the surgical suite.

We had our good times, though. We would have our base parties, when it was predicted safe. But one of the worst casualties we ever had was right at the time of one of those parties. We had to call the whole surgical staff down. A truck with thirty-some men went over a cliff into the sea - 50 feet. It was mass casualty.

Q. But if you were there until 1946 that was after the war was over - right?

A. I was there until 1945. The war was over - I know. We were, I told you, 6 miles from Oran. In Oran there is a peak which is probably a hundred and fifty feet high. At the top they

had a shrine - a religious shrine. When World War II broke out, the light that had always been burning on that shrine went out. When word was received that the war in Europe was declared over, we saw a torch march from the base to the peak of that mountain at night - to light that torch. These were the people who lived in that area. We were too far away to join them, but we could see them. It was impressive.

Q. Then were you sent back to the United States?

A. Yes - I was sent back on an LST - one of the slow boats to China. They didn't try to hurry us back - I tell you.

Q. Now, I have an idea of what LST means, but for people who are unfamiliar?

A. It means "landing ship tank" - they carried tanks. They had a door that would drop down in the front, and the tank would roll out. I had to get on in the Mediterranean. Have you ever been in a storm in the Mediterranean? It's worse than the Atlantic. I got into a storm. I didn't think we were going to make it even to Gibraltar. But we did - and came into New York Harbor at the base of the Statue of Liberty. Talking about no fanfare today! You know what they did to us? They put us off on a barge with all our rusty gear and towed us up the Hudson River to one of the piers and pulled us up and dumped us - and that was the greeting we got. That was my homecoming. So things haven't changed much.

Q. Where were you sent?

A. Because I was one of the last of the Mohicans, I had to be put to work. We had a real exodus of service men going out - leaving the service, of course. They were going to certain points in the United States for dispersement in the United States. They had to be processed, you know. I got the job of taking groups of men from New York to Chicago. They were going back to the Great Lakes. I was the medical representative on that train - anyone needing attention would be sent to me. It wasn't fun going out. They were on one of those old cold Lackawanna war trains - but I loved to come back. I always took the New York Central Commodore - first class pullman - and that wasn't bad.

I made trips there for about six months and then I was reassigned.

Q. And where were you sent?

A. I was at a hospital base in Samson, New York, near the Five Finger Lakes. Geneva, New York is close by. I was supervisor of the operating room. Of course, we had nurses there, but I was more of a personnel director of the operating crew than a supervisor.

That was a hospital mainly for the treatment of tuberculosis. I hadn't realized that there was tuberculosis in the Navy, but I found out that we had many.

I left from there to go to the big hospital in St. Albans, New York, on Long Island. That was in 1946, and

it was still full of post-war casualties. We were getting most of them back to health, but what made it worse than ever was the exodus of the medical personnel. We didn't have enough nurses, etc. I was more an administrator there. I had a heavy responsibility there - to keep the ship afloat with enough people to do the work. It really was a job because we hadn't yet had people coming back in to the service. Some of them were coming back - those who wished they had never left. At that time the Department of Defense was realizing the problem we were in, and they opened it up again for those who wanted to come back. I was in St. Albans until 1948. Right at Christmas time, when my family was comfortably settled in a home we bought in St. Albans, I received orders to go to a fighter squadron in the Naval Air Force. The first stop was in Quonsetport, Rhode Island.

About a month later I found myself on a carrier heading for the Caribbean with that carrier air group. You talk about "heart in your mouth" - I don't know which is worse - facing a plane cart wheeling down a deck on a carrier or facing the enemy.

Q. But what was the fighting squadron doing in 1948?

A. I can sum it up in one word - <u>prepare</u>. It goes on 24 hours a day, even to today. I can look back and realize that a third of my life was spent preparing for the next expedition. I had the privilege with that fighter squadron of being with the first jet-fired planes. I entered the jet age with them.

We were transferred to Jacksonville, Florida. That was a large naval air base there. A lot of training went on there. Pensacola, of course, was the school for training pilots, but Jacksonville, Florida, was the base for full training - pilots flying, ground crew preparing the planes and all that sort of thing.

Q. Don, you were probably at other places too - but maybe we can now go to when you came to Decatur.

A. Before I come back to Decatur, I would like to say that there is one thing I learned even before I was in Decatur (I was in Vietnam too) and that is that OK people are OK no matter where in the world they are. I've always had friends I remember, I don't care where in the world I was. I've had to cry with them, I've had to laugh with them, and they do the same. I don't criticize anybody, but I think to appreciate especially people, you have to be in their environment, you have to be there with their culture - you just have to be there. It's the same in battle, it's the same in even having a baby - and so I just want to insert that personal observation. My philosophy is that you're my friend until you prove otherwise. I've had some pretty dangerous experiences with that philosophy, but I've gotten around it.

Now, to get back to Decatur -

Q. What was Decatur like when you first came here?

A. It seemed a little subdued after I had been in New York and Boston.

Q. What year was it?

A. 1956. Some of the local people called it an overgrown country town. I didn't buy that - but that was before the Landmark Mall and before the Civic Center. I've watched Decatur mushroom out. I believe it's kept up well - the schools have kept up with the demand. Now, they are having to cut back a little because they have a little more space than they need, but the day will come when they'll have to open up again. Anything that goes, grows. I've always had the feeling that when a city reaches 100,000, there is no stopping it. It may have its highs and lows - everything does - but it won't die. It depends on the motivation of people. If they want to have a good life, they'll make it that way.

Q. What were your duties in Decatur?

A. Basically, to attend to those naval personnel who were stationed here. We had permanent personnel at the station at Lakeshore Drive. I also had to conduct the physicals. I had a doctor and dentist both working with me. The new recruits coming into the reserve had meetings every Tuesday night. That meant those nights in the month I had to give to the center, although I was there every working day too - all day long. But on top of that I was also under the jurisdiction of the regional Navy, which put me in an area where if an active duty personnel became ill or was injured or killed, I had to intervene to make arrangements for hospitalization,

and that was quite frequent because my region was large - all the way to Shelbyville, to Bloomington, and the same east and west.

Q. When did you retire from this position?

A. I didn't retire from here.

Q. Oh, you came back to Decatur when you retired?

A. That's right.

Q. We are flattered that you chose Decatur then.

A. I left here and was ordered to be with the Marines in North Carolina. That was right around the time of Korea. I told you that it seems as if I have had a guided life. I was with a unit that had orders to go to Korea. We were on a ship in the Atlantic with orders sealed to go around, but we never went. By the time I came back to the states, my time for sea duty was up, and I was assigned to shore duty.

Then I was assigned to another ship and that was another three years. Then I had a little pause in my active duty. I was struck down with cataracts in both eyes. I had to have them removed, and I was 80 days out of active duty in the hospital at Greak Lakes.

I was carrying a set of orders for the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery in Washington, D.C. I kind of half-way wished they would cancel them. They wouldn't cancel, and I ended up spending five years in the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery. It didn't hurt me a bit. I'm the first one in the physical evaluation of the Bureau who was put back to active duty after

having cataracts removed.

Guess where they put me back to duty? On board a hospital ship in Vietnam. With these eyes! My forehead is still sore from hitting those beams that come down so low.

That, plus a year spent at Greak Lakes after Vietnam brought me to my retirement at Greak Lakes, where I started in 1942. It was full circle.

Q. Don, you have many civic and community projects in Decatur. How did that happen?

A. I think that is natural - it falls into the category of experience I've had. Usually I had to care for people who had to depend on somebody. I decided that I wasn't going to work any more, but I had to have something to do. The Office on Aging had just started up, and I had been doing a little reading on some of the programs and projects being planned nationally. So I just got connected with the Office on Aging, and it took off from there and hasn't stopped. I was at one time state Ombudsman for nursing homes. That was a natural. We had some orientation and training before we went into it, but I related to those older people. It goes way, way back when I was a child. We respected our elders. We respected our parents. I tell you my grandmother was queen. She lived to be 91 years old, and she still was, when she died. That came back to me. So everybody is my grandmother.

Q. You have made a real contribution to Decatur. You are the president of the Decatur Senior Citizen Council. You are still with the Office on Aging, aren't you?

A. Yes - I'm on the Aging Advisory Commission now. I'm not really doing the work as I was. I was seven years with them, though. I was one of the original volunteers for the Office on Aging.

Q. You have really made a contribution. Have you enjoyed retirement?

A. Oh, yes, but sometime I wonder if I shouldn't be punching a clock. This week for six days straight I've dressed up to go somewhere, but this is fun - not that the work wasn't, but this is relaxing.

Q. One question I want to ask you - how does life in the service affect family life?

A. That's a good question! I've always said there have to be special wives to be a service man's wife.

Q. And you were fortunate?

A. I was fortunate. I have been on large ships - I'm talking about carriers now, where there are 4000 or more - and I've seen the line-up of married men strained by information from home - either directly from their families or through a legal agency. They are worried by financial problems or you name it. In all those years I never had one bad phone call - never.

Q. But you had to have an understanding family.

A. My wife is the type who thinks when I'm home it's my job. When I leave, she takes over. She has had enough training and

and education so that it never was a problem. She always made out the income tax report. She took care of everything.

Q. Well, Don, I think you've had a marvelous life, and you really have made a real contribution - in other places but especially here in Decatur. We certainly appreciate these reminiscences that you have given us. I want to thank you very much.

A. Thank you, Betty. I just want to close by repeating what I told my wife this morning - I said, "I don't know when I'll be home. If she covers thirty years, it might take thirty years to tell her!" I didn't realize how clear my recall is.

Q. Well, it's good to have it on the record, and that is one of the purposes of this oral history project.

A. I could write a history book!

Q. I'm sure you could - and we thank you very much for what you have given us. We appreciate it.

You have been listening to the reminiscences of Donald Oppedal. This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library.

"I don't think it matters — as we see from the M.S. "C. B." stands for Construction Battalion, corrupted to "Sea Bee." See Betty Betty T. Turnell about this before changing. OK.