

# Max Dean Petersen

interviewed by Judy Hansen  
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I was born at home in Rupert, Idaho on March 3, 1929 to James O. Petersen and Christiana Amelia Hansen; she went by the name Emily. I was the last child of ten children. I grew up in Burley. My father homesteaded in Burley in about 1907. There was a point in my life when I was required to have a birth certificate. I typed up my own certificate, my mother signed it, and I had it recorded with the State of Idaho.

When I was twelve years old we moved to Salt Lake City. I was raised in Salt Lake during the Second World War and everybody; friends and relatives were involved in the military in some way. When I was in high school they were having a hard time getting the military up to ten million men so my friends were dropping out of high school and lying about their age to join. I was in ROTC at West High for three years. We had a lot of exposure to the military.



Our ROTC advisor was a paratrooper from the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne; there are a lot of movies about the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne in Europe. I was a Master Sergeant. In addition to the drills, they entertained us with army training films. I have seen all the army training films that were ever produced during that time period (he laughs).

I then went on a LDS mission in 1948 to Norway. I was there for three winters. When I came back I didn't want to be in the infantry because I had known a lot of people in the infantry that highly advised me not to go there. I looked around to find a reserve group that was being called to active duty so before I reported to the draft board I had joined the Air Force in the Airway and Air Communication Squadron at Hill Air Force Base. I specifically joined the Air Force to avoid being in the infantry.

Our main mission was to run air traffic Control. I was called to active duty. The first thing they did was set us up with what they called basic training when it wasn't the same as basic training that you would go to at a basic training base. We had basic training from about 7:00 pm to 12:00 pm every day. Then our afternoon shift was to work at squadron headquarters. I was assigned to personnel. In other words I kept all the personnel records for all the men. We were a revolving door of military personnel coming in and out. People would come back from some place in the world and my job was to keep their records and to send them out to Camp Kilmer New Jersey or Camp Stoneman, California to their new assignments. I always had a revolving door of people coming in and out.

We were also weeding men out. We had a lot of people that we discharged for the 'good of the service.' You will recall at the end of the Second World War we had a hard time keeping ten million men in uniform. Every unit in France needed replacements. They were taking into the military mental patients and people paroled from the prisons. A lot of people were paroled from prison and sent directly to basic training. My friends that served with them said the mental patients were a bigger problem than the enemy (he laughs). They were misfits. Some of those people stayed in the military because of the security so part of the thing we were doing was not only sending men to New Jersey and California to be shipped overseas but we were discharging all those misfits that we could get rid of at that point. They weren't dishonorable discharges but section 8 discharges. This type of discharge did not give them educational or other benefits. We were probably discharging 5% of the men. I was given the MOS as a clerk. I was always a clerk; from the day I became active until the day I was discharged, I was always a clerk.

While I was at Hill Air Force base the draft board sent my commanding officer a demand to discharge me immediately so I could meet my draft quota; he laughed at them. He thought that was funny (as Max also laughs). He sent them a short letter and said he needed me and that I wasn't surplus to his needs. They had been waiting for me for over two years while I had served my mission and they were counting on me. I slipped away from them in the five days from the time I got home from my mission until I was supposed to report to the draft board. Well actually, I did report to the draft board but I reported that I was being called to active duty. So I was a draft evader.

As things progressed our group also was sent overseas. I was probably at Hill Air Force base for six months. They sent me to California to try to figure out what to do with me and then from California they sent me to Japan. I was in California for less than a month. I was only in Japan two days. When I got to Japan I was sent to what they call a Kamikaze base. It was a place where Japanese Kamikaze pilots had been trained. It had been converted to an American depot to decide what to do with all the American Soldiers stationed there.

The boat was kind of an interesting experience. On the troop ship, it was divided so naval people were on one side of the ship and on the other side of the ship were all the people that were being sent to Japan. A few interesting things happened on ship. One interesting thing was that I didn't get sea sick. I had already been at sea quite a bit going to and from Norway. I had found that I could avoid being sea sick by going up on the deck and looking at the horizon. The horizon was a fixed point and that was how I learned to get over sea sickness. Because I wasn't sea sick they put me in the galley scrubbing big pots and pans. I spent the whole trip scrubbing pots and pans on the troop ship. When I got bored I read the complete works of Shakespeare. I would also go up on the deck and watch the seasoned professional gamblers. They were all Master Sergeants. They would put on a show just like in Las Vegas. They would bring their sheep in and run their gambling operation and shear them. I don't think there was a kid on that ship that got off with a penny in his pocket.

When I first got to the Kamikaze base they segregated twenty-five of us out and had us sit with our duffle bags in a collection area. We sat there for hours and hours. Finally an Officer came by and said, "I guess you would like to know what you're doing here." "Yea - we'd like to know" we said. "Well, you

guys are going to Korea.” This was probably 1951. They put me in an airplane and flew me to Pusan and then put us on a train to Seoul.

An interesting thing happened at the Kamikaze base. We had five tiers of bunks and it was hard to get a night’s sleep because people were constantly falling out of their bunks onto the floor and yelling. There is not much space in military bunking. For example; on the troop ships we were five layers of bunks. The only bad part of that was the guys were sea sick and they were throwing up out of their bunks. Another bad thing about these bunks is that you can’t roll over. If you want to roll over you have to get out of the bunk and re-insert yourself on your stomach. There wasn’t room to roll over. It was a tight fit and I didn’t enjoy troop ships.

When I got to Korea the American’s had broken out of their perimeter at Pusan and pushed the North Koreans out of Seoul. Seoul didn’t have any formal North Korean army anymore. The most interesting experience there, was listening to the reservists who had been called from their civilian duty to defend the Pusan perimeter. These guys were civilians that were still in the reserves. They would pull them out of their civilian jobs, put them on an airplane, fly them directly to Pusan, and put them right on the perimeter. They had interesting military experiences. By the time I got there Seoul had been taken but the North Koreans still had a lot of Guerrilla groups working behind the lines and we had a really early experience with that.

About two days before I got on the train, the Guerrilla’s had blown up the railway and they had wiped out a platoon of Engineers who were manning a gravel pit. The Engineers weren’t paying attention to what they were doing and the North Koreans killed every one of them and of course they blew up the tracks. I had to get off the train and carry my duffle bag around the railway that had been blown up and get on another train to take me to Seoul.



They were interviewing me at Pusan wondering what to do with me. The guy interviewing me was a Master Sargent and said, “I’m married to a Mormon.” He said, “I like you and I’m going to give you a special assignment.” There was a vacancy at the 5<sup>th</sup> Air Force Headquarters in Seoul and he got me assigned there. When I got to Seoul they had two basic organizations at headquarters. They had what they called ‘Headquarters’ where the General was and his whole organization; and then they assigned me to a squadron that was to provide me a rifle, sleeping accommodations, and food. So I had a double assignment; one to the squadron that took care of me as a person and then I was assigned to the headquarters as a clerk.

The rifle they gave me was only about seven pounds. A regular M-1 rifle weighs over ten pounds. So for the weight it was nice, but it was also a bad rifle because the firing pin didn’t work. It

was a single shot. I couldn't find a gun smith in all of Korea to get it working as an automatic. I went through my Korean guard duty with a single shot (he laughs).

We were like a green zone in Iraq. We had a perimeter and no one was allowed in the perimeter without proper authorizations and passes. We had a lot of Koreans that were working on the base. They lived outside the base but assigned on the base to provide services. For example, I had a driver and his job was to drive me when I carried messages out to the Air bases. At that time, the guys I slept with in my bunk were all couriers. So when they were shorthanded I would be given courier runs. The purpose of courier runs was pilots would go take pictures all over Korea of North Korean installations. Then we would pick those photographs up and bring them to headquarters where we had an analytical group that would analyze those photographs. From the photographs they would determine who was going to get strafed and bombed the next day. We would take those orders back to the air bases for the pilots so they knew what they were doing the next day. So that is what the courier was doing; running back and forth. My fellow couriers often had to travel by air, but I never did.

I only had once scary experience as a courier. I had a tire blow out and I was stuck out in the boonies. I didn't want to be there at night because the North Koreans knew what couriers were doing and they wanted to interrupt that process. I was lucky that a guy came along and loaned me a spare tire. I told him I would be sure to get it back to him as soon as I got back to the motor pool. I got back safely that evening and felt very relieved that I wasn't going to be stuck up in the boonies at night; and you bet I got his tire back.

The couriers were a very frightened group of people. I've never known a group of people so afraid as that group was. Because they were afraid they drank heavily. Many of my supervisors and associates could not function without a shot of whiskey to start the day. The young Sargent I trained as my replacement was killed on a courier run.

One of my assignments was to be the librarian for the headquarters. I had to keep up the Air Force regulations, Air Force letters, Far Eastern Air Force Regulations, and Fifth Air Force regulations. These were constantly changing; nothing holds still in regulations. They are constantly being amended. So my job; when Officers came in looking for the latest version of an Air Force regulation or Air Force letter was to find it for them. In addition to that I was a typist. I'd type up letters for the Adjutant General. I was specifically assigned to the Adjutant General's office. I had two Adjutant Generals that I worked for but I can't remember their names. The first Adjutant General that I worked for was a reserve Colonel and he was worthless. He just didn't understand the military. The second one I worked for was a very talented southerner. He was a gentleman and he knew his military business. As the years go by I lose these names, they just drift away.

Another assignment that was given from time to time was to go log in messages at the message center. In other words, there were telegrams coming in from all over the world and we had to log those so when somebody wanted to know what was in them we could find them. That message center made life quite interesting. I'd get to read all the intelligence reports from the Far East and they were interesting. Their sources were interesting. Another thing that was interesting for a while was to log in the daily

reports from the Panmunjom peace talks. They put up a big tent right on the border of North Korea and South Korea and every day the North Koreans would arrive, the Americans would arrive, and they would talk all day. That was all typed up and sent to the message center.

The people were interesting to me. I really enjoyed the stories of the professional military people. I was always getting them to tell me stories. One interesting thing that happened while I was there was a Colonel fighter pilot had been shot down in North Korea and he arrived at headquarters having sneaked back to the American lines through the entire North Korean world while he lived on rats because there were lots of rats. That is how he stayed alive but he was pretty skinny when he got home. It took him about six weeks to get back to us.

The most captivating part of my Korean adventure was listening to the experiences of my friends and associates. I did put them in letters home, but the letters were all lost in my parents move. For example: an Infantry Major, who was a reservist past his physical prime, fought up and down the hill several times in the famous battle of Pork Chop Hill. The Chinese would overwhelm our troops in such great numbers that our people would be chased down hill. Many of the Chinese were so high on drugs that they would not even fire their rifles. The most important part of his experience was the complete fatigue that would leave him in a state of collapse. Nevertheless, he had to find the stamina to just keep fighting up and down that hill.

Another guy that was interesting that I ran into had been in the military his entire life. He was six months from getting retirement but when MacArthur sent the landing craft into Inchon to cut off the North Koreans that were in South Korea he had gotten assigned a job with the Navy to land the landing craft on Inchon beach. He said, "That's It! I don't care if I get a penny of retirement there is no way I am going to stay in another six months." It was such a bad experience for him that he said he was through with the military (Max laughs).

Another fellow I met was a Canadian Sargent who came on rest and recuperation to Seoul. He came to our LDS group and he told us his job was taking platoons out to determine where the North Koreans were. He said that his squad always wanted to go with him because he had a charmed life.

There were two fellow clerks that I called Brownie and Felix. These two guys were professional black-market traders. These guys figured out how to make money and they were in business. They would go out into the country side and they could get anything you wanted and they could sell anything you had. They were either wholesalers or retailers; I don't know which one. The interesting experience they had with me, they came to me after I had been there six months and told me they decided I was a military policeman and that I had been sent in to spy on them. They said, "You messed up our operations something awful. We had to be very secretive. We couldn't let you know anything we were doing" (he laughs). I was too clean cut; too square world; not like the rest of the guys.

Their biggest concern was how in the world they were going to convert their military script to American dollars when they got back to the States. They were totally puzzled on how they were going to do that. We were given shrunken script. It wasn't regular American dollars. It was military script and its purpose was to keep the military from being in the monetary business. They purposely made it difficult to

convert it. I didn't have difficulty converting mine because I didn't have that much but I did save up enough to buy a jeep when I got home. They had thousands of dollars and they didn't know how they were going to convert them.

In the spring of 1952 Korean thieves went throughout our compound and took every article of clothing and pair of shoes they could locate. I was lucky. I was using my fatigues as a pillow that night. The next day Brownie and Felix took up a collection and went down to the black market to buy up uniforms for their customers. I didn't participate. I was eventually issued new uniforms. Those were my clothes when I was discharged.

I got tired of Korea because I had dysentery the whole time I was there and I had boils all over me. I didn't really want to stay. One day an American Air Force regulation came through that said anybody that had served over six months that was a reservist and was serving in Korea was to be discharged immediately. I found that piece of paper and took it to my Commanding Officer with a written request to be discharged according to this regulation (he laughs). So my friends who had been sent all over the world from Hill Air Force Base had served their full term but because I found this piece of paper I was discharged and went back to school. I was in Korea in 1951 and 1952. I remember since I wanted to go back to school in 1952 I got out the end of summer 1952. I wasn't in active duty a full two years. I wasn't a very gung ho military person.

The most depressing experience I had was to stand on the deck of the troop ship the night before we sailed for home. I watched the loading of the green casket boxes that contained the remains of those going home for burial. They would never be reunited with their loved ones. I am proud of those I knew and worked with. Although we didn't always share the same values, many really did become my brothers.

I graduated in Political Science at BYU and finished my Masters in Public Administration at Wayne State University in Detroit. I got married as soon as I got my first degree. My wife, Lucy Marie Phillips had graduated from High School. She was in my LDS home ward in Farmington. I graduated from College and we got married on July 19, 1953. We moved to Michigan and had our ten children.

I moved back to Utah to be close to family. I had bought a house in West Valley on a five year contract. I was going to roll the contract with a new mortgage but I couldn't find a way to finance it so I had to sell it so the seller wouldn't take it back. I was just driving around looking for some place to buy that I could work on and there was a for sale sign in front of this house in Lehi. So I made an offer and here I am. That was 1992. I was looking for a project and boy did I find one. This home remodeling project was more than I bargained for. I was married about 58 years and we were blessed with ten children.

When my grandchildren come to me with the doomsday narrative, we review all that is going wrong in the world. I then tell them that the one thing I learned in Korea was to never underestimate the resiliency of the American people.