Interview with Donald Meier

VRK-A-L-2009-037

Interview Date: December 1, 2009

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Tuesday, December 1, 2009. My name is Mark DePue; I'm the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I'm excited today because I get to talk to Donald Meier. How are you, Donald?

Meier: Fine, this morning.

DePue: We're in Donald's home in Geneseo, Illinois, and we're going to talk to Donald about your experiences during the Korean War. You have a unique story to tell, and that's why I'm so excited about getting the opportunity to hear more about it, because this is not something that most Americans know anything about today. So, let's go ahead and get started, and just pick it up at the very beginning: where were you born, and when were you born?

Meier: I was born April 23, 1929 in Racine, Wisconsin. When I was three years old, the family moved back to Geneseo—back to Geneseo because my dad was born in Geneseo, and although we (laughs) went to some other locations, why, we ended up back in Geneseo.

DePue: Well, let's see—if you moved when you were three year old, that was 1932, in the very depths of the Depression. What was your father doing for a living? Why did he move from Racine back to Geneseo?

Meier: Well, actually, his brother-in-law had died early on the farm, and I think my dad hoped to be able to help his sister continue farming on their farm.

DePue: Was that your grandparents' farm, then, that they—

Meier: That would be—no. My aunt and uncle's farm. My grandparents' farm had somehow disappeared in the Depression, so we went to this uncle's farm, and we only stayed there a year. Then, my dad rented a farm west of Geneseo, and after a year or two there, we moved to another farm which later my dad purchased. So, we owned a farm just west of Geneseo—very small farm, actually, about thirty acres. But that was our farm, so we lived there, and I lived there the rest of my days when I was at home. My dad continued to live there for years after that.

DePue: Was it a typical farm of that time? Corn, soy beans, livestock?

Meier: (clears throat) Yes, and being it was so small, my dad used intensive methods: he had a few cattle and a few hogs and a few chickens, and then later, he got into milking cows and selling the milk directly from the farm. So, I had the privilege of getting acquainted with all these things. Milking cows before school in the morning became a job that I really didn't like, but I did. (laughs)

DePue: The cows didn't like you, or you didn't like the cows, or both?

Meier: Oh, it was mutual, I guess.

DePue: Well, that is a small farm. I would assume that, again, we're talking about the Depression years, that the family never went hungry. What was your father's cash crop?

Meier: Probably the milk, and eggs from the chickens. Things were pretty slim in those days, and if we did treat ourselves to some ice cream, it was usually getting a pint of ice cream and putting it in the middle of the table, and all six of us would grab a spoon and try to get a little bit of the ice cream before it was gone.

DePue: Six of you—your parents and four children?

Meier: I had one brother and two sisters. An older sister and a younger sister and a younger brother.

DePue: Okay. With a name like Meier—and that's spelled M-e-i-e-r—that sounds pretty German: is that the case?

Meier: Very much so. Actually, all four of my grandparents came from Germany.

DePue: Do you know when they came?

Meier: It would be in the 1880s, probably. My one grandfather actually served in the German army during the Franco-Prussian War, and told my mother that he had marched through Paris as a German solider.

DePue: That would have been 1870, I think. [1870-1871] Okay.

Meier: Good. You're a little better at history than I am, but in that neighborhood, yes. Yes.

DePue: Do you know why they came to the United States?

Meier: To avoid the military. When you were in Germany, you were taken into the military for quite a few years, is my understanding, and for probably financial reasons—farming was slow in Germany, and the West was just considered the place to go if you wanted to get ahead.

DePue: Did they move to the Geneseo area, then?

Meier: My father's mother and father, yes, moved to the Geneseo area, and my mother's parents moved to Stevens Point, Wisconsin area.

DePue: Okay. Do you know what part of Germany they were coming from?

Meier: No, I really don't know at this time.

DePue: Well, tell us a little bit more about growing up during the Depression. Do you remember much about those years?

Meier: Well, we were very poor.We didn't get new clothes if we could get some hand-me-downs from somewhere. We were poor folks, we really were, but we always had something to eat, and we got along.

DePue: Did you go to country schools?

Meier: No, I didn't. My older sister did, but then we were close to town, and so I could walk to school. It was about a half a mile, and right out west of Geneseo along the highway, and so we would walk along the highway. Of course we were warned to always stay off the road when cars came, and we would walk facing the traffic. We had that down. (laughs) We always walked facing the traffic so that we wouldn't get hit.

DePue: Did you have electricity on the farm, being that close to town?

Meier: We did after a while; the first year or so, we did not. Then, we got electricity and my dad, he did the wiring, and we got a lightbulb in the dining room, I remember. Gradually, we got more outlets and more electrical appliances. It was kind of slow going, though. We had kerosene lamps, and I remember my

mom would clean the chimneys on the lamps so they would shine a little brighter.

DePue: How about indoor plumbing? Did it have that?

Meier: We did, after a while. Not at first, but we did finally get indoor plumbing, and my dad installed all of that. He dug out the yard—a huge hole—to make a septic tank and ran the pipes in, and put in a pressure pump, and we did have then, yes, indoor plumbing.

DePue: How old were you when that happened? Do you recall?

Meier: Probably…ten or twelve years old.

DePue: Well, this would be towards the end of the Depression years as well, then.

Meier: Yes. Things were getting better. Actually, the thing that got us more on our feet—my dad's family, I should say, the family on their feet—was that during the war, my dad had driven a school bus a couple of years for our local high school, and so he was familiar with bus driving. He got the idea that he could haul people—workers—from Geneseo to the Rock Island Arsenal on a bus. So, he went to the Chevrolet dealer in Geneseo, and made arrangements to buy a bus.

The bus came, and then he started running three shifts a day to the Rock Island Arsenal. He would get up early in the morning so that he could gather up the workers from around town; he took them down so they could start work at seven o'clock at the Rock Island Arsenal. Then, leaving the Arsenal, he would bring home the workers who had been there since midnight before. Then, in the afternoon at two o'clock, he'd go around Geneseo and gather up some more, and get them down for the three o'clock shift change at the Arsenal. This was quite successful financially for us, taking in, I think, maybe as much as two hundred dollars in a week. The money was good. He got, I think, fifty cents a day from each worker. They'd pay by the week, and they would get a ride, then, right down to the Arsenal.

DePue: Does that mean that you and your brother were doing a lot of the work around the farm?

Meier: It means that I had to get up in the morning and milk the cows! (both laugh) That's what it meant. My brother was seven years younger, so he didn't get in on a whole lot of that kind of work.

DePue: Mm-hmm. Well, we are talking about the war here and how important that was to the family, financially especially. A couple of questions on that: do you remember Pearl Harbor?

Meier: Yes. We had a battery-operated radio. The news came over the radio, and the radio—I remember right where it sat in the dining room—and so we gathered around and listened to the news of the war. And I remember hearing President Franklin Roosevelt tell how it was a bad situation and how things would have to be from then on.

DePue: Now, your parents were both of German stock, but they'd grown up here in the United States, from what you've said.

Meier: Yes.

DePue: Do you remember their opinions about what was going on in Europe, with Germany especially?

Meier: Oh, they were 100 percent American. They didn't claim—they didn't advertise the fact that they were of German descent. Well, they were alive during the First World War, and there was a lot of ill-feeling to Germans during that time Those feelings were still prevalent during the Second World War, that you didn't want to advertise the fact that you were of German heritage.

DePue: Certainly there was no shortage of Germans around the Geneseo area, though, was there?

Meier: Right. There were a lot of Germans, there were a lot of Swedes, a lot of Belgians, and English, Irish… Well, a lot of everyone! Well, everyone was from a different country, back in those days.

DePue: Did you have any relatives that served in the military during World War II?

Meier: Yes. I'm thinking of one or two cousins, maybe three or four.

DePue: Okay. I want to ask you some more questions about the war, but before I do that, was religion part of your life growing up, as well?

Meier: Very much so. We attended church every Sunday; there were no excuses. Even when I got to high school and would go out on an occasional Saturday night date, that was no excuse for not being up in time to go to Sunday school and church. We attended an Evangelical and Reformed church. It was originally a German evangelical church, and that was our church. That was my dad's church, and actually, that's how my dad and my mom met. My mother, as I said before, was from Stevens Point, Wisconsin, and the minister they had in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, got a job down in our church in Geneseo.

And so, my mother had graduated from high school and was looking to get a teaching job. Girls could immediately start teaching in country schools, and I think the wages up there were eight dollars a month; her friend,

who was the daughter of the minister that moved to Geneseo, with her minister father and mother, she reported via letter back to my mother that wages were twelve dollars a month down around Geneseo. So, my mother came and lived in the parsonage for a while with her friend, and that's how she met my father down here in Geneseo when she was from Stevens Point, Wisconsin.

DePue: We probably should get down for the record your parents' names: your father's name?

Meier: Ernest, and my mother's name was Clara; her last name was Prell, P-r-e-l-l.

DePue: Okay. That's an unusual name, but German, you say?

Meier: German, yes. Yes, I don't know if it had any particular meaning in German.

DePue: What was it like growing up during World War II? By that time, you're into your early teen years, I would think.

Meier: Mm-hmm.

DePue: Were you paying close attention to what was going on in the war?

Meier: Very close, because we knew if the war continued long enough, I would be subject to military service. And so, of course I was glad when the war ended.

DePue: Do you remember rubber drives or aluminum drives, things like that?

Meier: Oh, yes—there were a number of things. One thing was the gasoline rationing was an interesting item. Of course, as a farmer, we were able to get some gas and my dad having his bus and driving his busload of workers to the Rock Island Arsenal was able to get all the gas he wanted for that. When I was in high school, I played football; I remember that the farm kids could drive their cars to the football games out of town. The school didn't have a bus to take us to out-of-town football games, but the farm kids could bring their car, and so we'd get a ride to the football game in the farm kids' autos.

DePue: I didn't ask you before—did you have a tractor on the farm? Was it mechanized?

Meier: We had horses at first, and then later on a tractor. So, I did get quite an education on horses. I remember actually plowing with horses and cultivating the corn with horses. Mowing the weeds with horses. Making hay with horsepower, horses.

DePue: Well, you had to be pretty young when you were doing that, too?

Meier: Well, I was big for my age, and so I early got (laughs) to where I could harness the horses and do some work with them.

DePue: It sounds like you had a pretty busy life, trying to keep things going on the farm and school, that there wasn't a whole lot of time for other activities. Is that about right?

Meier: That's about right. I did enjoy football and track and school. We occasionally went somewhere. We had an old car, I think, like a 1930 sedan car that dad would take us here and there. We didn't go to many things.

DePue: When did you graduate from high school, by the way?

Meier: 1947.

DePue: Okay, so, the last couple of years of that were after the war was over. Do you remember the end of the war itself?

Meier: Yes. There was some celebrating, but it was kind of bad. The people who I saw celebrating were people who were already either back home or had never gone, and I always felt that the people who should be celebrating were the ones over in Europe or the Far East who wished they were home, and for them, the war was over and they were on their way home. And so, any celebration until they got home was kind of wishful thinking, I guess.

DePue: You grew up on the farm, and a small farm at that. The last couple of years in high school, what were you thinking, in terms of your future?

Meier: Well, I didn't really know, although construction kind of fancied—seemed like a good thing. I had an uncle who was a contractor, and I ended up—well, (laughs)… One thing I thought about was mechanics. I was kind of mechanically-inclined and liked to work on… My cousin had a Model A car, and we would work on that; I thought that was fun. But I kind of steered away from that. One day, at church, my other cousin said that he thought I should go to work for my uncle. So, I went to see my uncle, and he hired me. I started working construction and worked that for forty-five years, so it was really good. My dad had done some construction work during the summers between years in school, and I had gone and helped then, when I was probably, oh, fifteen years old or sixteen. We would go, and we would mix concrete and I would help by shoveling the aggregate—or the gravel—into the cement mixer. So, that was good. That paid about thirty-five cents an hour, and that was money.

DePue: What happened to your dad's job after the war was over? Did that continue?

Meier: A couple of things: he got a job on the Arsenal and just drove the one shift, then. With his bus, he would drive all people to the Arsenal. Then that kind of

faded away, and then he went to work at John Deere Company, driving the bus and hauling people.

DePue: Mm-hmm. Well, I know that shortly after you graduated from high school, you also thought about the military. Now, this was a time when the military is much larger, and I'm not sure if the draft was going on then, but it certainly must have been in the back of your mind. What did you do in that respect?

Meier: I joined the National Guard to keep out of the draft, and (laughs) that's the honest truth. One of my friends had found out about it and recommended that we join the National Guard, so we did. And for four years, we drove one night a month over to Kewanee, where the national guard armory stood, and we would go to summer camp for a couple of weeks, either at Fort Ripley in Minnesota, or—I can't remember. There was one in Wisconsin.

DePue: Fort McCoy?

Meier: Yes, Fort McCoy.

DePue: I think it was probably **Camp** Ripley, Minnesota.

Meier: Yeah, and Camp McCoy, when we went. So, that was interesting. I think we might have set a speed record in getting from Geneseo to Kewanee because we didn't always get started very much ahead of time.

DePue: There was no unit in town here, then, in Geneseo?

Meier: No.

DePue: Why the unit in Kewanee?

Meier: I'm not sure. Well, Kewanee was a bigger community, and they had several units there. One was an ambulance company, and that's the one that we joined.

DePue: Do you remember the nomenclature of the unit?

Meier: Just an ambulance company, Forty-Fourth Division, Illinois National Guard. That's where I ended up. Then in 1950…1952, I believe, the national guard was taken into the active duty—activated, they called it—so then we were in the army.

DePue: Okay, before we get too far into that, June of 1950 is when the Korean War began, so you've already been in the national guard for a couple of years. Did you think, Well, this might be bad for me? Did that have an implication for you?

Meier: What I felt bad about **somewhat** is that I knew there would be people going to the war, and I had kind of sneaked out of it. I had joined the guard so that I wouldn't have to go. And there's a feeling of—I don't know what to call it—but anyway, I would be at home and going to the national guard meetings, and my friends and comrades and classmates would be over there fighting. So, I felt bad a little bit that I was not. Then on the other hand, I felt good that I would avoid that having to serve in the military. So, actually, I was a little bit glad when the unit was activated, and then I would be able to say that I was in the army.

DePue: But if I get my timeline right, it wasn't just a decision that impacted you, by that time. Were you married by then?

Meier: Well, I was married in 1951, in November.

DePue: Tell us a little bit about your wife.

Meier: Oh, I—(laughs).

DePue: Let's start with her name.

Meier: Okay, my wife's name is Joan Madsen—M-a-d-s-e-n, is Danish; her father was over 100 percent Danish. He was a very interesting fellow; the most wonderful father-in-law I ever could have had. He and his wife lived in Sheffield, Illinois, and at that time, my sister was teaching school in Cambridge, Illinois. My future wife had moved to Cambridge as a home economics teacher at their new high school. During those years, the rural youth and whatever youth groups, would have a barn dance, occasionally. One evening, my sister and my future wife came to Geneseo for a barn dance. I went there, and of course, my sister introduced me to her friend from Cambridge. Well, one thing led to another, and eventually we married, in November of '51. That's the story of our marriage, which has been fifty-eight years now, and we get along pretty well.

DePue: Yeah, you're closing in on sixty years, so you're going to get there pretty quick.

Meier: Yes.

DePue: I imagine, though, that Joan had an opinion about the Forty-Fourth Division being mobilized.

Meier: Yeah, it was of course sad for her when I had to leave. We left on a train, and of course, went out to Camp Cooke in California. She was, of course, under contract to finish the school year. We went to California I think in January, and we had been married the November before. So, she had to continue teaching until the end of the school year, which would be in May or June. At that time, she, of course, had my car and she drove out to California to see me.

I think a friend of hers came with her, a cousin of hers from Princeton, Illinois. The two gals, they drove out, and I was glad to see them of course, out there in California. And so, we stayed in a house with some friends of ours—army friends—and it was kind of funny: we moved into this one house and we had not met the owners, but our friends had met the owners. They said, Yeah, come on and live there, and so we lived there. Our friends moved away and then some other friends came, and as it ended, we stayed in the house for a month or six weeks, and had never met the owners because the owners were schoolteachers who had gone from California to somewhere—Colorado, I think—to further their schooling.

Okay, then I signed up for this school in Texas, the advanced first aid schooling in Fort Sam Houston, Texas. We left California, and there were three of us men; two of us were married, and then a single guy, and we went to school at Fort Sam Houston. That was good.

DePue: If I can jump in here real quick: why did you decide to go to that school?

Meier: Well, I think it looked like a chance for advancement.

DePue: Now, before that time, you were in an ambulance company. Does that mean that you were primary driving the ambulance, that you weren't trained in any medical skills?

Meier: Well, actually, for four years we had been in that and we did a lot of first aid training. As we were activated, I was changed from the ambulance company to what was called the headquarters company, and they were right together more or less. Anyway, it just seemed like the thing to do was to go to this advanced training school.

DePue: I've talked to several other people who were in the Forty-Fourth Division when it was mobilized, and know that the unit got broken up almost right away, that they certainly never deployed to Korea as the Forty-Fourth Division. I want to go back, though, because it sounds like you were married just a couple of months before your unit was activated. Were there rumors flurrying about that there was a mobilization afoot for the unit when you got married?

Meier: I think so. We knew that we were to be activated.

DePue: Okay, Donald, here's the next question: Did that have anything to do with the timing of the marriage?

Meier: Actually, yes. We moved it up. We were going to get married probably in February, but because we were going to go into the active duty, we got married in November. Yes, yes, to answer your question. (laughs)

DePue: Pretty close to Thanksgiving, huh?

Meier: Yes, actually, if I can joke about it, we were married on Armistice Day, (DePue laughs) the eleventh of November; it makes it real easy to remember: the eleventh month, the eleventh day, and fifty-one! All ones, so…

DePue: So, when you celebrate Veterans' Day today, you're really celebrating your anniversary?

Meier: Yes. At the same time.

DePue: Okay. Now, I think you mentioned earlier today that you graduated top in your class from the school in San Antonio, from Fort Sam Houston, I would think?

Meier: Yes. And I suspect that that's why I got chosen for the job that I got in Korea because the way I would understand is that the people in Korea requested someone to take over that job, and the thing to do would be to go to the school where they're trained and get someone.

DePue: Mm-hmm, okay. Well, let's talk about that assignment. From what I understand, you were assigned to your unit in Korea while you were still in the United States, is that right?

Meier: I think so.

DePue: What was the name of that unit?

Meier: It's Far East Command Liaison Detachment. It was part of the Eighty-Two-Fortieth AU – Army unit.

DePue: The Eighty-Two-Fortieth Company?

Meier: No, that would be a division—or not a division, but a… I'm not sure. I'm not sure.

DePue: I read a little article on it and I don't know that I'm sure. It just said the Eighty-Two-Fortieth, without any kind of unit size connected to it. Tell us about what the Far East Command Liaison Detachment was—what did it do?

Meier: Well, it was a unit that was formed to make better use of the North Koreans who were willing to fight the Communists that had recently taken over North Korea. These were North Korean patriots who still wanted to get rid of the Communist invaders, and so they were willing and eager to fight. Because they were fighting the Communists in North Korea, it kind of put them on the same side as the Americans and the South Koreans, so they would, well…it's interesting in that in Korea…

Let's go back a little bit: Korea was **never** a North and South: that was something that came up after World War II. President Roosevelt and Joseph

Stalin decided to divide Korea into a North and South for whatever advantage, and so they did. They drew a line across and said the thirty-eighth parallel—it's about in the middle—so that was the line. Before that, from about 1905 to 1945, Japan had ruled Korea. Before that, Korea had been an independent nation off and on, with many wars between, well, Japan and China and Korea. But anyway, the Koreans do have a nationality: they have their own language, their own alphabet, and in those things, they are ahead of their Chinese neighbors, and they're ahead of the Japanese.

DePue: The Hangul alphabet is what I think you're talking about.

Meier: Uh-huh. I'm not familiar with that name, but they do have an alphabet, and they do have a lot of things. Of course, I got this information from the Koreans I talked to; they would be prejudiced and put the best foot forward, and so…whatever. I'm not an expert on that.

DePue: Were these people that your unit's going to be working with from North Korea, would they have been soldiers or would they have been civilians who just decided to go back and fight against the Communists?

Meier: Okay, that I don't know for sure. I know some had been civilians, and I'm suspicious that some were soldiers. However, they divorced themselves from the North Koreans, and they were separate from the South Koreans.

DePue: I think what I'd like to do here is to get you to Korea, and then we can talk about the mission and the kind of things that these partisans, were doing in a more concrete way because the other unique aspect of your story is where exactly you ended up in Korea. So, do you remember shipping to Korea itself?

Meier: Yes. Our ship went from California, in the San Francisco Bay area—Camp Stoneman, I think—and we boarded the ship, the *General Meigs*, which was a troop ship. They had, I think, three thousand troops on the ship. I remember it very well. I did get seasick. The bunks were real close together—they're not a bunk, they're like a hammock. If I laid on my side, my shoulder would hit the guy above me, and if I laid on my back and tried to read a book, it was too close to my eyes and I couldn't see it. So, not a fun trip, but we got over there. Of course, the sailors that were running the ship were as helpful as they could be in putting us on. They would tell us, "Well, we're going to stop and pick up mail in Hawaii." Well, we didn't go anywhere near Hawaii, and I must have looked homesick because they would tell me something that wasn't true, so… That's kind of funny as I look back, but we did have… It was quite a ride.

We ate twice a day, and the line, of course, with three thousand men was endless. Everything was cooked in those huge boilers that troop ships have. I remember the eggs were cooked so hard that the shells broke and they were not good to look at, but we ate them. Quite a few guys were seasick, and they'd be running around moaning and groaning, and… It was quite a ride.

We came into the harbor at Yokohama, and that was interesting. I went out on the deck, and here was a Japanese boat—one of those real long like an extra-large canoe—and this man was standing in the back with a long pole that they work back and forth to propel them, and he had the big straw hat on. It was just so typical of what we had seen as pictures of Japanese boatmen, and so that was kind of thrilling. Then, we got off of course in Japan and went to our location there, and then we went to the airport. This was all pretty new to me, having orders to go here and there. Then the airplane took us to Korea from Japan.

DePue: What was your impression of Yokohama? Was there still a lot of war damage that you were seeing?

Meier: No. No, I really don't remember a thing about that.

DePue: Okay. You flew from Tokyo then to Seoul, is that correct?

Meier: That's right, that's right. Our unit in Seoul then was housed in an old Methodist missionary building, I remember that. One of the first nights, a couple of the soldiers got drunk and they were chasing each other with guns. I thought, My gosh, I'm going to get shot before I get into what I'm supposed to do in Korea. But anyway, that went away. Finally, after being there in Seoul several days, I got orders to go on this plane to go out to our airport on our island of Paengnyong-Do. The airports were all numbered—I think K-47 was one of them, and K-53 was another—but anyway, it was about a little over an hour flight out there, and if it would be fogged in, why, then they would have to turn around and go back. I think we only did that one time.

DePue: Let's talk about the location of this island, then. First of all, when did you get to Korea itself? Is that about October of '52?

Meier: Yes. Yes, about October of '52.

DePue: Okay. And the island—I've got a map in front of you here—it's pretty tough to see the island.

Meier: Yeah, it's right on the thirty-eighth parallel.

DePue: There's a cluster of three islands just south of the thirty-eighth parallel: the northernmost island is kind of a horseshoe shape, and it's the largest of the three islands. Is that Paengnyong-Do?

Meier: That's Paengnyong-Do, right.

DePue: And we should mention, *Do* in Korean is island, right?

Meier: Island, right.

DePue: Okay. And what's the island that's to the south of that, then?

Meier: That's Taecheong-Do. And then the third one, I'm not sure. There's several more of them; actually, that coastline there is just dotted with islands, and the main island there, Paengnyong-Do… I never had a map while I was over there and I'm kind of a map person; I like to study maps, and that wasn't my job to know where I was at. I just knew that we landed on a beach. The sand on the beach was the type that when the water goes out of it, it becomes very hard, very stable. So the airplane could land on the beach, and it was kind of a quick landing because there was a hill at each end of the beach, but the pilots were skilful. The pilot would tell us about the flight before we took off, and that was kind of interesting. He said, "Well, if we have to ditch, why, you have this flotation jacket." He then reminded us that if he thought we were going to get shot down, Why, he wouldn't go either. So, that made us feel better that way…we knew that he (laughs) realized that he was involved, too.

So, it was interesting. They told us that we were in a real secret outfit, so I didn't know if when I got to the island, some people would motion to me from behind the bushes or what. But we got there, then of course everybody knew what was going on. It's kind of strange, all these Koreans were around there the Korean drivers were driving the vehicles, but somehow I got to our quarters where the Americans were stationed, and it was about a good half-mile from the beach.

DePue: What was the size of the unit, this American unit you were assigned to?

Meier: Well, there were about ten or fifteen of us on the island.

DePue: Just ten or fifteen Americans? That was it?

Meier: Yes, yes. There was a major in charge…I think he was promoted to light colonel, but anyway, a couple of captains and three or four lieutenants, and some of us—sergeants, one or two privates, maybe. But we had help. We had hired Koreans to help cook in the kitchen and drive the trucks.

DePue: In reading about the Far East Command Liaison Detachment—that's a mouthful—the analogy that was made, and it makes perfect sense, is that this was kind of the precursor to the Special Forces. Of course, [President John F.] Kennedy formed the Special Forces during his administration about ten years later. But what you guys were doing, from what I understand, was training these North Korean Partisans who would then go slip back into North Korea and conduct raids and things like that. Is that your understanding of the time?

Meier: That's right, and I didn't get in on much of it. One thing I did catch was that the Partisans did not want the Americans to go with them. In the army, some of the American men are gung-ho, if that's an (laughs) understandable expression, and they wanted to go in on these raids. Of course, the Partisans did not want them along because if they were captured, the Partisans could

mingle with the townsfolk or the locals and maybe go undetected, whereas if they had an American with them, they were dead because the American would give it away that this was an enemy operation.

DePue: Were these Partisans wearing a South Korean or American uniform?

Meier: No. I don't think they had uniforms. Probably pieces of American uniform—well, that's all they had to wear, and they just depended on getting into the country and destroying something, and then running back and getting on their boats and getting back to the island.

DePue: How far away is this island from the mainland? It looks like about twenty, thirty miles?

Meier: Well, I don't know. We're going to have to check that out and see.

DePue: Well, it's a good distance. The other thing that amazes me is, you know, we talked before, you mentioned before that the thirty-eighth parallel was the peacetime border between North and South Korea, and this island is **just** south of the thirty-eighth parallel. But the battle lines are well south of the thirty-eighth parallel, so you guys are (laughs)—this island is essentially well-behind enemy lines.

Meier: Yes, yes.

DePue: Why weren't the North Koreans able to control these three islands?

Meier: Because they did not have the airpower. The air force that the Americans had there was the real saving thing. You just can't control a country if you don't have the control of the air, and so that was our best thing.

DePue: Can you tell us a little bit more about who these partisans were, what they were doing before the war, why they had decided to follow this route?

Meier: Yes, I think it was mainly, they were—they told us—businessmen, community leaders, people who owned property, and they wanted to regain their right to their property. They were probably educated people and leaders before who had been opposed to the Communist government taking over North Korea. And so they fled, and some of them went on the mainland, fled south, and some of them ended up on our island. I don't know how that worked, but that's the way it was.

DePue: Had they fled years before the actual war started, or did they escape only after the war started, do you know?

Meier: I don't know. I don't know how long some of them had been associated with these—they called them donkey units. We had, well, Donkey Four and

Donkey Seven and Donkey Three were the name and numbers of different units that we were working with.

DePue: Is that a bastardization of some Korean term, or…?

Meier: I don't know. Tagnagi was the word in Korean.

DePue: Tagnagi?

Meier: Tagnagi and that was the… I don't know where they got the donkey thing, so…(laughs)…

DePue: These partisans you're talking about, (laughs) what they were doing had to be one of the most dangerous things that anybody, any South Korean or any Korean, could do at that time. They had to be incredibly dedicated to what they were doing.

Meier: Soldiers of fortune comes to my mind. Young men who have no job, have no place to go, if they can join a military unit in a country in a war situation like that, I'm sure they joined just to get a meal tomorrow, to get a meal today, have something to eat and a place to stay. I'm sure some of them had very little concern about the politics or the world situation, and I'm sure we're facing that now today in the countries that we're having police actions in.

DePue: Going back to Seoul, what was your impression when you first got to Seoul, in terms of what you were seeing there? Because this is a city that, by that time, had been fought through three or four times.

Meier: There was a lot of damage, a lot of buildings, well, burned out, and the capitol building had been burned out. So, the windows were gone; you just saw the masonry framework of the building. The roofs had been burned off. So a lot of rubble lay around in the streets and the lots…

DePue: Can you describe what Paengnyong Do was like at that time? the geography, especially.

Meier: Well, it had several—well, it looked liked mountains to me—big hills, anyway.

DePue: Coming from Geneseo, it doesn't take much to be a good size hill, does it?

Meier: Well, that's right, but probably they were up—oh, maybe one of them was up a thousand feet above sea level—but more like five hundred feet above sea level. The hill right behind our hospital was at least up five hundred feet above sea level.

DePue: Was it an agricultural island? Did they have enough land to have a decent agricultural society?

Meier: I think so. There was quite a bit of farming going on. Well, at one time, we were able to buy potatoes from the locals and our mess sergeant served fresh potatoes. I know there were rice fields; there were rice fields and wheat fields, soy bean fields. I was able to get a number of pictures of agricultural activities. Planting the rice, and of course, that was the main thing.

DePue: Okay. You mentioned that you flew in on this airstrip that was actually just the sand on the beach, is that right?

Meier: Yes. Yes, the sand, when the water was on it, it was water, and when the water and the tide went down, the beach was exposed and soaking wet, but so hard that even an airplane hardly made a track in it.

DePue: What was the size of the tides that you had there?

Meier: Very high tides, as much as thirty feet, from low tide to high tide. I remember one of the units there, I think the air force, they had a small crane, a rubber-tired crane down on the beach, and they somehow had trouble with it. The tide came in, and went clear over the top of the boom, which would have been at least twenty-five feet off the ground. So that was quite an experience; the one morning going out to the hospital, I could see just a little bit of the boom sticking out of the water. The tide provided a means by which the ships could come in. We had those ships, LSTs [Landing Ship—Tanks], I think they are, that the front end of the ship opens up and a ramp comes down, and anyway, they would run up on the beach at high tide, and then as the tide went down, they would be grounded. They'd open up the doors, and that's how we got our supplies. We could back a truck into the boat or at least go down to the boat, and they would load. We took in all kinds of military supplies and that, plus rice. Possibly our military supplies might have come in more by airplane, but I really don't know. But I know that rice came in on a ship.

DePue: Were some of those supplies then supporting the local population on the island?

Meier: In that we hired quite a number of the local people to work for us, and we paid them in rice. At the end of the day, they would come by. They would have a piece of cloth maybe four feet square, and they would hold it; the person paying would dump a box of rice into that, and they would fold up the corners like a little knapsack, and that was their pay for the day. They would go home then, and if they could, they would use some of the rice and sell some for whatever else they needed. So, that was our means of having money. We had, of course, the military scrip over there; nobody had any U.S. dollars, we just had the military scrip. If the Koreans could get hold of the military scrip, why, they could use it to trade with. Otherwise, the Korean money, the won, was very inflated, and there was just—took a bushel basketful of their dollars to buy anything.

DePue: They were happy, though, getting the rice instead of any hard cash?

Meier: Oh, yes, yes. The rice was what they wanted, they could turn that into whatever they wanted.

DePue: Okay. I want to spend a little bit more time, even though I know you didn't work this side of the operation much, talking about what these raids or missions into North Korea were about. Then we'll get into what you specifically did, and spend quite a bit of time on that. Can you describe, in your understanding, what a typical mission would be with these Korean partisans?

Meier: Okay, and I didn't know exactly what they did, and I didn't participate in the raids, but they would come back and say that they had destroyed certain things. Maybe they destroyed even some ox carts or some vehicles, maybe, or a bridge. Things like that. They would come back, then, with some of the men were wounded; they would have, like, bullet wounds in their legs or arms. If they lost any men, I wasn't aware of it. That was not my job to know those things, and so I didn't. But I did know that they came back with men who were wounded. On one occasion they took in three men that were going to stay and be spies for awhile. I shook their hands and wished them well!

DePue: Did they ever express to you their opinions about the North Korean Communist government?

Meier: No.

DePue: No?

Meier: Not at that time. I did make friends with a theological person, student; he was a chaplain in the North Korean—in this group, He came to visit us several times in Geneseo after that, and of course, he then would talk about the North Korean government. He had come from way up north in North Korea, and he had been across the border into China and everything. He had been in jail in North Korea, and finally escaped and got into this group. He was with us for a while, and finally, then, why, he left and went back to Seoul. I did keep in touch with him after I got back to the States, and that's quite a long story, too, but…

DePue: What kind of things was he telling you about what was going on in North Korea under Communist rule?

Meier: Oh, the hardships: how they… well, if you opposed, if you voiced any opposition, why, you were apt to be thrown into jail. They had very little justice as we know. We in this country are just so familiar with a system of courts and justice that we just can't understand how these governments operate, where the military is in charge; that's just totally foreign to people in the United States. You just can't understand it.

DePue: Let's go and spend some time then talking about your specific job. Tell us exactly what you were doing once you landed on this little island.

Meier: Well, they had decided to set up a hospital to give immediate care to these people—these partisans—who had been in on raids into the North Korea. They had selected a site there on the island that wasn't too far from the beach or the airstrip, and they had this building. They were putting up another building, and well, we worked to get these buildings set up and organized. We had a sterilizing autoclave or some such thing to sterilize the surgical instruments, and had a bunch of medicines and treatments, and they had one doctor and an assistant doctor ready to go to work there.

DePue: Were these Koreans?

Meier: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Partisans. And some nurses. These were all North Koreans who had escaped the Communist government. So we had this hospital complex with four or five buildings, and it was quite interesting.

DePue: Now, you've showed us a lot of pictures and we're going to scan some of these into the collection. The buildings that you're describing look to me like a couple of Quonset huts and a couple of other smaller buildings?

Meier: Yes, yes. There were two Quonset buildings and another square metal building—two of them, I think—and one of them was a tent because at one time, we had as many as thirty in-patients. I don't know how the cooks managed to feed them, and of course they didn't get much nursing care and they didn't stay very long. If a soldier or partisan came back severely injured, we, of course, sent them on to Seoul on the next flight that had room for them, but sometimes it was foggy and that and the flights couldn't go out.

We didn't do too many surgical procedures. I do remember one time they amputated a leg that was having gangrene setting in, and we amputated that—the doctor did. There were other medical facilities on the island, I should say. There was an American doctor in, I think, the air force unit that was there, so I didn't do anything with my fellow Americans.

DePue: This hospital that you're working at—you mentioned that it had North Korean doctors and nurses there—how many Americans worked in it?

Meier: Well, just me, and then after a while I got another American helper.

DePue: What was his name?

Meier: Goldbloom. Abraham Goldbloom.

DePue: Well, that sounds pretty Jewish. (laughs)

Meier: He was, yeah, very much Jewish. Very, very intelligent kid. He had worked as a pharmacist some, and so he was knowledgeable about medicine and medical procedures, so that was real good because my medical training was very minimal. (laughs)

DePue: What did you do, then?

Meier: My job was to, oh, answer questions that the people had, and to keep them supplied. I would make the requisition to order different medicines or treatments, and they would come out from Seoul. Well, then they sent out these vaccinations and things for, I think, diphtheria, and, well, small pox. So at one time, then, that was my job, to go out and give these vaccinations and shots to the different soldiers; I did that and left this Private or Corporal Goldbloom, then he was the only American at the hospital. Well, things just seemed to run pretty good. The kitchen: they were self-sufficient, they bought from the local food vendors, we could call them, but they were women that brought fish and different things up from the town.

DePue: Were all of these North Koreans who were at this hospital, who were partisans, were they being paid by the American government?

Meier: I'm sure they were, and whether any of them got more than rice, I don't know. I was told that one of them had a jeep; our commander couldn't understand how they got a jeep.

DePue: Your American commander?

Meier: Our American commander could not understand how they got a jeep. (both laugh) Those are mysteries that go unsolved, but anyway, those things happen. There's a lot of trading, bartering with this rice.

DePue: Were some of the people working at the hospital islanders themselves, or were these all people who had fled the mainland?

Meier: Some of each. Some of the cook's help and some of the carpenter help and just maintenance help I'm sure had lived on the island, but some of them were displaced persons from North Korea.

DePue: Well, tell me your impressions of the Koreans: you, of all the people I've interviewed about the Korean War, by far had the most direct experience working with Koreans, because it sounds to me like there wasn't anybody else there for a lot of times, just you and a bunch of Koreans that you were working with.

Meier: That's right. That's right.

DePue: Did either you or Goldbloom speak the language?

Meier: No, no. They tried to teach us a few words and we did learn a few words. I wish that I had learned more words. We learned the Korean song, "Arirang." One of my friends I visited just a year ago out in California sang the whole thing! He had learned it from the Koreans, but I didn't really learn it very well, so I will not sing it for you now. (both laugh) But it was kind of a Korean national, just a friendly song, not a real patriotic thing. It's kind of a folk-tune song.

DePue: But again, tell us a little bit more about your impressions of Korean people and their culture.

Meier: Of course, I would have to say that they were friendly. They were friendly to me because, well, their livelihood depended on me, so maybe that's why they were friendly. But they were. Just ordinary people. They say if you have a friend it's because you're a friend. But anyway, we got along real well with them. Some of them teased me which I found a little strange because, after all, I was an American soldier, (laughs) and…

DePue: What were they teasing you about?

Meier: Oh, well, I was fat, for one thing. All of them were very thin. I guess that's the only thing.

DePue: Well, if what little I know about the Korean culture, that would almost be a sign of respect at the time, that you're a successful person, that you are able to be so wealthy that you are a little bit fat. Does that sound about right?

Meier: Yes. I didn't see any fat Koreans. (laugh)

DePue: Tell us about the food.

Meier: Oh, I loved it. I would eat with them at noon because it was, oh, like three quarters of a mile from our hospital to the village where most of these people stayed—a good share of them—and it was that far back to our American compound where I could have gone back every noon to eat with the Americans. I did go back quite a few times. But quite a few times I stayed at the hospital and ate the Korean food. They had rice as a basic thing, and then they had side dishes. So you might have a large bowl of rice and three or four or five side dishes. One of them might be a real thin soup, one might be oysters, one might be a fish product. Just different things.

DePue: Well, you haven't mentioned kimchi.

Meier: Kimchi! Oh, I loved it, and they all made fun of me for that because so many Americans come back and they don't like kimchi, but I did. I thought it was good, and I've gotten some since I've been back here. One time I showed my slides and gave a talk to our local Kiwanis club. I made sure that there was a

small dish of kimchi on every table so that the guys could have a sample. Most of them didn't take any, but a few of them nibbled a little bit.

DePue: Well, tell us what kimchi is. Can you describe it for us?

Meier: Well, it's kind of a cabbage that's fermented, like a cabbage pickle. They would take these—they called them radishes—but it's partly a leafy thing, like a lettuce that has the stems in, like bok choi? Is that a lettuce?

DePue: Yeah, I think that's their term for what we would call Chinese cabbage.

Meier: Yeah, okay. They'd take that and they'd put it in a big container—and sometimes in the ground, like a huge crock—and it ferments for a while, and then they dig it out. Maybe like garlic, it affects your breath, and so the Americans would complain that they could smell the kimchi on the breath of the Koreans that worked around them or near them.

DePue: Well, the kimchi that I've eaten has tons of garlic, like you say, mixed in with this cabbage usually, but also lots of red pepper as well. It's a very hot dish, for American taste. Growing up the son of Germans on an American farm, eating eggs and chicken and beef and pork and everything else, the diet had to be kind of (laughs) on the opposite end of the spectrum, completely different from what you had grown up with. Is that about right?

Meier: That's right. It was completely different. We had, like, army chow in the morning and in the evening; of course, that's army chow, which would be strictly American. I like a variety of food, so I enjoyed it. I have to say, I enjoyed it.

DePue: So, you didn't have to completely immerse yourself in Korean food, then? You can get American chow every day as well?

Meier: Yes, yes.

DePue: Was there any alcohol that they drank over there that you recall?

Meier: I don't know if the Koreans had alcohol. I know the Americans did. As a medic I had access to medical alcohol, which is also (laughs) known as drinkable alcohol. So, when the commanding officer, the major or colonel would have a party, why, I was instructed to bring some alcohol, and they mixed that with fruit juice. The cook had different fruit juices and I would bring the alcohol. I do not drink at all, so, well, the Americans teased me about that, but it keeps one out of trouble.

DePue: You mentioned before you had an interpreter: tell us about your interpreter.

Meier: Okay., his name was Kwon. I suppose he was in his early twenties, like I was. He was very athletic. He was with me all the time that I was at the hospital and when I would go on the boats.

DePue: Do you know how he learned English?

Meier: No, I don't. I don't know where he learned it. Most of the Koreans that I worked with could speak a little bit, although some of them, like those who worked in the kitchen, they knew very little; the labor-type people with us, they knew very little. They couldn't speak English at all.

DePue: How about the doctors and nurses? You already said that they're North Koreans. Where were they getting their education, do you know?

Meier: No, I don't know. Apparently, the doctor went to a medical school somewhere, probably in North Korea. The nurses were from somewhere in North Korea.

DePue: What kind of casualties did you work with, then?

Meier: Well, the one fellow had his foot blown off so that he had a stub that was getting gangrenous; that's a more serious problem. Some men would come in with old, old wounds that had been healed up for a long time; they had no service for veterans, so they would just paint some Merthiolate[1] on it and send them away. We got some men who had burns, serious burns, on their face from explosions in these boats. They worked in the engine room down below; those were very much filled with explosive vapors, apparently, and we got in several whose faces were terribly burned. We sent them on to Seoul, to the hospital. One or two of them came back then, maybe a couple of months later, and it looked like they had a whole new face. The skin on their face was just like a baby's skin, all new (laughs) and not disfigured like some burn cases, but just renewed.

DePue: Do you remember any especially sad incidents while you were there?

Meier: Well, we did get in two American bodies from Cho Do, which is an island to the north; these two Americans were killed, and they… There's always stories of "Bed Check Charlie," which was the name for a plane that would come from the enemy's side; they'd come around, flying around, and sometimes they would drop some bombs. It got to where the soldiers had disregarded this, and they did not go to the bomb shelter. They just thought, Well, this is just another bed check. But these two men were killed. They could not get a flight out with the bodies right away, so they transferred them by boat to my facility. So we had them in our hospital compound, and I remember them very clearly. I looked at them very clearly, and the one had a huge wound in his

[1] Merthiolate was a liquid antiseptic product that was commonly used at that time for basic first aid for minor wounds.

head, and the other one, his shoulder was just completely destroyed from shrapnel, I guess. I often thought, Gee, I wish I could tell their parents that we took care of them.

I had someone stand guard by their bodies as they were at our place. I do remember that the one, apparently, had been placed in on a stretcher immediately after the bomb fell, because the stretcher was filled with his blood. The fabric in the stretcher apparently is waterproof, and so there he lay in his blood. It kind of reminds you that the soldiers do give their blood, and the blood is so important. We have so much in our body, and for a healthy young person to suddenly have a whole bunch of blood vessels cut, would bleed out a lot of it. And so, those were sad.

Those were Americans. I wished that I could tell their parents that, "Hey, I saw them and we did this or that." But I resisted the temptation to put my name and address into their clothing because I feared, you know, that that would be against military regulations, and so I didn't do that. Out in Washington one time, I did run into an American who had been there and knew about those two people, but then I lost track of him, so…

DePue: This island, Cho Do Island, you're talking about, that's even farther north from yours.

Meier: Yes.

DePue: Must have been about thirty to fifty miles north, but that was under American control as well?

Meier: Yes, that was under American control because we had an airport there.

DePue: Was that this one right here? Probably hard to tell on this map, but…

Meier: I thought it was up further, but it's up there somewhere, yeah.

DePue: Well, and that's kind of a piece of the Korean War that I lost sight of, that that far north of where the main American lines were, these islands just off the west coast of North Korea were under American and South Korean control. Any humorous incidents that stick with you after all these years?

Meier: Oh, yes. Hmm. Well, as I did just a little bit of medical treatment myself. One time, the first sergeant's dog was sick, and so he brought it down and I did give it a shot of penicillin. Otherwise, I didn't do any treatment. One time, a Korean boy came in with a tick in his ear; I warmed up some olive oil and poured it in his ear to get the tick to let go and come floating out. One time, we needed a can to heat some water, and the only can that I could find was a five-gallon can of tea, and so I suggested dumping out the tea to get the can. The Koreans went berserk as they gathered up containers to put the tea in, so that I (laughs) didn't dump it on the ground.

DePue: You'd mentioned before your interpreter, and you've got a couple of pictures of you and the interpreter with an a-frame[2] on. He was a pretty strong guy, was he?

Meier: Yes, he was strong. In several places, there were parallel bars set up, like you would have in a gymnasium over here. He would jump on the parallel bars and he could stand on his hands then, and he was able to have me get on his a-frame and then raise up. The Koreans were good about—they had good strength in their knees. They could bend their knees and squat down practically on the ground and stay that way for hours at a time. The mechanic that worked on the trucks, he would get up on the fender with his shoes, and bend his knees and squat down. Where we would stand on the ground, he would have his feet up on the fender and then reach down in and work on the engine, maybe check the spark plugs or something, so that was pretty amazing. We certainly wouldn't do that.

Some other things that are maybe on the humorous side. I remember one day, the inspector general was going to come by, and the motor sergeant was drunk. So the first sergeant told me to take the motor sergeant in my truck and just get lost; he said, "You take him and you drive down somewhere and just get out of here for a couple of hours."

DePue: Is this an American first sergeant an American motor sergeant?

Meier: Yes, this was American. And so, I did that. Another time, okay, on our island besides us, there were some American marines—there were some America air force, and the American marines. One day they brought back to our—we stayed in a Quonset, the Americans—and they brought back an American who was drunk. They'd found him in town and brought him back, and said, "Who will look after this guy?" Well, I was a sergeant, he was a sergeant, and he was kind of a friend of mine. I said, "Well, I'll take responsibility." He had a pistol—we carried pistols, .45s, I guess they were—and so they gave me his pistol, and then said, "Okay," and then the marines—officers, like MPs—they left. Then the sergeant who had been drinking said, "Give me my pistol back." That was quite a decision for me, but I gave it to him, and he said, "Thanks for nothing," of course. (laughs) But…that's a case where you don't know if you hand them the pistol, if they're going to take it and shoot you, or what you're going to do, but…

Another time, another guy in our Quonset was playing with a rifle and he was seeing if he could put an American shell in it. I don't know if it was a Japanese rifle or where he found it. He discharged the rifle and it went out over my head, somewhere out through the building. Of course, then the phone rang immediately, and the commanding officer wanted to know what

[2] A frame of bamboo or wood used for carrying loads on one's back, the equivalent of metal-framed backpacks of America.

happened. The guy that had been playing with this rifle said, "I think that's for me," so he went and answered the phone. (laughs) He explained to the commanding officer why there had been an explosion from firing a weapon.

DePue: You mentioned there were air raids, if you want to call them that. Bed Check Charlie was flying missions over Cho Do Island. Were there ever any air raids on your island?

Meier: Yes, there were I'd say three or four times they came by. This one time, one of our men who had just been moved in was there, and he got terribly upset, nervous, as we were in our bomb shelter. We did have a bomb shelter and we were all in there. He was very upset, so the officer did send him back to Seoul because a person who is terribly frightened from some military action like that is not a real asset to the program.

DePue: This is one of the North Koreans you're talking about?

Meier: No, this is an American. An American soldier who had just come to our unit.

DePue: Had he seen some combat someplace else in the country?

Meier: No, no. I think he was probably new to Korea and this was frightening to him. So, anyway, the Americans had a heart and it was the practical thing to do, too.

DePue: Did you spend the entire year there on Paengnyong Island?

Meier: Paengnyong Do, okay. For one month after I'd been there, well, almost ready to come home, I was transferred down to Anmin Do because apparently, our organization had decided that that was a place to send a bunch of refugees. These North Koreans who were not partisans but they were Koreans and they had come from the north. We were more or less responsible to find a place for them to go, and so we had set them up on this island, Anmin Do, which was like a hundred-some miles south of us. They were there and they needed some medical attention, and I was to divide up my medical staff. (laughs) So I took the assistant doctor and one other fellow and myself, and we went down there.

There were some other Americans there, but just three or four, so there's probably, well, four or five Americans on this island, and we were trying to take care of these refugees. They were the poorest of the poor, and they were living in just tents that they had put together out of scraps of plastic or canvas or anything. They lived along the beach and they survived eating seaweed, dried seaweed, and I guess they got some rice, occasionally. But, we went down there and that was interesting. These two men, I took them from our compound and situation there in Paengnyong Do—two Partisans—and I said, "We have to go to this other island tomorrow, so bring all your stuff because you may not be getting back for a long time." They came the next day and they had like a knapsack about the size of a basketball, and I said, "Hey,"

I said, "You are to bring everything because you won't be coming back." "Well," they said, "this is everything we own." That was interesting because it was everything they owned in a little knapsack the size of a basketball or less.

DePue: Now, you described your own growing up during the Depression, small farm and being very poor: did that give you a new impression of what poor actually was?

Meier: Yes. We were rich compared to these people—they were absolutely poor, absolutely had nothing. They could not get a job. Probably the South Koreans didn't trust them and didn't need them and didn't want them. They were just totally, totally outcasts and refugees.

DePue: A couple of the pictures we looked at before we started the interview looked like you were making boat trips back and forth between a couple of the islands. Was that the case?

Meier: We did make some boat trips. I mentioned before, it was my job to vaccinate these people, and so that's when I made boat trips to some of these other islands. One island we went to was so close to the shore that—

DePue: To the mainland, you mean?

Meier: —yes, to the mainland, that we could easily see it, and they said, I think, that you could possibly swim there from where we were.

DePue: You're talking about looking right into what was North Korean-controlled territory, then?

Meier: Yes, yes. It was right over there, and that night—and it just happened to be a May Day. If you're familiar at all, May Day is a distress cry, but it was the May Day eve the night before May Day, and they shelled us with mortar shells. One of the other men with us, he thought I must have been hit, but I said I wasn't. "Well," he said, "that shell went off right next to you," but I wasn't aware of that. But it was a different experience, in seeing how close to the ground you can get. Of course, we didn't have time to dig a foxhole or anything. We just went out and…well, the shells were landing around us, but they did quit—but they did shoot off a shell that exploded and gave light—

DePue: An illumination round?

Meier: Yes, and that was quite an experience. So, when I sing about the "rockets' red glare" and "the bombs bursting in air," I remember that because it did, it just turned the night into day, really.

DePue: Another one of the islands that was just south of where you were was—I'm probably going to mispronounce this—Taech'ong Do?

Meier: Taech'ong Do, yeah. That was a…vacation island for the wealthy Koreans; they could go out there to vacation. It had beautiful sand beaches, and it was an interesting place. Well, there are just a couple of things that I remember about it, and one was that my interpreter told me not to go over a certain hill on that island, Don't go to the other side of that hill. I asked him why, and he wouldn't tell me; to this day, I don't know what was over there, but apparently, there was something over there that I shouldn't see. Then, on another occasion, I was walking somewhere (laughs) on the island, and here comes another American. I saw him coming and he was dressed in just civilian clothes, and I said, "Hi, how are you doing?" And he replied, "Fine, how are you doing?" I figured I didn't have the authority to stop him because I figured he was probably of a higher rank; if he was in the CIA or any of that stuff, why, he probably had a higher rank than I did, so I just didn't mess with him. (both laugh) And he did not mess with me.

DePue: So many of the Americans I talked to had experiences with orphans, because the country was just filled with these destitute orphans with nowhere to go. Did you have any experiences?

Meier: Yes, as I rode around the island, I came to an orphanage; they had a couple. The Koreans were taking care of these kids, and they were entirely Korean kids. Looked to be from, oh, six to ten years old. On one of the occasions, I had some clothing and materials that I had received from our church back in Geneseo, Illinois, and I took them there. They got some of the kids out and they dressed them up in these clothes some of my relatives had included and had sent along. It was fun to see them dressed up in American clothes, and I did feel bad when I ran out. The box that my wife had sent only held so much, so when the box was empty, why, there were no more clothes for the kids.

DePue: Well, in mentioning your wife and the kindness of your church back in Geneseo, how were you able to keep in touch with your family?

Meier: Okay, there was mail, and of course, the mail was free. Mail would come in every time an airplane would land on our island.

DePue: What was the delay time between when she mailed it and when you received it, and vice-versa?

Meier: Probably five or six days. It wasn't too bad; it was pretty good, really.

DePue: So, these must have been flown overseas, not shipped.

Meier: I'm sure they were. The military takes care of that; they do try to get the mail through as fast as they can.

DePue: Did you ever have a chance to call home?

Meier: No. No, overseas calling—I don't think that started then, yet.

DePue: I know that by the time you were there—and this is the last year of the Korean War—most soldiers got a furlough, about the mid-tour leave, if you will. Did you have that?

Meier: Yeah, known as R&R [Rest and Relaxation]. I did go on R&R and went to Japan. And I have a cousin there; she and her husband were missionaries in Japan, and they were living in Kyoto at that time. So I took my R&R, I flew into Tokyo, and I caught a train to Kyoto, and got to Kyoto and then I visited with my cousin and her husband and their children there in Kyoto. That was a different kind of R&R than a lot of the American soldiers had. There was a lot of, oh, bad stories and that about R&R, and I won't go into that. I think you've probably all heard enough of that! (laughs)

DePue: Bad in terms of maybe the Americans didn't always behave themselves on R&R?

Meier: Exactly. You've heard them.

DePue: Well, staying with the missionary family, maybe you had less opportunity to get yourself into trouble.

Meier: Right, right, and I was glad for that.

DePue: I suspect Joanne was as well.

Meier: Well, probably so, yeah.

DePue: Let's get you back into Korea. What do you think was the toughest part about being in Korea for that year—the toughest thing to deal with?

Meier: Oh, boy. I was so fortunate to have this job I had. As I look at my pictures from those days, I must have just been on vacation. I can't think of anything that was tough, except being away from my family here in Illinois. Other than that, I had really no problems. Oh…I did have a problem with the first sergeant when I first got there. I had come from a national guard unit, and back then, the national guard was regarded as, um, let's face it, draft-dodgers and that. I admit that I joined the National Guard to avoid being drafted. I carried that with me, then; my MOS or my number was National Guard, NG and a number.

The first sergeant was regular army, RA. He was regular army, and he had little use for the National Guard people and it showed. The captain that was in charge of my project told me to see the first sergeant and get certain things; I had to tell the captain that the first sergeant didn't think much of me, and therefore, I probably wouldn't get supplies from him that the captain suggested. So, the captain had to call in the first sergeant and tell him himself that I was to receive certain things. But otherwise…no, I really—I was just fortunate every time I turned around over there.

DePue: You mentioned this run-in with the first sergeant. What did you think in terms of the other officers and the NCOs that you worked with?

Meier: They were fine, fine people. I ran around with Sergeant Metasik; he shows up on a number of those pictures that I have had taken over there. Okay, since I've been home, I have made contact, through this Classmates thing on the computer, contacted Sergeant Lizardo. He lives in California; he stayed in and made the military a career. And then, I knew a Sergeant Russell Kelly. We visited Sergeant Kelly out in New Jersey here, a couple of years ago. Then I had one contact with another fellow. But those two men, Kelly and Lizardo, I have been able to keep in touch; I'll send them a Christmas card now, and so we could talk over old times because they were there and I was there. I also keep in touch with Corporal Goldbloom.

DePue: You were there, you mentioned earlier—not in this recording but when we were talking before this interview—until September of 1953, and that's when you rotated back. My question, then, is with the armistice being signed between North and South Korea, and between the United Nations and China as well, in July of 1953—you were there are the end of the war. I wonder if you recall the feelings that these North Korean partisans had about that event?

Meier: No. I don't know. I can only imagine that they were somewhat disappointed that the war was over because that eliminated any hope of them returning to their native North Korea and regaining their property, their homes, their farms, or anything up there in North Korea. They were then permanently locked out, eliminated.

DePue: Do you know what happened with those people between July and September, when you left? Did they stay on the island, or did they start to go elsewhere?

Meier: I would have to say that I probably left first, and they were all still there when I left. Where they went from then on, I don't know.

DePue: How would you describe their mood, in those last couple of months that you were there?

Meier: I really don't know. Well, they knew that when the Americans left, they would have to find another job and fit back into the economy and the neighborhoods. I wondered what the people who worked for me at the hospital, what they did. Where did the nurses go? They probably all went back to Seoul, and mingled back into the population. Probably didn't tell people—well, they could tell them that they were from North and that they were refugees or that. This one friend of mine, the chaplain, he went back to Seoul and then, of course—if I can talk about him a little bit—he came to the United States to study. He wanted to get advanced degrees in theology and that.

DePue: He's a Christian chaplain?

Meier: Christian chaplain in this partisan infantry division, if you will.

DePue: Protestant or Catholic, do you know?

Meier: Protestant—he was Presbyterian. Okay, the World Council of Churches years ago assigned different church denominations to different countries: the Presbyterian and Methodist were assigned to Korea.

DePue: This would have been, what, back in the late 1800s or 1900s, even?

Meier: Right. Late 1800s –19th Century. Anyway, the Methodists sent quite a few missionaries to Korea. The Presbyterians had a little different policy, in that they tried to have the Koreans be their **own** Christians and lead their **own** churches, and that seemed to work better. But anyway, where we stayed was a Methodist missionary headquarters building in Seoul. Let's see, there's some more I want to tell you about that, if I can think of it.

DePue: Well, you had mentioned this one chaplain coming to the United States.

Meier: Yes, okay, he was Presbyterian. He spoke to, oh, the Presbyterian church in Geneseo and the one in Rock Island, and kind of said, Well, here I am, I belong to your group, and that, and so that was good. Well, I'm drawing a blank on that. (laughs) Go on to something else!

DePue: Okay. Do you recall your own feelings about the end of the war? It's not really the end; it was an armistice.

Meier: Yes. Well, I was of course glad to be headed for home.

DePue: Were you disappointed, though, that the war ended in a stalemate?

Meier: That was so far above me that it didn't really have any affect on me.

DePue: Do you recall hearing any of the stories about the exchange of prisoners after the fighting was over?

Meier: Just what I heard from the newspapers as I got back to this country.

DePue: How about your homecoming. Can you describe your homecoming for us?

Meier: Okay. (laughs) We took a Navy ship back to the United States from Tokyo/Yokohama area. It was a Navy ship that had room for, like, twenty-five soldiers, and so we were guests on the Navy ship. It was interesting. In the mess hall area—I don't know what the Navy calls their dining room—why, here was their little brig or jail, and there'd be different ones of the sailors who would spend a day in that jail on bread and water. I thought it was kind of comical for me, but not for those sailors because they got half a loaf of white bread and a pitcher of water; that's what they got to survive on, in this little

bitty room that they were in for the day or two. They must have probably got drunk on shore leave or something.

But anyway, we were on this ship and it wasn't such a big one. I do have a story that I tell if there aren't too many sailors around. Anyway, they offered us a tour of the ship. Of course, having nothing to do, I was always interested anyway in mechanical things, so they said, "You can go up to the brig"—not brig, where the—

DePue: Bridge?

Meier: Bridge![3] Bridge—and see how they run the ship. I went up there. We were traveling with another ship that was probably a mile or two off to our side. Radar was fairly new back then, but anyway, they had a radar and we looked on the radar screen and the line was going around like they do. So I said to the sailor there, "Where is that other ship out there?" I could look out the window and see that other ship, over there a-ways. And then he turned a few knobs. "Oh," he said, "I think it's this dot right over here." And I said, "Well, are you sure that's it?" He turned the knob some more, and then he called over another fellow, and they were trying to see if they could find that other ship on the radar screen. I'm not sure they ever did. But that's not a very nice story to tell about (laughs) our Navy personnel!

DePue: Where was it that you finally were able to meet Joan?

Meier: Actually, at camp in Colorado—Camp whatever.

DePue: Was it Carson?

Meier: Yeah, Camp Carson. Yeah.

DePue: Can you tell a little bit about that?

Meier: Oh, we were real happy to see each other again, I can say that.… Another fellow from Geneseo was also there meeting his wife. Let's see, we had a car, and so I said, "Well, why don't you and your wife—" and they had a baby—"ride back to Geneseo with us?" So they did, and I don't remember too much about that, other than that the baby cried quite a bit of the ways. (both laugh) And so, the thing I noticed was that if you're busy driving a car, you don't notice those distractions nearly as much. Well, when my wife drove a little bit, and then the baby's crying was really pretty difficult to put up with, so then I offered to drive again. So, then you don't hear those things.

DePue: You already mentioned that you had a long construction career. You spent how many years, again, in construction work?

[3] In the Navy, the Bridge is the equivalent of the Army's Command Post; it's where the Captain is posted most of the time, especially during critical operations or maneuvers.

Meier: Well, I lump it off at forty-five. Probably forty-four is more accurate.

DePue: So, is that what you returned to when you came back to the States?

Meier: Yes, yes, very much so.

DePue: Did you stay in the National Guard for a while longer?

Meier: No, the end of my second enlistment was up then, which made a total of six years in the National Guard.

DePue: Okay, so time to concentrate on being a civilian, then.

Meier: Yes. Got out. Well, that was in '53, and then '55, we built this house. I stayed in construction. I worked with my uncle that I had started out with, worked with him for seventeen years, and that was all good. I always enjoyed construction.

DePue: Did you use any of the G.I. Bill benefits?

Meier: No. No, I don't think so.

DePue: Okay. We've been at this for over two hours now. It's flown by for me because it's a very interesting story that you have. I've got just a couple of questions, then, if we can kind of close up. First of all, maybe, is there anything else you'd want to tell about your experiences in Korea or about this chaplain?

Meier: Okay, yes, yes. The chaplain came and stayed with us several times, a couple of years apart. Finally—he had a daughter who was, like, nineteen years old, and the daughter wanted to come to America to study, to go to college. So we invited the daughter to come and live with us while she went to college in the United States. And so, she did. She came, and one night we went down to the Moline airport, and here was this nice little Korean girl; we brought her home and she moved in with us. Actually, we only have a three bedroom house, and she shared the bed and the bedroom with our daughter. She went to college around here and commuted for the first year, and then she started going to Dubuque College; then she would be like a regular college student, only coming here on vacations and that. She is in touch with us all the time now on the computer. She came back for my eightieth birthday and played the piano for us. She's quite an accomplished piano player.

Her father was always interested in getting the North and the South Korea back together, so he would go back to North Korea and teach at a seminary in Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea. All the while that we heard that no one could go to North Korea—just was no relationships with them at all—why, he would go back twice a year and teach for a week or so at this seminary in North Korea. Finally, to make a long story short, he died over

there; his daughter, our kind of adopted daughter, she and her husband went back to North Korea to the funeral. He's buried with North Koreans who found favor with the government over there. Of course, some of his friends regarded him as, oh, disloyal to Korea because of his associations with the North people, but he actually was working for the reunification of Korea. Korea wants to be back together. I find fault with our government for their stand on North Korea: our government refuses to meet with North Korea as an independent nation. They won't meet with them unless they invite in also Japan and South Korea and China. This is wrong. North Korea wants to be identified as a sovereign nation, and our government's attitude is wrong, I feel.

DePue: Of course, those talks now—you're talking about the six-nation talks I think—are usually focused on the nuclear threat that North Korea is posing.

Meier: Right.

DePue: A couple of other questions about the Korean War. You know it's called the forgotten war. It's sandwiched between World War II—which is very powerful in American memory—and Vietnam, which has a completely different kind of connection with the American psyche. Then, there's the Korean War. How do you feel about the way Americans seem to have forgotten about that experience?

Meier: Oh, it's—people forget. I'm eighty years old and I've forgotten so many things; I guess it's just a way of life. People think of things at the time they're going on, and afterwards, you forget.

DePue: Did you understand why you were there in the first place, at that time?

Meier: Well, I think so. We were trying to chase the Communists out of North Korea; of course, at the time I got there, the Chinese Communists were in there. The Chinese Communists. It just was a more difficult task as time went on, and after the Chinese came in, it made it an impossible situation, I think.

DePue: Are you proud of your service?

Meier: Yes, yes. Yes. I went in as a sergeant and I came out as a sergeant; I felt by the time I got out maybe I was qualified to be a sergeant. I didn't really feel qualified at first, and the National Guard was, of course, guilty of promoting people that really didn't know much about military stuff, and they would get some stripes and carry on.

DePue: Do you think this experience—especially your year in Korea—did that change who you are now?

Meier: I don't think so at all. It was just a wonderful experience, really. I wouldn't trade it for anything, but you know, I came back with all my facilities and all my hands and feet, and eyes and ears, so…life goes on.

DePue: What would it be about your experience that you would especially want people today and future people to remember?

Meier: Possibly that the North Korean people are a good people. They have some rotten leaders. We have some rotten leaders. Theirs are maybe more rotten, I don't know, but the people are good, and that's what I would say.

DePue: Any final comments for us?

Meier: Oh, I'm honored that you want to hear what I had to say, so I'll close with that.

DePue: Well, again, it's such a forgotten chapter of a forgotten war—I had never heard about it myself—so it's an important piece of history to preserve. I thank you for giving us the opportunity. That's it, thank you.

(end of interview)