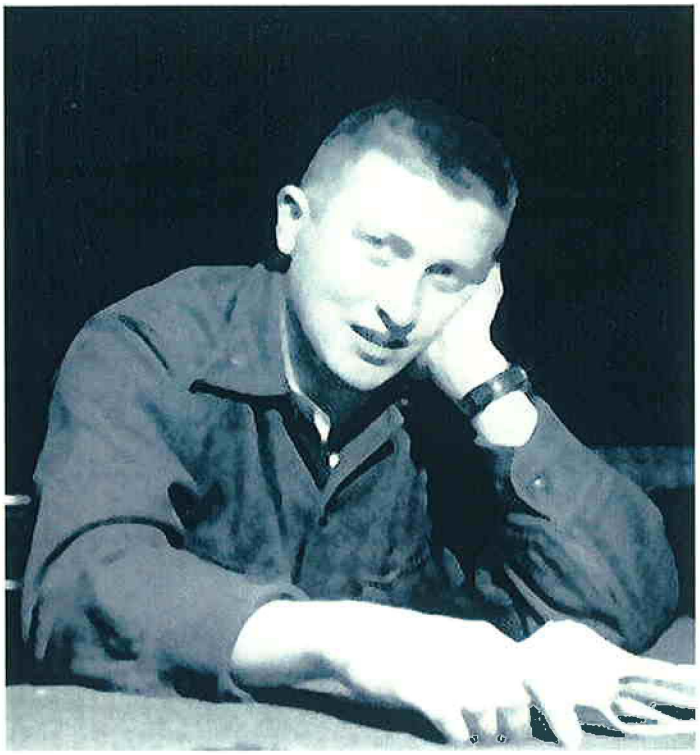

Seymour Wachtenheim

"Sy"

U.S. Army, Korean War
First Lieutenant
Dental Corps
5th Regimental Combat Team

Seymour Wachtenheim, DDS

Veterans History Project Transcript

Interview conducted
August 30, 2005

Niles Public Library
Niles Public Library District
Niles, Illinois

Niles Public Library District
Veteran's History Project Transcript

Veteran: **Seymour Wachtenheim** Rank: **First Lieutenant**

Branch of Service: **U.S. Army Dental Corps** Theater: **Korean War**

Unit: **5th Regimental Combat Team**

Interview Date: August 30, 2005 Place: Niles Public Library, Computer Room

Equipment: Panasonic Standard Cassette Transcriber **Interviewer:** Neil O'Shea

This interview is being conducted on August 30, in the year 2005, at the Niles Public Library. *My name is Neil O'Shea, and I am speaking with Seymour Wachtenheim. Mr. Wachtenheim was born on December 23, 1927 in Chicago and now lives in Niles. He has kindly consented to be interviewed for this Project. Mr. Wachtenheim will be our second Korean War veteran to be interviewed, and here is his story.*

Mr. Wachtenheim, how did it come about that, or may I call you

Sy. Call me Sy. Most of my friends call me Sy.

Thank you. How did you come to enter the service?

Tape Counter Mark – "entering the service as a '4-F' under the 'doctor's draft' "

I'm a dentist and I was a 4-F all the while. After I turned eighteen, and I thought I'd be 4-F forever, but they had at that time something called the "doctors' draft." As soon as I graduated I was no longer a 4-F. Their theory was that if I could practice in an office, I could practice in the service. I got a letter from my draft board that said we're calling you up. I called them up. I had just opened up a new office. I said, "You made a terrible mistake. I'm 4-F." They said, "No, you're not anymore, because you're a dentist now and under this special doctors' draft we can take you anytime we want so you either go down to enlist at Fifth Army headquarters on the South Side or we're going to draft you as a private."

I went down to Fifth Army Headquarters, which is the old Chicago Beach Hotel that the Fifth Army had taken over at the time, I think it's around 55th Street and Lake Shore Drive. I enlisted. Strangely enough, enlistees in the Officer Corps were classified in strange ways. I was category 2, and the description for category 2 was – "Involuntary Volunteer."

(Chuckles)

I swear to it!

So you went from 4-F to "A-1"! You had to put your career on hold.

Yes. I had to put my career on hold. I just bought all new equipment. I turned it all back to the dental supply company. I closed up the office and went into the service.

You were envisioning practicing on the North Side of Chicago?

Yes, the tri-corner of Sheridan Road, Broadway and Devon. They had the Arcade Building on the southeast corner and I practiced in there for the few months I practiced.

Did you find that there were other medical professionals in the same boat as you were?

Yes, a large majority of my training class were "retreads." They had been in the service as dentists or physicians before. They had served a full term. They grabbed them back. At that time they were eligible under the Doctors' Draft.

Is there still a Doctors' Draft to this day?

No, that ended some years ago. They give them huge bonuses to enlist. When you're a dental or medical student, they'll pay your way through medical or dental school. They have all kinds of programs, and it's not a bad career. It all depends what kind of person you are. If you are an independent type person and you don't like taking orders, why the service isn't for you as it wasn't for me. But some people thrive at that.

So you enlisted in the Army, that branch of service, and did you ship out from Chicago somewhere then?

50 - orientation and field training at Ft. Sam Houston

Yes, they paid my way to Ft. Sam Houston, Texas, which is the Brooke Army Medical Center. That's in San Antonio or just outside San Antonio although San Antonio may have enveloped it by now. That was the medical headquarters of the service at that time. Now they're making it the medical headquarters of all the services - like the people who are being transferred out of Great Lakes now, are going to Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio.

The people from Walter Reed Hospital, many of them will go there. That will be the Center for medical training for all of the services now as they're consolidating.

The training that you received in the Army was more orientation?

Right. As I recall there was a 12-week orientation period. We had some field training. We learned how to read maps; how to lead groups on patrol. There was some medical training there, how to do a tracheotomy, but mostly it was army lore.

Did you have to learn to use a gun?

We carried unloaded guns there. We did go on the firing line at some time and shot a few rounds.

Medical and dental officers were supposed to be non-combatants although it didn't always work out that way. You couldn't waive your Red Cross Card and people wouldn't fire at you.

There was that nice set of equipment that you left back in Chicago. Did you find the same type of equipment in the Army?

67 – older equipment and "midnight requisition"

In Korea we used what was called the Army Dental Field Kit #1 which had a pedal-operated drill. Your dental assistant was operating generally the food pedal like an old sewing machine at very low speed. They had a light in the kit, an electric light. But we didn't have electricity at first.

But I became an expert at what we called "midnight requisition." Our training group from Ft. Sam came over to Korea, and we replaced essentially all the medical and dental officers that went over there originally so I knew somebody in every outfit – either a physician or a dentist or a medical service officer who I had gone to school with in Texas. So once my commanding officer found out I knew all these people, he assigned me the task of getting us stuff that we needed off what's called the table of organization.

Every unit is allowed "X" number of item X and X number of item "Y." We had usually a lot more of everything that we wanted but some things we were looking for and I was assigned to go out and hustle it up. If it was a Quartermaster item, I'd go to a quartermaster outfit. If it was an Ordnance item, I'd go to an ordnance outfit and so on. Anyway I liberated a little generator, a gasoline-operated generator, so we didn't have to use the foot-pedal anymore. It was still at slow speed. The equipment was designed for World War I, and we were using it in Korea.

One of the Korean War veterans I interviewed said that sometimes they had old artillery and the shells wouldn't fire. It's like we weren't ready.

Right, exactly.

The newest stuff, actually, was from World War II which was at that time 7 years old at least.

So just to get us onto the dates, you enlisted in December of 1951 so you get to Korea in maybe

April 1, 1952. I had only been in the army actively for 3 months because I reported to Ft. Sam in January, and I did my 12 weeks. I came home for a week or two of leave and then I got shipped out to Korea.

Was that by boat or plane?

I flew over.

To Japan?

To Japan. From Japan they flew me over to Pusan, Korea. Then I took a train up to Chunchon, which is probably less than a hundred miles; it took 2 days for the train to get to Chunchon.

It was in bad shape, I would imagine.

100 – finding the "Triple Nickel" outift

We stopped a lot. And they gave us carbines when we got on the train – with no ammunition for the carbines. The rumors were flying: "We're going to get attacked," and there was nothing of the enemy in that area at all. Then from Chuncon I arrived there about nightfall at the Air Base in Chunchon which was called, I believe, K-5, was the code for it. I had orders to the 555FABN. I was so new in the Army that I didn't know what FABN meant. It meant the Field Artillery Battalion. But someone in Seoul had told me, FA meant Forward Artillery!

(Chuckles)

Anyway I called the outfit on a crank phone in the airport there. I finally got a hold of somebody, and they didn't pick me up until the following morning so I slept in my clothes on a wooden bench in the K-5 airport which was pretty well unheated. In April it's cold there –not a comfortable night. And then the next morning they came and got me. At that time the Triple Nickel which was the outfit I was officially signed to, was the Artillery Battalion of the Fifth Regimental Combat Team.

A combat team is a regiment of infantry, and all the ancillary things which go with a combat unit like artillery. They had a Medical company. They had an Engineering platoon. They had an Ordnance platoon and so on. It was a self-contained thing; we weren't part of a division. They kept attaching us to different divisions. We would stay on-line all the time, and the division we were attached to would rotate back to the rear and they would bring up another division. We stayed on-line. The whole year I was there we were on-line.

125 – on-line, the front line, for one year

And when you say "on-line" you don't mean on the internet? You mean on the front line!

Yes, actually it was called the "MLR," it was called the Main Line of Resistance" although I wasn't on the actual main line of resistance. We were back maybe a quarter of a mile, half mile.

Were days typical at all?

Yes, there were typical days. I did dentistry in the day time. At first before I moved in with the medical company, I was in the area of the headquarters of the artillery battalion. We had a tent in which I did dentistry. We were in the Mundungnee Valley. We were attached at that time to the 25th Infantry Division, I think. Then after we were there about three months, they moved us into the Punch Bowl Area. In the Punch Bowl they said, "Why don't you go live with all the other dentists in the medical company, and the last nine months I lived with the medical company of the infantry regiment of the regimental combat team.

144 – the real-life individuals of the M*A*S*H Unit

*What did you think of the television show, "M*A*S*H"?*

I knew those people. The MASH Unit was probably 20 miles away, but it took at least half a day to get there on those roads. It was mountainous. Where we were was toward the east in the north part of Korea. We were above the 38th Parallel because the line went north as it went west. We'd go back to the MASH Unit every once in a while. The dentist who was portrayed in MASH, his real name was Joe George. He was from Connecticut, and he was a red-headed Assyrian, which you don't find too often. He was woman-crazy just as he was portrayed on there. Hawkeye and his buddy were a couple of surgeons. One of them was Andy Ivey, a junior, who was the son of Andrew Ivey, a big-shot at Cook County Hospital in Chicago, but he wasn't talking to his father because his father started backing a cancer treatment called Krebiozen which turned out to be a phony deal so they weren't on speaking terms.

The characters were all the same. The gal they called, I forget what they called her on M*A*S*H, but we called her "Old Iron-Pants," the Chief Nurse. (*Hot-Lips Houlihan*?) But that was the parallel to what they called her in M*A*S*H. Yes, they were quite a bunch of characters. When they got casualties, they worked very hard and under pretty primitive conditions.

Did you find yourself watching the show?

No, just to get away from the usual thing.

You mentioned casualties.

The casualties came in at night. Almost all of the fighting was done at night.

We were in stable positions basically. One side would take a hill, and then a month later the other side would come back and take the hill but basically we were in one position.

We lived in bunkers. We built a log cabin ourselves, the medical officers and dental officers. We piled sandbags around there.

Did you have plans to do that?

Well, we had an engineering officer from the motor pool who had been a builder, and we notched the logs. It's not terribly difficult. It's not high-tech stuff. We notched the logs, and then we piled sandbags around it and over the roof. And it was fairly comfortable in the winter and the summer, because it was insulated well. And we had a little potbellied stove in our bunker. And we slept on cots, folding cots, Army cots. And this is what it was like.

Now, we actually did our dentistry in what were called Jamesway tents, which looked like Quonset huts, but they're insulated canvas, and they're barrel shaped. And we had, I recall, four chairs in the Quonset hut where I was working. And one day, we had a dentist from Texas, I

forget his name, but, as a waiting room, we had another Jamesway tent adjoining us. And, all of a sudden, we heard a bang, and this guy falls down screaming. He got shot in the behind. One of the soldiers who had come down off the hill for dental work was playing with his trigger, and the gun went off. And it got this guy in the behind. They evacuated him to Japan, and he got a Purple Heart for the experience.

The dentist from Texas, yeah.

197- helping with casualties

So the dental care situations that you were, where you were administering to these soldiers, were they the result of combat?

No. No. Not the dental work, but I helped with the casualties at night when they got overwhelmed. They'd call, and wake me, and I could do certain things. I could learn how to do a cutdown. When the blood vessels collapsed, I could do a cutdown in the ankle here, and get a vein, and put an IV in - things like that, I learned just off the cuff. And I took—and, while we were in the Mundungnee Valley, I took sick call a few times instead of the physician, because our physician, when a few rounds came over, he would disappear.

Where'd he go?

I don't know, but he would disappear, and, so, if he wasn't around, I took sick call on occasion. So, I learned a little medicine.

212- diagnosing appendicitis and becoming a hero

Yeah. Did you have supplies of-- ample supplies of anesthetics?

Yeah, anesthetics, we had, yeah. A local anesthetic was all I used. We had ample supplies of that. I was a big hero one time, also, in the Mundungnee Valley. This kid had a bellyache. He's lying on his cot moaning, and I started questioning him. You know, I had a certain amount of medical training. I took some internal medicine in dental school, and it sounded like appendicitis. And there's a classic test for appendicitis which is called rebound tenderness. If you press in the area of the appendix, it doesn't hurt. But when you let go, it hurts like hell. And I used that test, and he had rebound tenderness, so we sent him back in an ambulance to MASH hospital. And I was a hero, because I'd diagnosed a case of appendicitis.

Could have saved his life if it burst, right.

Yeah, probably, although they would have shipped him back anyway, and they would have figured it out back in MASH.

Yeah.

But that's how I became a hero in the outfit. I was just there, maybe a month when that happened.

Did-- How was the food? Did you get better food as medical personnel than as

No, No, we ate the same thing

Same thing

that the troops ate. They had a little PX somewhere around, I remember, and I used to buy cans of smoked oysters when I just couldn't handle the food there anymore. But, generally, we ate the same food.

Did you lose weight while you were in the Service?

No, I gained weight when I went in the Service. I was as tall as I am now, and I weighed 115 pounds. I was a quarter of an inch under six feet, and I weighed 115 pounds. When I came out of the Service, I probably weighed 135 pounds, and I was all muscle, because I had done physical activity, obviously. And I wish I was back at 135 pounds now, obviously.

Did-- Was it hard to stay in touch with your family or anything, letters, or?

Well, they would keep asking me if I was in a combat situation. And I would just ignore the questions, because I did not want them to worry. My mother and father were, of course, worried about me. And then the doctor who used to disappear, who came from Pennsylvania, passed through Chicago on his way home. He rotated, and he stopped at Chicago to change planes or trains. And he called my parents, and he fed them all kinds of war stories. So, they found out I was in a combat situation that way. Not that I ever told them.

So while you were there, the front line didn't shift too much? You were in a permanent

No, very little. We were-- If you are old enough to remember, the Punch Bowl was there. Sandbag Castle just out of the Punch Bowl. Going north was Sandbag Castle which they went back and forth a couple of times while I was there.

So, you were never-- they never shelled your bunker there, or your?

No, that's not true. Most of the real fighting happened at night, and I wasn't there at night, although I would go up on-line on occasion to visit friends and so on. I'd even go out to the OPs, the outposts which were between our lines and the enemy lines in the daytime, and there was very little danger.

Were you allowed to do that or did they let you?

Well, nobody--

Nobody said you couldn't, yeah.

You know, they figured, I guess, he is young and stupid. Let him do what he wants. And I was young and stupid! But they would lob over occasional mortars and artilleries in the daytime. Of course, we got rocketed once by our own Air Force, which was the loudest noise I ever heard in my life! The Navy and Marine flyers were very good at close combat operation, so they could tell who was American and who was not American, and they fired, generally, only on the enemy. The Air Force was not that great at that. So, once in awhile, we got some rockets from them, around from them. And, of course, there was always the famous short round. The artillery fired over us, and if the artillery shell didn't have enough bags of powder behind it, it fell short of the enemy and landed among us. That happened a couple of times, too, but I was not in danger most of the time. A large majority of the time, I was not in immediate danger.

295 – rotating out of the combat zone in spite of the commanding officer

While you were there, did you have any-- allowed any R&R a week somewhere from the front?

Yeah, I had two R&Rs. I had one R& R to Japan, and I came back, and I was supposed to rotate, and my commanding officer declared me essential, and I couldn't rotate when I had the 36 points which was required, which I made in nine months, because I was in a four point zone. The months were multiplied by the area you were in. Rear echelon was one, and then there was two, three, and four. Well, I was in a four point zone, which was a combat zone, but I couldn't go home until he told me I could. So, finally, what I did is I went and got my own replacement from-- the Army Medical Replacement Depot was in Yong Dong Po, which was a suburb of Seoul. I went there, and I brought back my own replacement, and that's how I got to leave.

To leave the Army or for R&R?

No, I got to leave my outfit and go home

Oh

after twelve months instead of nine months, which it should have been.

If you hadn't gotten that-- if you hadn't been able to arrange for the replacement, how long would you have stayed there in this essential category?

I have no idea, because I was not in very good terms with my commanding officer, who was a physician from Georgia, and he was not the most liberal-minded person in the world at that time. He didn't like black people. He didn't like Jews. I'm sure he wasn't crazy about Catholics. So, I didn't really get along well with him. And, so, he did that as an act of spite. And I couldn't fight it, so I went around it.

One thing about being in the Army is you meet people from all different parts of the

Yeah

country and represent different

Yeah

subcultures,

Right. Exactly.

outlooks. And I guess sometimes you make fast friends and it's the most

Well, I had one friend that I made over there who came back to Chicago. He rotated apparently three or four months before I did. He had been there before I got there. And he was what was called a Medical Service Officer. He was a pharmacist really by training. And he moved back to Chicago, even though he left home in Wausau, Wisconsin, where his family was. But while he was in the Army, they moved to Chicago, so he was waiting for me when I got back to Chicago. We were very good friends until he passed away many years later. Other than that, I'm not in contact with anyone from the Army on a direct basis, although I still get the periodical of the 5th regimental combat team has-- they mail-- they have an organization. And they send out a mailing. It's supposed to be once a month, but we usually get it, maybe, six times a year.

So, you were looking forward to being able to leave the Service?

Yes, the Service and I were not meant for each other on a permanent basis.

And that was

I figured that out very early on.

And that just wasn't because of the man from Georgia. You just

No

327 – dislike of taking orders

didn't like the Army style or

No. I didn't like taking orders. Some people are good at taking orders, and some people aren't. And the people who were good at taking orders had a career in the Service. As a matter of fact, I was offered a career in the Service by General Mark Clark, who was then the commanding officer of the Far East command. He was in Japan. And after I was there a few months, he started to send me letters offering me the great opportunity to become a regular in the Army. And I went—a superior officer sends you a letter, you have to do what's called reply by endorsement, and I kept replying, thank you, but no thank you. And he kept sending letters until I rotated home.

Yeah. I think he was reckoned to be a good general, was he, Mark Clark?

Yeah. He was supposed to be a good general. He fought in World War II. He was in command in the Italian mountains. He made a name for himself there, which was rough territory to fight in.

Yeah. So, then, when the day came you were delighted there.

Yeah.

And then you journeyed back down. Did you leave from Seoul or go down to Pusan again?

We came home by ship. We took-- I think they flew us to Pusan. And from Pusan, they flew us back to Japan up to the "repple depple" (replacement depot). And then we took a ship across the Pacific. They were in a hurry to get us there, but they weren't, then, in a big hurry to get us home.

358- returning via Pearl Harbor

That's what it sounds like, yeah. So then, so when you got to-- did you get to stop at Pearl Harbor, or anything, or Hawaii, or?

Well, I saw Pearl Harbor later, which was very impressive, the Arizona Memorial, and everything. I don't know if you've ever been there.

No, No, not yet.

Really very impressive. And the guys that give the speeches, at least at the time I was there, it was maybe five years ago that I was there at the Memorial, were actually veterans of Pearl Harbor. And I don't know how many of them are left. There can't be a whole lot of them left, which is why these oral histories are a good thing to have, if anybody listens to them, which

Well, we're thinking that we can work with the schools a little bit, you know.

Yeah.

The kids—there's more of an emphasis now for students to act as historians, and use primary documents, and construct their own meaning, you know,

Right

than just take it as a teaspoon served up from the textbook. So, did the Army, then, provide you with transportation back to Chicago?

375 – Stateside assignment to Camp Kilmer and facing prejudice

Yes, as I recall, I flew into Midway Airport from San Francisco. And I had a week or two, and then I was to report to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, which I did. I bought a car while I was there and I drove-- by the way, I learned how to drive in Korea on jeeps and trucks. And I never took an actual driver's test for a driver's license until I turned 75 years old, because, when I went for a driver's license when I bought my car, I was in uniform, and the guy said to me, "Do you have an Army driver's license?" I said, "Yeah, here." He said, "Okay, you don't have to take a test."

So, until I turned 75, I didn't have to take a test, I never took one, which was a couple years ago. I never took a driving test.

So, you had to drive to Fort Kilmer in New Jersey to be formally mustered out or whatever

No. No. I was stationed there about from sometime in April and I was discharged October 31st, I believe, of 1953, it would be. In the meantime, I was stationed at the dental clinic in New Jersey at Camp Kilmer.

Okay, when I got to New Jersey, there was a colonel of the Army Dental Corps in charge of the dental contingent at New Jersey. And there were two dental clinics there, a small dental clinic and a very large dental clinic. And the small dental clinic was a much better assignment, because you got to do a greater variety of work, including a lot of oral surgery. They had an oral surgeon there. And when you got off the boat in New Jersey, the officers were handed their 201 files, or, no, you turned in your 201 files to them. That's your entire military history in this 201 file. And they were supposed to ship the 201 file to my next station which was Camp Kilmer. Well, something went wrong, which happens, and I got to Camp Kilmer, and it turns out the colonel in charge of the dental corps there was also a shitkicker from the South, and he wasn't fond of minorities. And I was tall, and slender, had a blond crew cut, and he just knew I couldn't be Jewish, so he assigned me to the small dental clinic. And, then, when my 201 file finally arrived there and he realized what a terrible mistake he'd made, he had to figure out a way to tell me that I was going to the other clinic. And I knew what was happening, and he didn't, because I talked to the other guys that were there, and they told me the kind of guy he was. So, I knew what was happening. And I just let him stew until he figured out a way to tell me. And then I was in a production clinic where we took care of the guys going overseas. And we had to do a certain amount of work and so on. And I spent the rest of my days in the large clinic there.

So, that was sort of your second encounter with, that you mentioned, with an unpleasant officer

Yeah. Yeah.

who seemed to rely more on ethnic

Well, there

disposition rather than

Well, Southerners, at least at that time, seemed to feel more comfortable in the Service than Northerners for whatever reason.

Yeah

And it doesn't make them bad people. I accept everybody like they are.

Yeah.

And you know--

That wouldn't be their outlook, though.

No, no, they weren't raised that way.

Yeah.

You know, when you're raised a certain way, it's very hard to change.

Yeah, so the, pardon me in my geography again, now, Fort Kilmer, is that anywhere near New York or?

Yes, it is.

So was it--

Between New York and Philadelphia. It's closer to New York. And the bachelor officers' quarters there were temporary barracks they had built for World War I. And we were staying in these wooden temporary barracks. And those were our bachelor officers quarters. And the guy next to me in the room next to me was a Major Peress --peress--who made the big time later on when they were -- Congress was investigating communists in the Service. He appeared before a Congressional committee, and he got the commanding officer of Camp Kilmer eventually fired or at least replaced because, you know, I just knew the guy to talk to, but he was up all night typing, and he was apparently typing communist manifestos all this time. And they caught up with him. And it turned out that he was all ready to be shipped to Korea, and this Congressman sent somebody a note to call somebody. And they came and they took him off the ship. But that was on his way to Korea. And they sent him back to Camp Kilmer. He was from the New York area somewhere. I never knew the man that well.

Was that because of connections then that he got

Because of Congressional influence, yeah, definitely, and he told us about that. So, there were some characters around.

Everything in society also exists in the Army, you know.

Right.

Clout, prejudice, and all that stuff, yeah.

I understand it still goes on.

Yeah.

If you have a West Point ring or a Masonic ring, it helps in the Service, if you're a regular.

483 - escaping Camp Kilmer and the Army

Yeah. So, there are probably worse places to be stationed in the United States for this last three or four months of your Service then

Not many.

Oh, here I was thinking you were off to New York on the weekends for Broadway shows!

Yeah, I was. But simply because Camp Kilmer was a terrible place where down the road maybe twenty-five miles was Fort Monmouth, which was a beautiful place. But that's beside the point. I was there temporarily. I knew I was there temporarily, and I actually got out about three months early because I found an Army regulation that said that if you're a category two medical or dental officer, which meant an involuntary volunteer, and you had time in combat, that you could apply for early-out. So, I actually got out three months before I would have normally have gotten out.

500- rank and medals

So, your rank in the

I was a first lieutenant when I went in. I was a first lieutenant when I came out. I was a captain for about a week. I got a battlefield promotion to captain. I don't remember why, and then it got to regiment, and they bounced it back, because you have to be in grade a certain amount of time in order to get promoted. And I'd been in the Army for like five months. I wasn't in grade long enough so, essentially, I was a first lieutenant the whole time I was in the Army.

First lieutenant, Army

Dental Corps.

Army Dental Corps. Did you receive any medals or citations or

Not really, no. No, just the usual battle ribbons, Korean War

508 – "war is chaotic and stupid"

Yeah.

and so on. Yeah, I don't remember what they were. Oh, I did get the medical combat badge, I take that back, which was the equivalent of the infantry badge, the combat infantry badge. They have a combat medical badge. As a matter of fact, they awarded me the wrong badge first. I got orders giving me the combat infantry badge. And then I said, "No, you gave me the wrong badge." So, they cut orders to give me the combat medical badge. The Army is not a real efficient organization. And war is

Oh, yeah

completely stupid and chaotic. And the people back home know more about what's going on than we do when we're there.

Yeah, I can't remember which military history I was reading but I was--sat there and was saying, you know, it was amazing these two armies even could find themselves on a field to have a battle. Even that would be would be an accomplishment.

537 – drinking with the general who called "a time on target"

We had-- just to give you an example of how wasteful and stupid war is, there was a hill between the two lines, I don't remember the number of the hill. All hills had numbers which was their height. And one night, we went back to corps headquarters, which was back around MASH. It was probably about 20 to 50 miles in back of it. And our outfit was part of corps artillery, but corps artillery had big guns back there. And we're drinking with the corps artillery commander who was a brigadier general, and he was getting drunker and drunker.

Did he have good whiskey or better liquor than?

Oh yes. No, we had good liquor and all we wanted. The officers could get liquor, and that was not a problem. But, anyway, he decided that he was going to call a corps artillery time on target on this hill, even though nobody was on it. And you know what a time on target is? All the guns in the corps, and there are hundreds of them, there are 55 millimeter, 15 millimeter, 8 inch guns, and all the artillery fired so all the rounds land at the same time. That's a time on target. And one shell each from each cannon is probably X number of millions dollars, not to speak of the wear and tear on the cannon. And in a drunken stupor, he ordered this time on target. And everybody had to get rousted out to their artillery pieces. And the guys in the fire direction control had to figure how from their particular piece to land at that particular point at a certain time.

Midnight firework show or something. Did he enjoy a long and glorious career in the Army?

Probably. That's the only time I ever drank with him. I was a lowly lieutenant. He was a general, you know, and I was just there with some of my superior officers.

Yeah.

But war is stupid.

Yeah. The-- we're just going to change the tape here.

2nd side

Okay, now, we're on the second side of the oral history tape of Sy Wachtenheim. And he's in Fort Kilmer and you've worked it so you were going to be able to, you earned it, to leave three months early, yeah, and then you drove back to Chicago.

Yeah, I drove back to Chicago.

005 – restarting a dentistry career

Did you use the same equipment now when you got back to Chicago that you had given--

No. The old equipment, I had turned back to the dental supply company. And they took, I know, twenty or thirty percent off, and they sold it again to somebody else, who knows. But I went to a dental supply house which I was familiar with, and they usually have somebody who wants a dentist, an associate, at that time. Now, they have better ways of doing things. And they sent me to this guy to talk to, and I worked for him for about three months. And then a guy I met at Fort Sam who lived nearby, he lived maybe three or four blocks away from me, and he had never gone to Korea, he stopped in Japan, and he looked me up. He said, "I got to open an office now, and my brother-in-law, and my brother, and I are going to open a medical building across from Illinois Masonic Hospital. I have an office there, but it's going to be a year or two `til that's built, so let's open an office now. We'll be partners, and then when the other office opens, we'll be partners in two offices. And one will be here, and one will be there." Which sounds logical and reasonable, but it doesn't work out that way, because, when you're in this office, the patient in the other office always wants you, and so on. But, anyway, I was partners with him for like thirteen years. And then we decided to part ways. And from that point on, I was operating by myself.

So, dental practice hadn't changed while you were away?

Oh, yeah.

Oh, it had changed!

Oh, yeah.

So, you had to catch up a little bit then?

Well, at that time, the pace of change was slow. Now, two years is a lifetime in dentistry and medicine.

And the—but, perhaps, you were coming back with

My skills were not at their peak after being-- after operating under crude conditions.

So, even though you had a variety of experiences and other things, it still wouldn't have been the same?

No, my skills were not at a peak. It took awhile `til they got back to where I wanted them.

So, I think we already discussed that you didn't feel a need to join any veterans organizations or

No, I resisted that. I didn't want to.

Yeah.

I didn't want any contact with anything military. And I never joined a veterans organization, although, I mean, we need them like we need the Army. And they do, you know, many useful things, but I didn't want to be part of it.

036 – view of military service

It suggested that we, you know, always ask this question at the closing of interviews: how do you feel that your Service and those experiences affected your life?

Well, like most things, it's good and it's bad. I'm glad I had the military experience, but I wouldn't go through it again for a million dollars.

Even though you developed a great physique, and you learned to drive, and did you save some money while you were in there?

Well, No, I think, in balance, I wouldn't want to do it again. I wouldn't want my kids to do it again. My son was fortunate. He turned eighteen after the draft was over. But even when he was like five years old which was during the Vietnam War, he kept telling me that he was going to go to Canada if they try to draft him. He didn't hear that at home. I don't know where he heard it, but he knew that. And he knew I was in the Army with George Washington, because he learned George Washington was the Commander of the Army. He knew I'd been in the Army, so he asked if I knew George Washington in the Army.

Did your-- Would you say that your military experience influenced your thinking about war or about the military in general?

Oh, yeah, definitely. I'm not a pacifist by any means, but in order to justify war, you really need an overwhelming reason, in my mind, because war is so stupid and chaotic and dumb, and everything as we're finding out again in Iraq. It turned out that the reasons were not adequate for the trouble we're in, at least in my mind, but I would have, if I had been in Congress, I would have voted, because they told the Congress that there were reasons, I would have voted to go in. But it turned out the reasons were false so--

Is there anything you would like to add to the interview at this time that maybe I didn't ask about or something else comes to mind?

No, I had an excellent career in dentistry after the Army. I've been anointed with all the honors that can accrue to a dentist in this country and in the world. And I'm not sorry about anything in my life. I mean I'm really at peace with myself. And the Army is part of that experience, and there were good parts of it, and there were bad parts.

Well, on that very fair and balanced statement, I think that might be a good point in which to conclude the interview. So, I want to thank you for coming in to share your experiences in Korea.

Well, I hope this is useful to somebody in the future. That's why I came in.

I, myself, have learned from the interview and enjoyed it. And I also thank you for being able to come in relatively soon after I contacted you and for being able to fit us in today,

Yeah

Tuesday.

So, thank you very much.

All right. Thank you.

Lt. “Sy” Wachtenheim in Korea