

RON ACARREGUI

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INTERVIEW WITH BOB HATCHER

AT KODIAK, ALASKA

RA: Today I am interviewing Bob Hatcher. It is December 7, 1992, which is Pearl Harbor Day.

BH: I grew up in the state of North Carolina and I went to elementary school and high school there. At seventeen, I volunteered for the Aviation Cadet program [in order to qualify you had to pass a state wide test and meet all qualifications, at that time you had to be recommended by several big business people that knew you]. When I turned eighteen I went in the Cadet Program, but then they let me out to finish high school, then I was drafted into the service. From North Carolina I went to Fort Bragg at that time. I went to training there and when I got to Fort Bragg I was offered Officers Candidate school. They had told me in my exam that I probably wouldn't stay in the service very long because of some health problem, but they didn't tell me what was wrong and I still haven't found out.

I left Fort Bragg, North Carolina, went to Camp Gordon Georgia and from Camp Gordon I went to Fort McClellan, Alabama. That's

were I took training with the infantry regiment, I don't remember the numbers, but all I know is it's the first time I'd saw so many men in all my life.

I took infantry training there, trained there for sixteen weeks for readiness for over seas and I did get to go back home for a little short vacation three days or five days I guess it was, and then went to Fort Larnen in Washington state, there for a while, and that's when I first ran into the German prisoners who were our cooks and things in the kitchen.

From there I went to Fort Ord California and from Fort Ord California we took some additional training for overseas. I was then loaded onto a troop ship with many other regiments heading overseas, we didn't know where we was going, as usual back in those days we had no idea, all I know is that it was a long ship ride and thank goodness I didn't get sick or anything on the ship. So, I wound up in Okanawa, from Okanawa we then traveled to the Aleutian Island. I was with the Stevedore Company. I took ordinance training and learned how to use guns.

We arrived in Adak that was the main base. We were also on Keska. I was in the 4221st Quartermaster group it was an engineering group.

The battle was over when we arrived. I didn't have to use any

weapons or kill anyone. We were put on watch to look for Japs and watch for bombers. When we came into the Aleutian Islands we had only summer clothes. We had leather boots, army parkas, and leather gloves. I almost froze to death, we had dug outs we lived in, they were just made of dirt and snow. We had to stand watch 24 hours on and 8 hours off. If they could find someone to stand your watch, otherwise you had no relief with very little sleep.

We burned calendars and paper for warmth. We only had the summer clothes to wear. The storms in the Aleutians were the worst we had ever seen.

We were told there was a woman behind every tree. When we got there we were looking for trees. We were only 17 and 18 years old. But no trees.

We had the National Forest on the Island, it consisted of one tree at the time. We added to it and that's where they got the name Adak National Forest.

We were standing watch and we got snowed in and it took 4 days for them to find us. We had K-rations to eat, you could strike powder on the bottom to heat them.

We got so cold our gloves froze, and our feet and hands were

frozen. We got back to camp and they told us to take warm showers. The pain was intense. They didn't know how to treat our condition. They sent us to Fort Rich in 1945 to treat us. Our flesh on our hands was a different color and our cheeks were hard as rock. We were treated at Fort Rich for thirty days then were shipped back to Adak.

I remember visiting Anchorage, it was very small. The servicemens club was near a wooded area and I remember going to the 515 bar for enlisted men. Anchorage was about the size of Kodiak in 1945. I met people in Anchorage who had got out of the service and staked claims on land. If you did a hundred dollars in improvements to the land it was deeded to you free and clear.

I worked in a machine shop and worked as a tradesman for six months. I went to Seattle to go to college. I traveled on a troop ship, the Funston. So many veterans were going to school you could only go half days. I decided it would take too long.

I went back to Adak and worked for \$1.40 an hour up to \$1.75 an hour. Its was a lot of money. I was sending money home, to my mother and my brother and sister. I worked from 1945 to 1949, they closed down the ship supply area and they closed down the repair ship yard and transferred me to Kodiak.

I worked on the base for the Department of Defense. We had complete shops and we could repair any size ships. I worked there until 1971. We worked for the Navy from 1969 to 1971, then we closed the repair shop down at that time.

I started the Federal Credit Union at the base. I was injured in 1971 and retired on disability.

I then went to work as an Assistant Manager of the Federal Credit Union. It became Fed Alaska and I was Manager of this branch. I enjoyed helping people learn how to save money. I petitioned to expand services to teachers and state workers. I retired in 1979 from the base and moved into town.

I got a job working as the State Inspector for OSHA. I was the first state inspector in Kodiak.

RA: Tell me about your wife.

BH: I was single for many years. I was in love with my old school sweetheart. I talked her mother into letting me bring her to Alaska.

In 1966 she came here and we got married a week later. She was a registered nurse and she didn't know if she would like

it here. I told her to give it a year, she became involved in the community and worked by Dr. Bob Johnson.

Our daughter was born here and we have been very happy here in Kodiak.

My wife is very active and works for the museum. She knows a lot about history of Kodiak.

I worked for the state for 17 years. I am 66 years old and have a private business now, doing safety consulting work.

Kodiak was a small town. There were more bars than churches. Everyone helped each other. I was on the volunteer fire department, and we were all friends and neighbors in this small town of Kodiak.

RA: Bob, could you tell me about the Army and its attitude towards segregation and Negro soldiers in the 40's?

BH: My two brothers went in the service also. One served with Patton and was a 30 year man.

I grew up in North Carolina. We went to separate schools, separate churches and ate in separate restaurants. I had to fight many times when I was a kid. We walked to school and

the white kids rode. They used to spit at us as we walked along.

Where we lived in the country we were all friends but the more people around, the more prejudice people were.

We played together well until we were 14 or 15 then there was a separation between us, between black and white.

In the Army I didn't think this would happen. They separated us. We had separate barracks and food was served separately. We were in Alabama training to go overseas, we had been out on maneuvers and stopped at a hamburger stand to buy hamburgers. They sold them to the white soldiers, but refused to serve us. Here we were going overseas to fight and maybe die for our country and we couldn't be treated better than animals. We stayed overnight nearby. Funny thing, the hamburger stand burnt down that night. We don't know how it happened!!

Alabama had the buffalo troops, a Negro battalion. They got in fights because they wanted to be treated equal. They were shipped overseas into heavy fighting to get them out of the way; so I have been told!

It began to change when President Truman signed the proclamation against discrimination in the service. I had no problems while stationed in the Aleutians or while working. I was usually

the only Negro and was treated because of who I was; a good tradesman and a good worker and a good person.

Alaska was a good area to live in. I remember coming to Kodiak and going to a club. I loved to dance and thought nothing about it. I was dancing at the Momont (a club in town). I was told I could not dance with a white person and was asked to leave. NAACP approached me on the Momont situation but it did happen again. I went in the Veterans club and I was refused service, this really hurt me! The club was shut down for a while because of it. I was really hurt when I tried to join the Elks, they black balled me.

A younger group got into the Elks and Ollie Johnson and Tom Sweeney helped me get into the Elks. I was the first Negro to get into the Elks in Kodiak. I am a thirty year member now.

Fighting and the war got us closer together because we did the same things together no matter what our color.

I was VFW President and Pioneer President. We found out after we joined that blacks were not to be in the club. I went to Palmer for a convention, they all looked at me as I got up to give a report. I said "I'm from Kodiak, Alaska and as I look out at you, you all look the same". Everyone laughed! We were the first Negroes to join the Pioneers in Alaska.

We have enjoyed Kodiak and raising our children here. You can overcome anything in life. Alaska has been good to me, and this is my home.