Grand Valley State University
Veterans History Project
Jan Viveen
(57:49)

Background Information (00:35)

- Born in 1918 in a small village in North Brabant, Netherlands. (00:40)
- His father worked selling fish that were shipped in and sold in the market. (1:15)
- Because there was no refrigeration, all the fish had to be sold the day they were received. (2:37)
- He was educated through high school in the Netherlands. He graduated in approx. 1935. (3:00)
- After graduating jobs were scarce. Jan took a job in a hardware store where he worked for 1 year before he joined the army. (3:30)
- He was drafted in 1936. This was normal, most young men were drafted. (4:36)

Basic Training (4:57)

- The men were given weapons training. (5:00)
- The men had to march approx. 35 miles. There was a lot of physical training. (5:33)
- The Dutch army placed high emphasis on military discipline. (5:59)
- Training typically lasted 1.5 years. (6:27)
- Before the Germans invaded the Netherlands in 1940, Jan paid much attention to the events occurring in Europe. (7:55)
- Jan expected a German invasion. (8:35)
- Most Dutch people were afraid of and disliked the Germans. (9:06)

German Invasion of the Netherlands (May 10th 1940) (9:50)

- Jan was on the border behind the Erft river manning an anti-tank gun. (9:57)
- Jan did not defend a bridge crossing, only the river. (10:52)
- The anti tank gun was a 47 mm. (11:27)
- The men started fighting at noon. By 5 AM German planes flew overhead and Netherlands was invaded. For Jan the war was over. (12:00)
- At this point Jan’s unit was forced to surrender. (12:26)

Life as a POW (12:30)

- The men were shipped by train into Germany. The train trip to the German/Polish border took 4 days. (12:35)
- On the 4 day train trip the men did not receive food or water. Some people died. (13:25)
- Jan was then placed in a conventional POW camp. (13:55)
- Jan was placed with other prisoners from France and Belgium but was kept separate from the Polish. (14:11)
- He was in the prison camp for 4 months. (14:33)
- The men were treated fairly well if they didn’t act out. Food was scarce. (14:44)
- One slice of bread at 6 AM and one bowl of soup at 6 PM. (15:03)
• The men could not take baths or showers. (15:55)
• Jan personally didn’t know of any prisoners who died of disease. (16:09)
• Jan mostly stayed with people from his native country. (16:15)
• The prison guards were average soldiers. (16:51)
• The men slept on boards without mattresses. (17:18)
• Jan signed a form to be released that said the men would not take any actions against the Germans. Jan was released after 4 months in the camp. (17:48)

Service after Imprisonment (18:10)

• He returned home by train on open freight cars. (18:14)
• When he arrived back in the Netherlands he and his fellow soldiers were met with much appreciation. (18:58)
• Jan stayed in the Army and was transferred to The Hague, Netherlands. (20:22)
• Here he would occasionally march. However he had little to do while stationed there. He did that for approx 1 month before he was dismissed out of the army in late 1940. (20:46)

Life after Military Service (21:20)

• After his discharge he ventured back home. (21:26)
• Jan acquired a job on a railroad by coal mines in the southern part of the Netherlands. Here he regulated the filling and emptying of box cars. (22:00)
• He worked with Dutch civilians and never saw German officers. He had the job until the end of the war in 1945. (22:48)
• He had this job for approx 12 years. (23:07)

Life under Nazi Occupation (23:15)

• There was very little relationship or interaction between the Dutch and the Germans until 1942. At this time supplies began to run short for the Dutch civilians. (23:27)
• He was married in 1942 during the occupation. (24:07)
• The civilians got food using coupons. The coupons were exchanged for the specific types of food indicated on the coupons. (24:38)
• Food was scarcer in the big city. (25:20)
• He was aware of resistance in the Netherlands. (26:00)
• Jan assisted shot down Allied airmen by providing them with places to stay and cover and aid in their return back to Allied territory. (26:41)
• Resistance members were regularly caught. They were never heard of after the Germans seized them. (27:56)
• The civilians were unable to have radios. They still hid them and listened at night. This is how they were informed. (28:30)
• In 1944 Jan’s house was destroyed after a bombing raid. He then walked to his parents’ home (29:40)
• The bombers were targeting bridges. It took 12 tries to destroy the bridges. (30:18)
• Sittard in South Limburg was seized by Allied forces 20 minutes after the allied bombing. (31:20)
• In the spring of 1945 is when Jan’s city was liberated. (32:17)
The mine and the railroads never shut down during military conflict. All of the coal mined went to Germany. (32:53)
The winter of 1944/1945 was very difficult with recourses, such as food, running low. (33:30)

Jan’s Work in Germany (34:02)

In the spring of 1945, the Dutch were told that they would be transferred to work in Germany. After no one showed up, 13 Dutch men were captured and killed. Once again the call went out for workers. This time 4,000 Dutch civilians marched to Germany for work transfer. (34:04)
They marched 30 miles into Germany. A lot of people died on the march. (35:07)
After the march, the men were taken by train to a labor camp in Germany. (35:18)
Jan and his brother were forced to work as army guards until the Americans liberated the camp. (36:00)
There were some people helping the Germans while they occupied Germany. (37:43)
Jan’s wife stayed back in the Netherlands while Jan and the men were transferred for work. (39:34)
The women were also sent to another location. Jan’s wife and sisters were allowed to say in the Netherlands because her brother was the head of the fire department. (40:11)
More food was given to Jan in the labor camp than when he was a prisoner. The food was still low. (41:11)
After Americans liberated the town, immediately Jan and his brother in law traveled home. The trip took 4 days. (41:53)
Other men had a motorcycle. To travel. This motorcycle however, was confiscated by allied forces. (43:30)

Life after the War (43:55)

After the war there were still fuel and food shortages. (44:00)
Jan immediately took back his job at the railroad. (44:15)
Housing was in short supply due to the amount that was destroyed by bombing runs. (44:43)
It took several years before everything was restored by normal. (45:00)

Move to the U.S. (45:23)

The U.S. offered to move Jan to the U.S. because he was bombed out during the war and survived he was offered an opportunity to move to the U.S. in December of 1956. (45:30)
Jan was fluent in English before moving to the U.S. (46:31)
Because the committee that offered him to travel to the U.S. was in Western Michigan, Jan immediately moved to Grand Rapids Michigan upon his arrival. (46:45)
Jan began work in a factory making furniture for 4 years. (47:24)
Later Jan worked in a print shop for 22 years. After this he retired. (47:52)

Final Thoughts on Service and War (48:27)

The civilians were always afraid of being killed or harmed by the Germans. (48:58)
He recalls the disappearance of the Jews and the yellow star badges. (49:22)
Jan had a radio which he hid somewhere in the attic. (50:22)
- Near the end of the occupation, German soldiers came into his parent’s house to sleep. His father told them to leave after coming home and finding them and surprisingly they did. (51:28)
- He didn’t travel seeing to many other travelers when he and his brother in law traveled back to the Netherlands. (53:11)
- The area was completely bombed out after the war. (55:46)
- The bombing continued up until the Allies liberated the city. (56:51)