

**Grand Valley State University
Veterans' History Project
Arden Pridgeon
World War II**

1 hour 18 minutes 15 seconds

(00:00:20) Early Life

- Born on April 5, 1924, in Isabella County, Michigan, at home on the family farm
- Attended a one-room schoolhouse
- Farm had no electricity, and no vehicles
 - Farmed with horses
- Had 160 acres of farmland, but allowed other people to use the back 80 acres for their farming
- Kept the farm through the Great Depression
 - Paid off the mortgage before the Stock Market Crash in 1929
- Grew cucumbers and potatoes as cash crops
- Grew corn to feed the cattle and chickens
- Had one older sister and two younger brothers
- Older sister went to live with a relative when the Great Depression began in 1929
 - Made it easier on the family
- Started school when he seven years old
 - Had to walk two miles to school and his parents didn't want him to walk alone
 - Meant he had to wait until his younger brother was old enough for school
 - Parents made sure he knew how to read and write before he started schoolhouse
- Graduated from high school in May 1943

(00:03:44) Start of the War

- Didn't pay much attention to the fighting happening in Europe and Asia prior to American involvement
 - Family had a battery-powered radio and a subscription to *The Grand Rapids Press*
- Heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor on the radio
 - Students talked about it in school the following Monday
 - Nobody knew where Pearl Harbor was or most of the details

(00:05:28) Selection for Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP)

- He took a pre-induction test for the ASTP in April 1943
- The ASTP was a program that allowed recruits to go to college through the Army
 - Receive specialized, educated training that could be used in the Army
 - Army needed some soldiers educated in certain areas
 - Colleges needed students
 - Government agreed to pay public colleges to train soldiers

(00:07:00) Basic Training Pt. 1

- Sent to Fort Benning, Georgia, for his basic training
- Received an advanced version of basic training along with the other ASTP recruits
 - Received the equivalent of Officer Training, but graduated as a private

(00:07:23) Army Specialized Training Program Pt. 1

- Selected for basic engineering training
- Sent to the University of Wisconsin in Madison, Wisconsin

(00:07:36) Getting Drafted

- In November 1942, Congress lowered the draft age from 21 years old to 18 years old
- In December 1942 he was granted a deferment to finish high school
- Reported to Fort Custer, Michigan, for induction shortly after graduating high school

- Stayed there for two or three weeks
- Worked in the kitchen and did other menial tasks

(00:09:07) Basic Training Pt. 2

- Sent to Fort Benning in August 1943
- Traveled there by train
 - Saw a segregated drinking fountain in the South
 - Came as a shock to him
 - Remembers it was a hot and sooty train ride
 - Took a couple days to get from Michigan to Georgia
- Had never been in such a hot place before
- At Fort Benning he learned how to be an infantryman
 - Marching, shooting and maintaining a rifle, bivouacking, compass reading, and gas training
- Accepted the discipline
- The officers and non-commissioned officers training the ASTP recruits resented them
 - Felt that it was unfair they got selected to go to college rather than go fight
- Given demerits, extra kitchen patrol duty, or have passes revoked for infractions
- Completed that training in December 1943

(00:13:23) Army Specialized Training Program Pt. 2

- Sent to the University of Wisconsin for his ASTP training
- He and other recruits were quartered in a fraternity house
- Ate at the Student Union building
 - Allowed to drink beer, because the drinking age in Wisconsin was 18 years old
- Attended regular classes
- Marched between classes and had to wear uniforms in class
- Had specified study times and bed times
- Took 24 credit hours per semester
- Stayed at the University of Wisconsin until March 1944 when he completed the term

(00:15:26) Joining the 96th Infantry Division

- The Army shut down the ASTP because more infantrymen were needed to fight
- Assigned to G Company, 381st Infantry Regiment, 96th Infantry Division
 - Assigned to G Company as a rifleman
- Trained at Camp White, Oregon, for a month
- Sent to Camp San Luis Obispo and Camp Callan, California, for amphibious training
- Boarded a troopship and went to sea so the soldiers could get used to being at sea
 - Did an amphibious training exercise at a nearby island
 - Fully loaded with gear and weapons
- Officers and non-commissioned officers in the 96th were inhospitable toward the ASTP men
 - Didn't trust their combat abilities
- Received 30 days of refresher training
 - Mostly rifle training and going on the infiltration course
 - Infiltration course: crawling under barbed wire while a machine gun fires over you
 - Felt prepared for that after the advanced training he received at Fort Benning
- After the amphibious exercise they did another amphibious exercise at Oceanside, California
 - Landed at the beach and set up camp
 - Marines detested their presence
- Sent to Camp Beale, California, for more gas mask training and more map-reading training

(00:20:50) Deployment to the Pacific Theater

- From Camp Beale the division went to Camp Stoneman, California to prepare to go overseas
- Took a barge down to San Francisco and boarded a troopship

- Left the United States on July 15, 1944, and sailed to Pearl Harbor
 - Helped load cargo onto ships for an invasion
 - The ship he was on could carry a couple thousand soldiers
- Stayed in Hawaii until September 1944 then left with a few other ships

(00:23:18) Preparation for Invasion of the Philippines

- Initially had orders to invade the island of Yap
- Orders changed to invade the Philippines
- Stayed at sea for one month waiting for the invasion convoy to form
 - Allowed to stop at the Admiralty Islands for one day to go swimming and drink beer
- Crossed the Equator, and he went from being a “Pollywog” to being a “Shellback”
 - Usually celebrated with a “King Neptune Ceremony,” but there were too many soldiers

(00:25:13) Liberation of the Philippines – Invasion of Leyte

- Invaded the island of Leyte, in the Philippines, on October 20, 1944
 - First island in the Philippines to be liberated by American forces
- Told to expect Japanese snipers and a jungle combat zone
- Given Atabrine for malaria and water purification tablets
 - Also told which plants were edible
- Navy bombarded the landing zone in the days before the troops went ashore
- Had an uneventful landing
 - Surprised by the lack of Japanese resistance
 - Went ashore in a Landing Craft Vehicle Personnel (LCVP)
 - Had climbed down cargo nets from the troopship into the landing craft
- Japanese forces were disorganized and incapable of regrouping to mount a resistance
- Secured the beachhead and moved into the interior of the island

(00:29:15) Liberation of the Philippines – Battle of Leyte

- First major encounter happened at Mount Catman
 - Japanese were defending the hill, but American soldiers and artillery overwhelmed them
- Japanese Navy attempted to destroy the American fleet and cut off the American ground forces
 - Note: Battle of Leyte Gulf (October 23-26, 1944); Allied victory; largest naval battle in history
- On December 7, 1944, the Japanese landed paratroopers at the beachhead
 - Able to secure the beachhead
- At night he heard Japanese soldiers moving around in the jungle, trying to scavenge food
- Filipinos helped American troops in any way they could
- On November 11, 1944, they were on a patrol when the Japanese ambushed his patrol
 - Opened fire with a machine gun
 - They were able to reorganize quickly and counterattack, losing only two men
 - Stayed low and assessed the situation
 - Taught them to be a little more careful
- Set up ambushes against the Japanese
- Found a Japanese soldier in a creek that had committed *seppuku* (ritual suicide by disembowelment)
- Japanese hid and waited in an attempt to wage a guerrilla war on the American troops
 - Minimal organized resistance from the Japanese
- On December 25, 1944, General MacArthur declared the island secured
 - Continued to look for Japanese stragglers
 - Stayed on guard and carried weapons at all times
- Got one Japanese prisoner-of-war
 - Gave him food
 - Died two days later because he had been starving and the food killed him
 - Pathetic, and he felt sorry for him

- Able to celebrate Christmas 1944
 - Had a special meal, had a Protestant and Catholic chaplain available for religious services
 - Sang songs and tried to make things as festive as possible

(00:39:24) Preparation for Okinawa

- On March 20, 1945, they received orders for the invasion of Okinawa
- Knew almost nothing about Okinawa
 - Knew it would be a major battle
- Refitted with gear and ammunition and received bayonet training
- He was assigned a bazooka
 - Expected Japanese armored resistance
- Had another man carrying a flamethrower

(00:41:33) Invasion of Okinawa

- On April 1, 1945, he saw hundreds of American planes, and over 1,000 American ships off Okinawa
 - Saw Japanese *kamikaze* planes attacking the American ships
 - Stood on the deck of his ship and watched the initial landing of troops
- Placed on a Landing Ship Tank then went ashore on a Landing Vehicle Tracked (amphibious tractor)
- No resistance on the beach
 - Japanese wanted to draw the Americans deeper into the island before attacking
 - Fatal strategic mistake for the Japanese
 - Could have stopped the invasion, but allowed too many soldiers to get ashore
- For the first ten days there was little to no resistance from the Japanese
 - Marines moved north while the Army moved south
 - Landed thousands of troops

(00:44:39) Battle of Okinawa

- Received a Bronze Star for his actions on April 14, 1945
 - The Japanese wanted to use their expendable troops first to try and repel the Americans
 - Arden and his unit were dug into a position when those Japanese troops charged
 - He just kept firing his sub-machine gun until they stopped coming
 - None of them broke through the line
 - Amazed him that the Japanese kept coming despite being mowed down
 - Only artillery support the Japanese had were “knee mortars”
 - Note: Knee mortar: Type 89 Grenade launcher; portable and small
 - This was the first major action he encountered
 - The next day, he and the other troops collected souvenirs from the dead Japanese
 - Mostly wristwatches, flags, and other items like that
 - Japanese could have inflicted more damage if they had used a better strategy
- Americans were on the offensive

(00:49:20) Getting Wounded

- Shortly after the action on April 14 he was sent to the rear to collect rations and supplies
 - Support personnel didn't want to risk coming up to the front line
 - En route, a grenade exploded near him and peppered his jaw with shrapnel
 - Dog tag chain stopped the shrapnel from hitting his neck
- Went to an aid station near the front line
 - Technically, since he had suffered a head wound he required evacuation
- Sent to the airport and flown to the naval hospital on Guam
 - Felt uncomfortable being with more severely injured men

(00:51:27) Returning to Okinawa

- Sent to an Army Replacement Depot on Saipan and requested a redeployment to his unit on Okinawa
 - Had to do combat training and a psychological evaluation before returning to Okinawa

- Arrived on Okinawa on June 1, 1945
- Rejoined his old platoon
 - All replacements
 - He was immediately promoted from private first class to staff sergeant
 - Placed in charge of the platoon
- Manned the radio mounted on a flamethrower tank during one advance
 - Tank had to be within 25 feet of its target before it fired
 - He smelled the flesh burning whenever the tank hit a target
 - Japanese soldiers strapped satchel charges to themselves and tried to attack the tank
 - American soldiers with the tank shot them before they got close enough
- Pushed the Japanese into the caves or to the end of the island
 - Japanese soldiers at the edge of the island committed suicide rather than admit defeat
- One night, the platoon got ahead of the rest of the company
 - Had to send a detail of soldiers back to help evacuate the wounded
 - Had to stop on the road at night on the way back to the rear
 - Made him realize he wouldn't want to be the company commander if the opportunity arose
- Took some shrapnel in his left arm
 - Medic told him to keep it as a souvenir (not a serious enough injury to warrant surgery)
- Had civilians surrender to them by the hundreds
 - Had dropped 50,000 surrender leaflets on Okinawa before the invasion
 - Only saw one Japanese civilian present that leaflet to the Americans

(01:01:34) End of the Battle of Okinawa

- By the end of the battle, most of the buildings on the island had been destroyed
- Okinawans had dug large, underground burial sites
 - Japanese soldiers had hid in them which required the sites to be destroyed
- Never saw an intact building on Okinawa
- Saw acres of destroyed rice paddies
 - Meant that farming was impossible
- Left the island in mid-July 1945
- Ordered to bury Japanese soldiers on their way back across the island
- Received 25 points during his time on Okinawa
 - Note: Points awarded for combat, medals, dependents, rank, and length of service
 - Had received a Bronze Star, a Purple Heart, combat, and a promotion on Okinawa

(01:04:22) End of the War

- At the end of July the unit moved to the island of Mindoro in the Philippines
- Prepared there for the planned invasion of Japan
- He was made squad leader for the invasion
- Kept the replacements they had received in Okinawa
- Mindoro was a higher, drier island than Leyte or Okinawa
- Didn't see much of the local population
- On Mindoro when the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan
 - Came as a shock for the war to be over so quickly and so dramatically
- Ordered to turn in weapons and ammunition

(01:06:53) Coming Home & End of Service

- Offered the chance to reenlist or go home
 - He decided to go home
- Sent to Leyte to board a troopship bound for the United States
- Landed at San Francisco on January 4, 1946
 - Given a meal before leaving to be discharged

-Sent to Camp McCoy, Wisconsin, and was discharged there on January 11, 1946

(01:08:54) Life after the War Pt. 1

-Decided to use the GI Bill to go to college

-Attended Michigan State University

-Graduated in June 1949

-Army Specialized Training Program had helped give him direction for his education

-Took a job offer in Benton Harbor, Michigan

-Moved there on July 11, 1949

-Had a wife and his first child

-Worked for the company in Benton Harbor for 16 years

-Got his master's degree at night school

-Taught at Western Michigan University for 25 years

(01:14:14) Reflections on Service

-His time in the Army helped direct him to college

-Without the Army he probably wouldn't have gone to college

-Wouldn't have had the direction or the funding to do that

-Led to him getting his master's degree in business

(01:16:52) Life after the War Pt. 2

-Got married in 1947

-Had his first child in 1948

-Ultimately had six children

-Had 15 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren

-All of his children graduated from college