

Interview with Dr. Robert Boon

In Association with the Veterans History Project

December 7, 2007, Huntsville, Alabama

Interviewed by Stephanie J. Dixon, Affiliate of the Veterans History Project
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The transcript has been lightly edited.

Stephanie Dixon: This is Stephanie Dixon, interviewer. The veteran's name is Dr. Robert Boon. [0:00:08.3] When is your birthdate?

Dr. Robert Boon: 21 June 1921. [0:00:14.3]

Stephanie Dixon: Okay, and the war you served in and your branch of service? [0:00:17.3]

Dr. Robert Boon: World War II, Army National Guard, 206 Coast Artillery Anti-Aircraft Band.

Stephanie Dixon: Okay, and what was your highest rank?

Dr. Robert Boon: Tech III.

Stephanie Dixon: Tech III, okay. [0:00:31.5] The date and place of the recording, it is the 66th Anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. It is December 7, 2007. We are at the Boon home in Huntsville, Alabama. My name is Stephanie Dixon. I have no relationship to the interviewee except that he was the best friend and the best man of my father, Bob Johnson. The others present and assisting: Bill Dixon is assisting behind the camera and his wife Eloise, Dr. Boon's wife Eloise, and daughter Hannah are present and this interview is being conducted for the Veterans History Project of the Library of Congress. Okay, Dr. Boon. Can you tell me when and where you were born?

Dr. Robert Boon: Marianna, Arkansas, 21 June 1921.

Stephanie Dixon: Okay. If at all possible can you answer in a complete sentence because I don't know how this might be cut later. Like just say, "I was born....."

Dr. Robert Boon: Okay.

Stephanie Dixon: What were your parent's occupations and who were they?
[0:01:53.2]

Dr. Robert Boon: My father was R. M. Boon Jr. who ran a general furnishing merchandise store with my grandfather and my mother was a house wife.

Stephanie Dixon: And what was her name?

Dr. Robert Boon: Ada Wyman Boon.

Stephanie Dixon: Okay. Did you have any siblings?

Dr. Robert Boon: No.

Stephanie Dixon: Okay. So you're an only child.

Dr. Robert Boon: I am and so was my father.

Stephanie Dixon: All right. What were you doing prior to service? [0:02:26.9]

Dr. Robert Boon: I was attending Kemper Military School following graduation from the T. A. Futrall High School in Marianna, Arkansas in 1939 and as we were told that we would be called into Federal Service in the fall of 1940, I did not return to college as I knew I would be taken into Service probably in January of '41.

Stephanie Dixon: Well, I want to ask you a little bit about – what year did you graduate from high school? [0:03:09.3]

Dr. Robert Boon: 1939.

Stephanie Dixon: 1939. Just for my own personal interest – I'm not sure when my dad graduated from high school. Did you all graduate together?

Dr. Robert Boon: No, he was one or two classes ahead of me.

Stephanie Dixon: Okay. And why did you choose Kemper Military Academy to go to college? [0:03:28.8]

Dr. Robert Boon: Because my best friend, Maxie Daggett, was going there and I had no desire to go to a large university such as the University of Arkansas.

Stephanie Dixon: Okay. Just tell me a little bit why you decided – you enlisted didn't you?

Dr. Robert Boon: Yes.

Stephanie Dixon: Okay and why did you decide to enlist, especially in the National Guard? [0:03:58.6]

Dr. Robert Boon: Because I wished to play in the band and there was no high school band and it provided free music lessons, a spending money check which was quite scarce during the Depression and I also had fantasies about getting away from home.

Stephanie Dixon: (Laughs) I think a lot of guys did. (Coughs) Excuse me. You told me the other day on the phone who the band master was and I have forgotten. Who was that?

Dr. Robert Boon: His name was Cryer. I do not remember his initials or first name. He was just known simply as the Professor.

Stephanie Dixon: Okay. Did he live in Marianna or.....?

Dr. Robert Boon: Yes. He lived on Pearl Street close to where Julius Benham and his family lived.

Stephanie Dixon: Okay. So you enlisted in the National Guard in order to join the band and learn how to play. Had you had any exposure to music prior to that?

Dr. Robert Boon: No.

Stephanie Dixon: You just had a desire to learn how to play an instrument.

Dr. Robert Boon: Right.

Stephanie Dixon: Okay. I think that answers my next question. You know, why did you choose that specific branch of service. [0:05:25.1]

Dr. Robert Boon: Well, it was a regiment that was headquartered in Marianna. The officers in the unit were all acquaintances or friends and several of my friends were playing in the band and there was no other outlet and also they furnished the musical instrument.

Stephanie Dixon: Walk me through your process of you all being in the band in the National Guard and then you went to Fort Bliss. Did you all get called up for your training or how did that happen? [0:06:12.1]

Dr. Robert Boon: We were notified and in, I believe, August of '40 that we would be mobilized and we were sent to Minnesota for summer training and then when we returned in September, the Colonel who was the local banker, gave all the people who were in college or going to college the option of getting out of the National Guard. But several of us decided that since the draft had been instituted and one year of service was required of all people our age, we would rather spend our time in the service in the company of our friends under officers whom we knew and get our year of service over

with. And of course, after we entered service it was soon announced that there would be no one year of service. It would be at the President's pleasure for our length of service.

Stephanie Dixon: So it seemed like a good idea at the time and it blew up on you.
(Laughs)

Dr. Robert Boon: It didn't really blow up because I think I could have had much worse military service experiences.

Stephanie Dixon: Right. Okay. Are you sure you're rolling? I just want to make sure before we get too far into it. Okay.

Eloise Boon: Were you 16?

Stephanie Dixon: Thank you. Tell me how old you were when you..... **[0:07:54.7]**

Dr. Robert Boon: I was 16 and I fudged my age a bit and since I later became company clerk I could handle that on the records.

Stephanie Dixon: You were 16 when you joined the Guard?

Dr. Robert Boon: Yes.

Stephanie Dixon: Okay. I'm still trying to figure out how you could do that. Even fudging, you know – so how old were you when you graduated from high school?

Dr. Robert Boon: Seventeen.

Stephanie Dixon: Okay, okay. This is going very well. I want to back up a little bit and get a little more detail on your joining and your age and how you were able to accomplish that and you mentioned when the tape was off about the band director really trying to recruit people. Could you tell us a little bit about that? **[0:08:53.9]**

Dr. Robert Boon: Well, the band director was under some pressure to fill the ranks and to have an acceptable band for summer camps and we also played in the town square every Wednesday night which was our drill night and all the kids would come and run and squeal and we would march from the old armory to the town square and play along the way so we were sort of a combination of the Army National Guard and town band.

Stephanie Dixon: You said something about training in Pensacola. What type of training was that? **[0:09:42.2]**

Dr. Robert Boon: We went for two weeks every summer for training and the only convenient place that the gun crews could fire their weapons was out over the Gulf and the Navy supplied tow-target planes so that we frequently, each summer, went to Pensacola, Florida for two weeks in convoy and then convoyed back each unit, which

were of course stationed in different towns in east Arkansas, would then return to its home base.

Stephanie Dixon: So, you – the 206 is what your unit was. Is that correct? [0:10:31.1]

Dr. Robert Boon: Correct. That was the regimental designation.

Stephanie Dixon: And it was an anti-aircraft unit. Is that correct?

Dr. Robert Boon: Yes.

Stephanie Dixon: So even though you were in the band, you all had to train with weapons.

Dr. Robert Boon: We did not fire weapons and technically, in time of war we were supposed to be ancillary personnel for the medical company so that we were not issued arms. [0:11:05.7]

Stephanie Dixon: What sort of training did you get for the medical end of it?

Dr. Robert Boon: Essentially none. We were to go pick people up and haul them to the aid station.

Stephanie Dixon: I see, okay. I want to continue to talk a little bit about your age. Could you tell me exactly how old you were when you graduated from high school?

Dr. Robert Boon: I was seventeen.

Stephanie Dixon: And you were already in the Guard at that point, is that right?

Dr. Robert Boon: Yes, I'd been in for almost two years.

Stephanie Dixon: Was that a problem? The fact that you were underage, was that a problem at all?

Dr. Robert Boon: No, because at that time no one anticipated that we would actually be called into Federal Service or go to war and it was sort of a thing that a lot of the high school boys did. [0:12:02.9] We served in the aid for the 1937 flood and set up a camp in the local football field for refugees from, what was then called, the Bottoms, which was the area that overflowed from the Mississippi, L'Anquille, and St. Francis Rivers.

Stephanie Dixon: Well, (laughs), all right. I would like to know a little bit about your going to Fort Bliss. Were you called to go up.....? [0:12:38.3]

Dr. Robert Boon: As I said, we were notified in late '40 that we would be called into Federal Service so I did not return to college and then on January 6, 1941 we were actually mobilized but they had no training camp to send us to right then so we stayed in Marianna and drilled for six weeks or so and then we were taken by train to Fort Bliss

which was the available artillery range. They needed lots of vacant space to fire the anti-aircraft guns because shrapnel would come down on people if they were fired in a populated area.

Stephanie Dixon: I am curious about why they chose to call you up then and what was going on politically in the world that might have caused them to call you up then. [0:13:45.8]

Dr. Robert Boon: Well, Hitler had invaded Poland and World War II was raging in Europe and it seemed at the time that President Roosevelt was quite interested in getting involved and Britain was under tremendous pressure so I'm sure that such measures as demanding 50,000 airplanes be manufactured and to call up the troops sort of rattled the saber a little bit and it was maybe hoped it would cool Hitler down a bit.

Stephanie Dixon: Oh. What sort of specialized training did you all get when you were in Fort Bliss? [0:14:32.1]

Dr. Robert Boon: The band rehearsed and the new members of the band, which were largely college students from the college in Monticello and the new band director who had just directed in music there, all needed to get together and be functioning and, of course, the gun batteries went to the range and we were, at that time, equipped with basically World War I equipment. Radar had not been introduced so the gun batteries were being issued new equipment, trained on the new equipment, and it was sort of a period for everybody to get everything together.

Stephanie Dixon: So at no point in any of your training were you all trained on weapons? [0:15:30.0]

Dr. Robert Boon: No. Not until we were in the Aleutians and then there was a considerable shortage of people of course and some of our people volunteered as gunners to ride on the Navy PBYS. Others became ammunition passers or fuse cutters with some of the gun crews. I worked as a technician in the local hospital and various other people had different jobs. Horace Bonner was trained an accounting and he worked for the local finance office. [0:16:23.0]

Stephanie Dixon: Now he was the band director wasn't he?

Dr. Robert Boon: No. He was just one of the musicians.

Stephanie Dixon: Okay. And none of that happened until you were actually in Alaska.

Dr. Robert Boon: Right.

Stephanie Dixon: Okay. Any other kind of specialized training you all got there in Fort Bliss or later?

Dr. Robert Boon: No. We sort of filled in wherever it was felt we were needed and we spent most of our time digging holes and it was decided to disperse the regiment so we were helping build roads and digging in our huts.

Stephanie Dixon: And this was in Alaska?

Dr. Robert Boon: Yes.

Stephanie Dixon: Okay. I am going to come back to that. How did you all adapt to military life when you were at Fort Bliss? Was there an adjustment period? [0:17:31.8]

Dr. Robert Boon: I think we adjusted very well. There was lots of horse play and going to town and getting drunk and we had a very compatible group, most of whom had been in college and we had very little dissension. Our group did not have to pull KP or guard duty or any of those things.

Stephanie Dixon: [0:18:00.9] I want to just tell a little story here that I read from a recent book called *The Williwaw War* which is excellent.

Dr. Robert Boon: I have it.

Stephanie Dixon: Oh. Isn't it a good book? And they talked about the last night before you all left to go toward Alaska. Colonel Robertson said there was no – he was putting no limits on leave that night. That you all were leaving in the morning but that everybody should be back by early in the morning to leave and of course, Juarez is right across the border and a lot of guys beat a path over there every time they had a chance. Everybody showed up on time. They had nobody who was AWOL which I think is remarkable. It wouldn't happen today.

Dr. Robert Boon: Right.

Stephanie Dixon: (Laughs) What sort of physical regimen did they put you all through to get you prepared? [0:18:58.8]

Dr. Robert Boon: The band essentially did calisthenics each morning and that was about it.

Stephanie Dixon: Okay. What sort of housing did you have? [0:19:11.8]

Dr. Robert Boon: We lived in tents on the side of, I believe it's called Mt. Washington, which is northwest of the city or at that time it was. I understand it's all built up now and it was right west of Biggs Army Airfield.

Stephanie Dixon: How did you all adjust to the climate there because it is hot desert-like conditions? [0:19:39.3]

Dr. Robert Boon: It was much more pleasant in the winter than eastern Arkansas actually and we had no heat in the tents but I think everyone was reasonably comfortable.

Stephanie Dixon: And how about the food? How was the food? [0:20:00.9]

Dr. Robert Boon: It was standard Army fare. Warm and greasy.

Stephanie Dixon: (Laughs) And you – you’ve sort of touched on the social life. The – you sort of hung around together a lot, the guys did. [0:20:17.8]

Dr. Robert Boon: Yes and we played for dances and we went over to Old Fort Bliss and one of my most favorite memories is seeing the last parade and playing in the last parade of the Horse Cavalry that was stationed in Fort Bliss and then they got rid of all the horses and were reequipped with Jeeps and mechanical means.

Stephanie Dixon: Where was that unit, the Horse Cavalry unit, from?

Dr. Robert Boon: Fort Bliss.

Stephanie Dixon: They were from Fort Bliss – did they – I mean where did they come from? Did they come from Arkansas?

Dr. Robert Boon: No. This was a regular Army.

Stephanie Dixon: Oh I see, okay.

Dr. Robert Boon: It had been for many, many years the headquarters of the Horse Cavalry.

Stephanie Dixon: Well – can you tell me about you all finding out that you were going to be going to Dutch Harbor, Alaska? [0:21:23.2]

Dr. Robert Boon: I can give you an anecdotal story. I have no idea whether it’s actually true but we trained with the 200th Coast Artillery from New Mexico and word came out that, boy, we’re gonna be sent to the Philippines and there was a story that the two colonels flipped a coin to see who had to go to Alaska and who got to go to the Philippines and the New Mexico Regiment won and then, of course, they were completely wiped out on Bataan. So actually I think, in the long run, I’m sure glad for the tails coming up.

Stephanie Dixon: [0:22:11.7] I have read several accounts of that. Of course, everybody from Marianna who was there told the story you just told and that’s what I heard when I was growing up and then I have read several accounts that said they didn’t know if that was a true account or not, it seemed unlikely. But this book I was telling you about, *The Williwaw War*, which was exhaustively researched, said that in the ‘60s it was General Robertson, by the way.....

Dr. Robert Boon: Yes.

Stephanie Dixon:got up at one of their reunions and said, as unlikely as that story seems, that is what happened. So he said it was the truth and he was one of the colonels. I guess he was still a colonel then.

Dr. Robert Boon: Yes. He was.....

Stephanie Dixon: He was one of the ones that was involved in the coin toss.

Dr. Robert Boon: Right.

Stephanie Dixon: Which is just a remarkable tale to me. Okay, can you tell me about – turn it off just a minute – did we get on camera the story about – we got the coin toss on camera didn't we? I would like to know how you got up to Dutch Harbor once you all learned you were going what happened on the way up? How did you all travel and how long did it take you to get there? **[0:23:36.7]**

Dr. Robert Boon: As I remember, we travelled by special train and most of our equipment which, as I mentioned was grossly out dated, was left in Fort Bliss and we were to go to Fort Lewis, Washington to be reequipped and then await transportation to Dutch Harbor. And I believe it took about three days and they had a car on the train to prepare food but we would stop occasionally and a few people were allowed to get off and walk about and on arrival in Fort Lewis we, or the gun batteries, were reequipped. We were introduced to radar which was a new device at the time and the gun batteries were equipped with somewhat more modern guns and the World War I solid-tire old military trucks were reequipped or replaced with more modern vehicles and the band played at various functions for about the two and a half months we were there and a small group of us also would go in to the city at night and play in a night club for a little extra money.

Stephanie Dixon: Okay. So you were allowed to leave wherever you were, your base, to go do that?

Dr. Robert Boon: Yes, we were at the National Guard facility in Fort Lewis.

Stephanie Dixon: Okay. Did you all have barracks there? Because I know.....

Dr. Robert Boon: No, we lived in tents again.

Stephanie Dixon: Okay, all right. How long – what happened when you left Fort Lewis to.....?

Dr. Robert Boon: We were on a troop ship, the U.S.S. Grant which was said to be an old ship seized from the Germans at the end of World War I and reequipped and the bunks were down in the cargo hold and they were stacked so close together you had to get out of bed to turn over and during the trip it was discovered that it was infested with

bed bugs so a lot of us would sleep up on the deck and it was good enough weather that that was possible and we would stop for fuel along, the names of the towns I do not exactly remember, and then we went to Seward and stayed a few days and then went on to Dutch Harbor.

Stephanie Dixon: Was this U.S.S. Grant was it formally the St. Mihiel because I've seen a mention of one troop ship M-i-h-i-e-l I believe was the name of it.

Dr. Robert Boon: I am just not certain.

Stephanie Dixon: And did you go up through the Inside Passage?

Dr. Robert Boon: Yes, as far as I believe Skagway and then we cut across to Seward and then on out to Dutch Harbor.

Stephanie Dixon: Was it a fairly smooth crossing or was it rough?

Dr. Robert Boon: Not too bad that time of year the williwaw season hadn't started yet.

Stephanie Dixon: Well while you're on that, tell us what a williwaw is. [0:27:43.6]

Dr. Robert Boon: A williwaw is sort of a – I suppose an Aleut name for a storm.

Stephanie Dixon: What – what sort of form did it take, this storm?

Dr. Robert Boon: The Japanese current hits the cold water all along the Aleutians and causes pretty much constant fog, rain mixed with sleet, and very often extremely high winds. But in the meantime there may be very pleasant sunny days between and the wind was so strong that we had to dig the Quonset huts into holes in the ground and during one of the very active storms one could really not walk. And there was a picture, which I cannot find right now of a Marston Mat, which is heavy steel that was laid down over the muskeg to land airplanes on, being rolled up like an accordion by the wind which is somewhat unbelievable but it did happen.

Stephanie Dixon: Well, when you all first arrived in Dutch Harbor what time of year was it?

Dr. Robert Boon: I believe it was early November or late October.

Stephanie Dixon: And had the bad weather started at that point?

Dr. Robert Boon: Not so much.

Stephanie Dixon: When do – when did you run into the bad weather?

Dr. Robert Boon: It usually started in early December and lasts off and on until maybe late May.

Stephanie Dixon: Okay. What sort of duties did they give you all when you first got to Dutch Harbor? How did you all get used to the area you were in? [0:29:43.6]

Dr. Robert Boon: The band, as I mentioned earlier, was given the opportunity or the chance to help out other places and various others – and various of us did things that we were somewhat interested in such as I had been in premed in college so I worked as a lab assistant in the local hospital. We played in the NCO Club maybe once a week which was a Quonset hut dug in a hole in the ground and then we played at the officer's dances which were the nurses on the island and of course there was a small civilian settlement at Dutch Harbor and they had a bar called Blackie's Bar and we could go there to buy drinks and the gun batteries were in the process of digging in. There were no roads and the engineers had not arrived yet so most of that had to be constructed by shovel and wheelbarrow since we didn't really have any construction equipment. And then somewhat later, probably in 1943, the Navy came in and built an airstrip but until that time we were very isolated. There would be a supply ship every so often and we would go help unload that so we could steal some of the officer's mess meat.

Stephanie Dixon: Was the food pretty bad?

Dr. Robert Boon: [0:31:47.8] Right after the war started there was no transportation and we had fishing crews go out to catch fish and the – I can remember well, the cooks boiling ribs and slapping them out on your mess kit and the big blue stamp "USDA inspected" would still be on it.

Stephanie Dixon: What did you all have besides bad meat and fresh fish?

Dr. Robert Boon: We had some canned vegetables. I also worked as a coding clerk in the local headquarters at night because I had taken typing in high school and there was a shortage of typists and I got a little extra food that way.

Stephanie Dixon: I suppose no fresh fruit or vegetables ever.

Dr. Robert Boon: Very little.

Stephanie Dixon: You all were attacked once. Could you tell me about when that happened and what you did during that time?

Dr. Robert Boon: [0:33:03.5] We had been put on alert many times and had been told that we would be attacked at some point and they gradually built up the force there by adding two infantry regiments and we, as I mentioned, began to disperse the gun batteries and put them on the surrounding hills and we moved out of Fort Mears, which was the main camp up into the hills, dug our huts in and we had people who were assigned to different gun batteries as helpers. As I mentioned, some people were ammunition passers and then we spent most of our time during that period digging and then we would play for various functions and worked various places to help out.

Stephanie Dixon: You mentioned to me at one point that you – when a new troop ship came in, you all would go down and play when they would come in.

Dr. Robert Boon: Yes and the Navy was gradually building up its sub base and their ships or subs would come in. One time we had a full battleship and then we would go play for the troops as they got off to welcome them.

Stephanie Dixon: Now, you said you all were on alert before the Japanese attacked. How did you all come to be on alert? How did you know this was about to take place?

Dr. Robert Boon: Well, my pay grade didn't really know that but we were just told to be ready to run for the hills, as it was, at any night and we had several false alarms and in the confusion one night I put my big rubber galoshes on the wrong feet so trying to get up the hill with the huge galoshes on the wrong feet was – took quite a while.

Stephanie Dixon: What happened that day when you were attacked? [0:35:26.5]

Dr. Robert Boon: We were alerted probably an hour before that there was something going on. We of course didn't know that this was a side show from the Battle of Midway and then the new radar crews who weren't really familiar with the equipment saw some blips and knew planes were coming in and then the first actual attack was by high-altitude bombers and that was followed by strafers who, of course, bombed the main camp which we had vacated and the hospital was blown up. Some of the civilian workers there and I think maybe 170 or so people were killed but we lost no one and had no injuries in my particular unit.

Stephanie Dixon: Wow. Were there other fatalities among the men that were up there?

Dr. Robert Boon: There were some accidental deaths and some suicides and I would say though that we had very few, if any, battle casualties. We had none in my particular unit. We were strafed but we were all in fox holes and dug in.

Stephanie Dixon: Did you all attempt to fight back?

Dr. Robert Boon: We – a few of us who had rifles fired and of course the anti-aircraft crews were quite active and it was fortunate that one of the zeros was damaged so that the pilot had to attempt a landing and he unfortunately put his landing gear down, hit that muskeg, flipped and broke his neck but the plane was damaged very little and it was located, brought back to the States where our engineers designed fighter planes to overcome its advantages. [0:38:04.6]

Stephanie Dixon: Okay. That sounds like that was a real advantage too.

Dr. Robert Boon: Yes.

Stephanie Dixon: It could help because they had air superiority at the time didn't they?

Dr. Robert Boon: At the time, yes.

Stephanie Dixon: What were your -- can you remember what your emotions were like when you were in combat and you were maybe witnessing some casualties or people that you knew possibly getting hurt? [0:38:30.1]

Dr. Robert Boon: Well, we didn't hear about anybody getting hurt until the next day and we, of course, saw the camp burning and knew there were bound to be some people there, particularly in the hospital which was pretty much demolished, and we were then instructed to go help with some of the clean up and the -- but our particular area just had strafing.

Stephanie Dixon: Oh. Now they came back again didn't they?

Dr. Robert Boon: Yes. They came the second day and the, of course, I suppose they had heard of the disaster at Midway and left and went out to occupy Attu.

Stephanie Dixon: Did they have a base -- did the Japanese have a base at Attu during the whole war or just was it an occupation? What was it? [0:39:35.3]

Dr. Robert Boon: It was essentially an occupation. I don't know all the details for sure but we were told that there had been a weather station at Attu and it was essentially an uninhabited island. The Japanese dug in and it became a big political issue for Roosevelt's third term that the Japanese were occupying American territory. So I think it became politically essential that they be taken off of Attu.

Stephanie Dixon: Well how was that accomplished?

Dr. Robert Boon: They sent troops up from the States who were -- some of whom were staged in Dutch Harbor and then went on to assault Attu which was a very bloody operation.

Stephanie Dixon: Really. A lot of casualties there?

Dr. Robert Boon: Yes.

Stephanie Dixon: Did you know any of the personnel that....? [0:40:42.2]

Dr. Robert Boon: No. These people were all from, unfortunately, California and not properly equipped for Aleutian weather and it is said that they lost more people from gangrene of the feet and weather-related injuries than were killed in actual combat but I don't actually know that that's true.

Stephanie Dixon: You can confirm this or deny it for me. I've always heard that between the first and second Japanese attack, the officers in -- Colonel or General Robertson, I think was part of it, kept people up all night moving around the munitions because the first part was essentially -- the first attack was reconnaissance and they

took pictures about where they thought everything was so that night they kept everyone up moving. [0:41:38.8]

Dr. Robert Boon: Yes, they – it was rather miraculous that they could move an entire gun battery, dig it in, in a new position overnight but it was done.

Stephanie Dixon: And, as a result.....

Dr. Robert Boon: As a result we had very few or no casualties because the Japanese bombed the old gun position where no one was.

Stephanie Dixon: Okay, that's good. I assume that boredom was as big a problem as anything. What all did you all do to keep yourselves entertained and not fall into a depression?

Dr. Robert Boon: [0:42:24.5] Well, as I mentioned, there were a fair number of suicides but we fished and had small groups who would play our instruments and we also --probably half of the band had a job somewhere that we either worked with one of the gun crews, as I mentioned some of the fellows rode with the Navy as gunners, others would work at various things that needed a hand. As I said, I worked as a code clerk at the base headquarters for a while and for a while I worked in the hospital as a lab assistant.

Stephanie Dixon: I want to ask you about Blackie's Bar. I have heard that Blackie, the owner of the bar, may have been a brother or half-brother of Pretty Boy Floyd. Had you heard that?

Dr. Robert Boon: I had not heard that and I only was able to visit Blackie's Bar once or twice because drinks were three to four dollars which was astronomical at that time.

Stephanie Dixon: I guess so. Well, as I said, that's just – I've heard that comment a couple of times. I don't know if there is any truth to it or not. How did you stay in touch with your family and friends back home and how did you hear from them?

Dr. Robert Boon: [0:44:02.0] We had fairly reliable mail service and we wrote letters. Of course there was no telephone communication but we got letters from home. I also had a correspondence course going with the University of Tennessee for a while and there was plenty to do if one looked for it.

Stephanie Dixon: Okay. I think we've talked enough about recreation and off-duty pursuits. I do have one question that Sandy Beach had wanted me to ask you. Do you remember Cliff Williams? [0:44:45.0]

Dr. Robert Boon: Yes, very well.

Stephanie Dixon: She had wanted to know if you remembered when Cliff broke his arm. That he got up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom and fell off the back

porch because it was icy and he broke his arm and it was a clean break so they didn't set it and what they did for him to strengthen that arm is they gave him a bucket of coal to carry and he carried that bucket of coal around with him all the time.

Dr. Robert Boon: I don't remember that particular episode.

Stephanie Dixon: She also says that he kept having to replenish the coal because it would get cold at night and his bunk mates would dump his coal out and burn it overnight. (Laughs)

Dr. Robert Boon: Well, we had what were called Sibley stoves which were just conical pieces of metal with a pipe going out of them and most of them were fired with compressed saw dust and we would also go to the dock and help unload coal ships and one could, as you say, "Take your own bucket," and – but most of the time we had a little fire going in the stove either in the dugout or the hut.

Stephanie Dixon: Were the conditions pretty primitive in those huts? [0:46:10.2]

Dr. Robert Boon: They were standard issue Quonset huts which we began to get probably about January or so of '42. Up until that time we had lived in eight-man squad tents which were quite uncomfortable and windy.

Stephanie Dixon: Okay. Now I know what young men are like and if drinks at Blackie's were three to four dollars, you all had to have some sort of alternative method of.....

Dr. Robert Boon: [0:46:49.8] Well, I was designated supply sergeant and company clerk so I made what was called "Sneaky Pete" which was a fermented beverage made of raisins and whatever dried food we could scrounge from the mess sergeant and this was put in jugs and passed around.

Stephanie Dixon: So you used your college chemistry for that right?

Dr. Robert Boon: Yes.

Stephanie Dixon: And you were a very popular fellow I assume.....

Dr. Robert Boon: And some people were able to take one of the old large granite coffee pots, whittle a wooden insulator to fit in the spout and get a piece of copper pipe and somewhat strengthen the "Sneaky Pete" through partial distillation. There was a rumor going around that some people had taken a .30 caliber machine gun and used the water barrel – the water cooler from that to cool the steam but I never actually saw that operation happen.

Stephanie Dixon: That's amazing. What lengths people will go to in an emergency. (Laughs) I know – you and I discussed the fact that – I think it was in '40 – what year was it that you all had the furloughs to come home? Was it '43? [0:48:21.4]

Dr. Robert Boon: '43. The regiment was sent back to the States and the band was given the opportunity to transfer into a gun battery, go back to the States, be reequipped and sent on to Europe or we could stay there and Bob, your father, and I elected to stay there. And then shortly thereafter we were sent to Amchitka which is much further out the chain and a number of replacements were sent, all of whom were draftees.

Stephanie Dixon: Well, were you allowed to come home on a furlough? [0:49:21.1]

Dr. Robert Boon: Yes, we were given a chance to come home on furlough as part of that process.

Stephanie Dixon: Can you tell me a little bit about that? I understand it was kind of exciting.

Dr. Robert Boon: The military said that we could have the furlough but we'd have to find our own transportation so our orders were cut and we could go down to the dock and wait on something that was going to the States and one day we were at the dock and this dilapidated tug came though pulling a barge of scrap and he said that he was short two men on the crew so we could ride to the States. So your father and I got aboard but it turned out that during one of the storms the front hatch had been seriously damaged and the available bunks leaked water a good bit of the time so I slept in the engine room, incidentally this was an old World War I, hand-fired with coal, tug so the engine room was quite dusty and I slept on a coil of rope in there and by the time we got to the States some 29 days later, I was very dirty since there were no facilities to shower or wash.

Stephanie Dixon: And I understand that your – your friend, my father, was sick.

Dr. Robert Boon: Yes, he became very seasick and when the dilapidated tug finally got to Prince Rupert, Canada, he was put off to go to the hospital and be rehydrated from his prolonged vomiting and I was put on a freight and passenger boat going to Vancouver and then on a train to Fort Lewis where I was cleaned up, given some clothes, and went on to Minneapolis on the train and then down to Arkansas where my furlough started.

Stephanie Dixon: How long were you able to be there?

Dr. Robert Boon: We had 30 days.

Stephanie Dixon: And – and my dad I understand, came down a little bit later when he was well.

Dr. Robert Boon: Yes, after he recovered he was sent on to the States and, fortunately, all this travel time did not come off of our furlough since it didn't start until we actually left Fort Lewis.

Stephanie Dixon: When you got back up to – did they send you directly to Amchitka? Did you go back to Dutch Harbor for a short time or what.....? [0:51:55.1]

Dr. Robert Boon: We went to Dutch Harbor and got all of our equipment on what was called a barge. It was actually a powered barge and meandered out to Amchitka which was quite a long way.

Stephanie Dixon: And what did you all do there until the end of the war?

Dr. Robert Boon: Uh, we were in a band, of course, and we played for some parades, some officers club – I had to pull guard duty a couple of times on the balloons that the Japanese were sending over trying to set fire to the woods in Washington and one of them fell or was shot down on Amchitka and was kept under lock and key and armed guard from some reason. [0:53:25.0]

Stephanie Dixon: What kind of balloons?

Dr. Robert Boon: They were large balloons that had something in them that was supposed to set the woods afire when they came to Washington.

Stephanie Dixon: Now this is something I've never heard of. I also never heard that my dad spent any time on Amchitka at all. What was – were there a lot of people there or was it very small? [0:53:50.5]

Dr. Robert Boon: It was a 28-piece band and the rest of the military was partly Navy, partly Army troops and the Air Corps at that time, which had not been separated into the Air Force, built an airstrip and used it to fly reconnaissance out of.

Pause in the recording.

Stephanie Dixon: I wanted to ask you what unit number you were in at the end of the war. [0:54:39.0]

Dr. Robert Boon: When we left Dutch Harbor we were redesignated as the 238th Army Ground Forces Band and then as I mentioned, when we got to Amchitka we began to get replacement members for the people who had transferred to the other units and gone back to the States.

Stephanie Dixon: Okay, and this last part is about the end of the war. Where were you when you found out the war had ended? [0:55:10.3]

Dr. Robert Boon: I had already been discharged from the service in – I believe it was, May of '45. Whenever the war in Europe ended we were told that everyone who had, I believe it was at that time, 120 combat points, could go back to the States for discharge and your father and I elected to do that but again, we had to find our own way back so I got a plane going to Adak. I went there and pulled my first day of KP because I was only a buck sergeant and everybody there had rank and then I got another plane to Anchorage and then another plane to Edmonton, Canada and I stayed there to get new

orders to get transportation, then by train to Minneapolis and by train to Fort Smith where I was discharged. [0:56:30.2]

Stephanie Dixon: How did you get home from Fort Smith?

Dr. Robert Boon: I rode the bus.

Stephanie Dixon: And what sort of greeting did you get at home?

Dr. Robert Boon: Well, my father and mother were happy.

Stephanie Dixon: (Laughs) And you were too I assume.

Dr. Robert Boon: Yes.

Stephanie Dixon: Uh, do you remember how you readjusted to civilian life? Was it difficult or was it easy? [0:56:55.0]

Dr. Robert Boon: It was difficult because after having someone to tell you day to day what to do then you suddenly realize, "My God, I've got to do this on my own!" And I knew I wanted to return to college. My father had been very unhappy that I was not going to become a farmer as he was and be with him so I decided to go back to the University, in agriculture but I was able to take all of my chemistry and wind up with a chemistry major and after trying to work with my father who was a pretty stubborn person, I decided that simply would not work so I went back in premed. Then I met my future wife and we decided that I would go to medical school so she tried to get or did get a teaching certificate so she could support me during medical school and when I was selected for admission we had a friend in Little Rock who was able to find an apartment for us and we moved there.

Stephanie Dixon: What year were you married?

Dr. Robert Boon: 1946.

Stephanie Dixon: Okay. We have very little time left. I assume you went on the G.I. Bill? [0:58:34.6]

Dr. Robert Boon: Yes, I had saved – I had made an allotment of my pay while I was in the Aleutians to go to the local bank, Colonel Robertson's bank, and I only got \$15 a month while I was in the Aleutians but when I got home, I had \$1,800 cash so I used that and I played in a dance band at the University and at various night clubs around to help support us there and then I saved my G.I. Bill for medical school.

Stephanie Dixon: We may shut off in just a minute but I want to find – just real quickly. Any life lessons you learned from the service or how, you noticed how it affected your life with that experience? [0:59:26.1]

Dr. Robert Boon
December 7, 2007

Aleutian World War II
Oral History Project

Dr. Robert Boon: Never volunteer for anything.

Stephanie Dixon: (Laughter) We will cut right there.

End interview at 0:59:35.0.