

Paul Oppenheim

November 11, 2013

Interviewed by Jerrod Howe

Transcribed by Olivia Mavec

Edited by Teri Embrey

Produced by Brad Guidera & Angel Melendez

Web biography by Jerrod Howe

[starts 2:28]

Howe: Let's get us started, and we can talk about that. So, we are here at the Pritzker Military Library in Chicago. Today is Monday, November 11th, 2013, Veterans Day. My name is Jerrod Howe and I am here with...

Oppenheim: Paul Oppenheim.

Howe: Thanks again for your time, Sir. And thank you for your service. So, we are going to start at the beginning real quick. When and where were you born?

Oppenheim: Lincoln, Nebraska. October 1943.

Howe: Is Lincoln a metropolitan area?

Oppenheim: Yes, it is the capital of the state. The University of Nebraska is located there. It is the second biggest city in the state.

Howe: What was growing up in Lincoln like?

Oppenheim: Well, I didn't grow up in Lincoln. I was born there. The family lived in a little town called Crete, which was twenty-five miles southwest of Lincoln. It's a college town. You know, rural community, but there is a small college there called Doane College. My folks were both on the faculty. And we lived there until I was five years old, until we moved to Chicago. But we obviously had roots there, and that's where I ended up going to college. They offered me a scholarship. That was the deciding factor.

Howe: When you moved to Chicago, where'd you live?

Oppenheim: Hyde Park, where the University of Chicago is. And then, my dad was working on his Ph.D. And then, we later moved to southwest suburb of Oak Lawn, where I went through high school, and then went to college from there.

Howe: Went back to Nebraska?

Oppenheim: Yeah.

Howe: Tell me a little bit about your childhood. What was it like growing up in two very different places?

Oppenheim: Well, yeah. But I was so young in Nebraska and had relatives there, so we went back in forth. But most of my life has been in the Chicago area. And then, in the suburbs, you know, normal childhood. Good parents. Good family. You know, a typical childhood, I guess.

Howe: Siblings?

Oppenheim: One brother.

Howe: Older? Younger?

Oppenheim: Two years younger.

Howe: All right. What line of work were your parents in? You said they were both in...?

Oppenheim: Yeah, my dad ended up as a school principal here in the Chicago area. Mom taught high school.

Howe: Where did she teach at?

Oppenheim: Richards High School in the southwest side. She taught Advanced English—right up your alley.

Howe: And so they both worked?

Oppenheim: Yep.

Howe: Did either of them have military experience?

Oppenheim: No. No, during the World War II, Dad was medically unqualified. He had a deviated septum, of all things. But the little college, Doane College, where he had taught, had a V-12 program—the [US] Navy training naval officers. And so, he in fact, helped train naval officers during World War II. So, in a way, he served, but not really. He was never a member of the military.

Howe: How did their views of the military impact you?

Oppenheim: Really not a factor. My mother's older brother was a gunner on a B-17 during the war. Obviously, during World War II, the whole country was behind the effort. Dad was training naval officers. You know, it was just a part of existence. They weren't anti-military. They were not, I would say, gung-ho military. It was kind of a patriotic thing. And the whole country was behind the war effort.

Howe: Okay, so what was there reaction when you decided that's what you wanted to do?

Oppenheim: Well, I decided...it was during the Vietnam years, there was a draft going on. Now, I've got to preface this by saying this: out of college, I went into Peace Corps. I graduated from college in 1965. And it was not that long after Kennedy had been assassinated. And he after all, had started the Peace Corps. And frankly, when I graduated from college, I didn't know what I wanted to do. And the Peace Corps sounded like an interesting way to serve and maybe gain some foreign experience. So, I went through Peace Corps training and ended up as an English teacher in Thailand—1965-1966. And that was when Vietnam was just beginning to build up. There was an air base not too far away. This was before the United States acknowledged that it was flying missions out of Thailand into North Vietnam. But the F-105s would take off with full bomb loads and come back empty. So, it was pretty evident something was going on.

Howe: You tell folks back home.

Oppenheim: Yeah. And when I got out of the Peace Corps, I came home, and that's when I was invited to join the military. I wasn't drafted, but I got a notice from my physical, and so I thought it was just a matter of time. It was before the lottery,

and so I enlisted. It was inevitable, so I enlisted to go to...I had the option of going to Officer Candidate School.

Howe: And what year did...?

Oppenheim: That was 1966. So I went through ten months of training, basic training, AIT [Advanced Individual Training]. And then, six months of OCS [Officer Candidate School] at Fort Eustis, Virginia. So, that's how I got my military training.

Howe: Did you hold a job before then?

Oppenheim: For a short period of time in between the Peace Corps and the [US] Army, I was a writer and a photographer for a local suburban newspaper.

Howe: Where at?

Oppenheim: Worth, Illinois. A very tiny, suburban paper. So, I was able to write and take pictures. I thought, based on that, that maybe the Signal Corps was where I wanted to be in the Army. And in those days, you could—if you are a college graduate, you could enlist. And they said, "Well, what branch would you like?" And I said, "Signal Corps." So, "Okay, you got Signal Corps." But, upon induction in October of '66, there were about six or eight of us headed for basic training in New Jersey at Fort Dix. And we were put on a train at Union Station. We were comparing orders. "Where are you going?" "Oh, I am going to go to armor." Or, "I am going to go to artillery." "I am going to go to Transportation Corps." And I said, "I'm going to Signal Corps." And somebody said, "No, you are not." Because there was a parenthesis after my name with "TC" after it. And they said, "That's Transportation Corps." So the first day in the Army, I had already been screwed. But, what's the difference? So, I decided I'd stick with Transportation. And so, that's where I ended up. I went through Transportation OCS [Officer Candidate School].

Howe: So, you were rerouted from your initial preference before you went to...?

Oppenheim: Basic. Yeah, before I went to basic training. Probably a clerical error. But, oh well. So, that's where I ended up. And by the way, I put in my whole career of transportation; I retired five years ago. Working for Metra, the local commuter

rail system, here in Chicago. So, you know, one of those accidents that shapes your life.

Howe: And you go with it when you can.

**Oppenheim: Yeah. But, I had been in the Peace Corps in Thailand, obviously, as a Peace Corps volunteer. You're trained on the culture, the history, the language and the country. And sensitive to local customs and trying to be good ambassadors. So highly sensitive to that. By some miracle, I ended up back in Thailand as a lieutenant in the Army—'67-'68. Right during the peak of the American involvement in Vietnam. And the reason I am here today, because that experience of having been in Thailand as somebody sensitive to local customs and [at least, I had a base knowledge of the language and the history of the place. And how to treat other people, how to be polite], how to be a good ambassador.

And then, a year later, coming back as an Army lieutenant in a military base. And after all, Thailand was an ally. We had bases in Thailand, but we were an ally of Thailand. And yet, there was the inevitable strip that grew up outside the post where I was. You know, the bars, the tattoo parlors, you know, and so on. The usual stuff that grows up outside a military base. And I was acutely aware of the mutual hostility - that GIs were looking to get drunk, to get laid, and to get tattooed or whatever. You know, they are just raising hell when they were off duty. The Thais on the other hand, they wanted the American dollar. And there was this mutual hostility. They got along, but there was this undercurrent of distrust and contempt between the two sides that I was acutely aware of, because of my Peace Corps background.

And I thought, "Wow, this is a sign that in Vietnam, it is hopeless." We have no sensitivity to Asian cultures, which were so different. Not only were there GIs in Vietnam, but they had immense fire power. So, if a platoon of Americans comes into a village, who were the villagers going to trust? The Viet Cong that come around at night that speak their language and know their customs? Or, the big Americans with immense fire power, who are total foreigners? To me, that showed me that Vietnam was hopeless.

Howe: And have no cultural sensitivity.

Oppenheim: Yeah. That were—that we could bomb the hell out of the place. We could shoot it up, but they were never going to trust us. And lo and behold, twenty years later, we did it again in Iraq. The same insensitivity to local customs and the assumption that we're Americans, and we can charge in with all of our fire power and technology, and they will just welcome us in. Didn't happen in Vietnam, didn't happen in Iraq. Apparently, not happening in Afghanistan. So, that's what I bring to this session, just the comparison of the Peace Corps experience versus the military experience.

Howe: Were you able—while you were in Thailand as a military officer, were you able to try to bring some of your experience as a Peace Corps worker to your current job for the Army?

Oppenheim: Absolutely. As much as I could. Now, I wasn't trying to be a savior or anything like that. Just based on my daily interaction with the Thai clerks that we had, with the—they called them "house girls,"—the ladies that cleaned the officers' quarters and did laundry and so on. The fact that I spoke some Thai and tried to interact on a polite level—at least, on an equal level with the Thais—I hope, made some difference. At least I was somebody sensitive to their customs, their language, and their culture. Now, obviously, I could not transform the whole organization, but on a personal level, I tried to do what I could. And it's funny...at one point during my military tour, I got a weekend pass or a three or four day pass, and when another officer friend who had gone through OCS with me, we would back up to the city where I taught in the Peace Corps. And the difference was astounding. From just this sort of attitude of mistrust to people greeting you on the streets and nodding and saying, "Hello," to you in Thai. And it was—the total atmosphere was so different. The attitude around the military base was sort of toxic. And they were allies, but the cultural differences were so different.

Howe: When you visited the town where you previously worked, was—first of all, were you wearing uniform?

Oppenheim: No, civilian clothes. And in fact, mostly we weren't wearing uniforms off post, in the military, as well. You know, you change out of your fatigues into civilian clothes to hit the strip, but obviously, we were Caucasians, and they were Asians. So, obviously, the physical differences were apparent.

Howe: The likelihood that you are part of this occupying [unintelligible].

Oppenheim: Of course, of course.

Howe: Do you feel like your experience in the Peace Corps had any effect? Do you feel like there was an exchange of respect? Were you able to teach some American soldiers? Give them some cultural understanding?

Oppenheim: I would say yes. But, you know, a small cog in a big machine; there is only so much I can do. I would say more when we were off post, with other Americans. I could say here is what you do, or you shouldn't do that. Sometimes they listened, sometimes they didn't. Good friends, I could maybe sensitize a little bit.

Howe: A droplet in a pond.

Oppenheim: Well, yeah. Precisely, precisely. Another funny thing that happened, in the Transportation Corps—right after OCS, I was sent to Fort Knox, Kentucky for a two week course in vehicle maintenance. And when I went to Thailand, they gave me a motor pool. And after, a couple or three weeks, I got called up to the battalion commander's office. And I thought, "What have I done?" And the colonel said, "Lieutenant, I've been checking your records and I see you have a degree in political science." And I said, "Yes, Sir." And he said, "Well, we need a legal officer, so that's close enough." So I did court martials for the whole year in Thailand.

Howe: You were there from...?

Oppenheim: Mid-'67 to mid-'68. So I was there during the Tet Offensive—which didn't affect us, but we knew something big was going on in Vietnam.

Howe: Were you ever involved in direct conflict?

Oppenheim: Nope. You know, Thailand was where they sent troops from Vietnam for R&R. So, I have no combat experience. But this cultural awareness, I thought was significant. It showed me what was happening in Vietnam was likely un-winnable.

Howe: After this post in Thailand, what was your career like in the Army?

Oppenheim: Sent back to Fort Eustis [Virginia]. Maybe one of the reasons I went to Thailand, you know, who would expect somebody that knew about a country would get sent back to that country as a military officer. Usually, you go to some place completely different.

Howe: [indistinct 18:50]

Oppenheim: Oh, yeah. But on completion of OCS, they gave most of us a form to fill out as to where we wanted to be assigned. Most guys, would put some military post that was close to where they lived. I was one of the few who put down an overseas post, initially. So, maybe that's why I got it. When I left the Peace Corps, I had heard that the Americans were building a big base at Sattahip, which is on the Gulf of Thailand, a hundred miles south and east of Bangkok. Turns out the Sattahip area was where the huge U-Tapao airbase was. The home of the B-52s that just bombed Vietnam constantly. But there was an Army military seaport right next door to the airbase. Just based on these rumors I had heard when I was in the Peace Corps, I picked the right assignment and got it. So, who would expect somebody that knew something about the language and culture of a country, they actually get assigned there in the military? It was one of those strange miracles.

Howe: Things happen for a reason, and hopefully your experiences previously gave you the opportunity to make some changes.

Oppenheim: I hope. Then, after Thailand, I was assigned back to Fort Eustis —which was the headquarters of the Army's Transportation Corps. Finished up my military service there. And then, got a job here in Chicago, with the railroad.

Howe: The Metra organization.

Oppenheim: It was originally the Illinois Central Railroad, but then, when the public agency was established here in Chicago, threw my hat in the ring for Metra.

Howe: Do you maintain contact with anyone that you served with?

Oppenheim: Yep. The same guy that I took up where I've been in the Peace Corps, he and I have been friends ever since. We went through OCS together and served in Thailand together, served in Fort Eustis together, and have been friends ever

since. In fact, back in 2005, I think it was—he was visiting me in Chicago. He and I, and my wife were out at a Thai restaurant in the neighborhood. And I had been trying to persuade my wife to go back to Thailand for years, but she has a bad back, and the long airplane ride is hard on her. So, she said, "Paul, you and Andy ought to go back to Thailand one of these days." And he said, "That's a great idea, and I'll pay for it." He'd made a lot of money working for FedEx, and he had a huge pile of airline miles and hotel points. So, we went to Thailand together. We hadn't been there since the 1960s, and here we were. And the change was astounding. From a kind of a charming, third-world country into a major... Bangkok was just a major metropolitan area. Have you ever been there?

Howe: I have not, no.

Oppenheim: Yeah, it is an amazing city.

Howe: So you saw a great deal of change...?

Oppenheim: Huge, just huge.

Howe: Did you visit...where was the town where you served in the Peace Corps?

Oppenheim: It was called Nakhon Sawan which is about 150-200 miles north of Bangkok, in the middle of the country. We drove up there, tried to find my old school. It was a vocational school. And it is gone. Don't know what it has been replaced with. We tried to find it. It apparently has been replaced. I think I found the old house where I lived, which is a part of a Buddhist temple area. But the school itself is long gone. But still, it was a pretty area. We stayed overnight in a hotel. It's funny how online you look at hotels and it looks charming; you get there and it was a dump. But it was all right, it was clean enough.

Howe: A for effort, I'd say. [unclear]

Oppenheim: Yep.

Howe: So, your friend and you, how long did you spend in Thailand?

Oppenheim: A little over a week, and then we went to Japan for a week. And then, back home. So, it was a great trip.

Howe: When you were overseas, did you spend time in Japan as well?

Oppenheim: No. Well, I got sent there for a conference one time because I was the legal officer—in quotes. I was sent to Japan to attend a tax advisors' school put on my— the military. And it was supposed to help GIs do their income taxes. So, that was really the only time I spent in Japan. I had stopped there a couple of times, just overnight. Originally, going to Thailand in the Peace Corps, we had stopped overnight in Japan. Then, I got sent there during my military service for several days. And then, not until coming back in 2005—hadn't been there ever again.

Howe: So, if you can, describe for us please, when you come back from having served in the '60s, how do you feel were you treated as a veteran?

Oppenheim: It was kind of a non-issue.

Howe: Okay.

Oppenheim: Flew back. I—obviously not being in combat, I didn't have any scars from having been in combat. It was a pretty easy transition. I don't have any poor experiences some Vietnam vets had. I was able to find a job fairly quickly. Well, again, from Thailand, I still had about the better part of a year at Fort Eustis, living off post. So it was not, it was kind of an easy transition, let us say. And then, I—for a job back here in Chicago, and so the transition for me was pretty seamless.

Howe: When we first walked in, you made a comment about the hat. Do you feel public sentiment that there may or may not have been a change from that time to this time? Do you feel like you are more proud of wearing the hat today?

Oppenheim: I think I am. Back when my friend Andy gave me that, he says, "You can find U.S. Army hats all over the place, but not one that says, 'Transportation' on it." So, he bought that for me. And I said, "Okay, this is one of the few times I can wear that funny-looking hat." Yeah, even though Vietnam was an ill-advised, fruitless war, I am proud of my military experience. I do think, you know, we got the all-volunteer military now, which I...they say the quality of the soldiers and sailors is higher than it's ever been.

But I personally think the draft was a good thing. If it's handled evenly, without special privileges and being manipulated. It brought a broad cross section of people into the military. Right now, I think you've got the "Support Our Troops." Talk is cheap. The actual military...so many people I've realized don't have any exposure to military. It's just kind of a fuzzy concept to them. So "Support Our Troops" is just cheap words. Remember after 9/11, the TV cameras went into the local watering holes for twenty-somethings and said, "Well, what do you think we oughta do?" "Yeah! We oughta go over there and kick their butts." Well, how about you? Would you like to enlist? "No, man, that's not my thing." So, you know the guys that are actually serving, I would say tend to come from small towns where there might not be jobs available. So, there is this: you know the folks that are serving in the military, there is a pretty wide gulf between the lot of them and the rest of society. And this program, that General Cullum just gave—he talked about integrating military people, military veterans into civilian life.

And I think that GIs are misunderstood and underappreciated. But, number one, they are used to following orders, they get to work on time, they may have been combat troops. They probably can do a lot of things a lot of civilians coming into the work force can't do—like getting to work on time and following orders. It's been a big disappointment to me to see how there are so many guys coming out of the military that can't find jobs. It's a tragedy. I think it's this gulf between...in my generation, almost everybody knew somebody that was in the Army or had a family member that was in the military. No more. There is this wide gulf. That's why these GIs coming out of service, or any veterans, you know... you are a Navy guy...are having trouble getting accepted, getting understood, getting hired.

Howe: There are still problems with that.

Oppenheim: You bet.

Howe: Are you presently involved with any veterans' organizations?

Oppenheim: Nope.

Howe: Is your friend, Andy, at all?

Oppenheim: No.

Howe: Are there things that you'd like to add? Or something that you thought I might ask?

Oppenheim: No, my major point was this contrast of Peace Corps versus military experience in the same place, and very close to the same time.

Howe: A point well-taken. And I do agree with some of the differences in cultures. I served in Guantanamo, and we detained non-enemy combatants brought from the field. Their status was questionable. And it really is a huge cultural gulf. And once you can bridge that gap, once you can realize we are just people, human beings. We have inherent differences, but we have the same basic wants, needs, and desires.

Oppenheim: What role did the Navy play at Guantanamo? It's a naval base.

Howe: (starting at 30:50...speaks about Navy's role in Guantanamo. Cut until 32:30)

Howe: You talked about detention that exists in a civilian area, where there is interface with a foreign military force, an occupation force. And the resentment that starts to cause friction. So, I think what you are talking about is the result of that friction, where certain tactics in the field were targeted inappropriately. For example, the program that I am working with right now, I was trained with an individual about two or three weeks ago. We are flying on a plane from Houston, coming back to Chicago, and we are just talking about our various experiences. Come to find out, his entire service in the Army, he's never served with females. Never served with females because he has always served in a combat role. He is a medic. So, he describes when they were in field in Afghanistan, there were teams called, "FET teams"—Female Engagement Teams. And so these, from what I understand, soldiers raised their right hand and said the oath. They were out in uniform. They would go out with platoons, but they would let their hair down. In areas that were notably religious to an extreme, religious fanatics. It is questionable as to what the tactic is there if you are targeting someone who poses a potential threat, or if you are targeting a cultural practice, or a cultural behavior. Because what they found was, yeah, people hadn't seen women in public with their hair down, with the skin exposed. So, they attracted a lot of people who would come look at these things. As a result, they ended up

interfacing with individuals who were very upset by this. But then, the question is, "Are you engaging an enemy threat? Or are you engaging a cultural difference?"

Oppenheim: Are you saying that the female American military was upsetting the Afghans because they were letting their hair down?

Howe: This was an assigned task.

Oppenheim: To do what? To interact with the locals?

Howe: Yeah. All my friends tell me that they were trying to show them that females can, in fact, be in the work place, be in public, and be exposed, and you don't have to hide the individual at home.

Oppenheim: To try to change attitudes.

Howe: To try and change attitudes. But they were trying to specifically target these areas, where they knew they would get a response.

Oppenheim: I thought perhaps it was to send female teams in because males having contact with Afghan females would totally be inappropriate in some areas. They would be talking—or God forbid, treating somebody that was wounded. A male medic treating an Afghan female. I thought you were talking about female personnel.

Howe: That would make sense, but given the context of how they were dressed, it would be more appropriate if they were interfacing female to female, and using the culturally appropriate garb.

Oppenheim: Yeah, like wearing a burka.

Howe: So, then you are asking about Guantanamo, and how this relates is the fact that you know: everyone in Guantanamo that I interacted with at one point in time said, "I was a goat farmer."

Oppenheim: Yeah, of course. I am not guilty.

Howe: But to a certain extent that is believable to a lot of folk. But because they were there, they have resentment. Because we said, for whatever reason, they reacted negatively to a policy that we were instituting in an Arab town. We were trying to send people who were incensed about something. We rounded them up. Now, they are a part of the system. Now, they know other people who are connected.

Oppenheim: So, we created enemies.

Howe: We created this problem.

Oppenheim: Wow. How is it ever going to be solved? Trials are starting now. There is something on one of the news programs. These luxurious facilities are being built to conduct the trials, you know, with wonderful furniture—better than I ever had in my office. God, the money we are spending in Guantanamo to put these guys on trial. And then, what are we going to do with them? We are never going to let them go.

Howe: Some can't ever go. It's known that if they go back to their home country, they will immediately be executed.

Oppenheim: Or if we send them back to their home country, they will just become leaders of terrorist groups and attack us all over again.

Howe: There is more than enough people who believe that.

Oppenheim: Some maybe, some, of course. Others, maybe not.

Howe: It's been proven because others have been caught in the field again. That exactly has happened. They've been brought back. They've been found, and since been brought back to their home countries. And they've been caught on the battle field, and then brought back.

Oppenheim: Yep, Yep. I don't know the solution. There is no solution probably.

Howe: None that the people, the powers that be, want to hear. Probably.

Oppenheim: Yeah, you don't want to keep innocent guys locked up for their whole lives. But, oh well.

Howe: Once you've locked them up for a day...

Oppenheim: You've created an enemy.

Howe: You've created a problem.

Oppenheim: Yep, wow.

Howe: Is there anything else that you would like to add about your experience?

Oppenheim: Nope, nope.

Howe: Okay.

Oppenheim: I'm sure this wasn't very profound or very deep, but, it's Veteran's Day and I thought, what the hell? You've got the program here. I thought I'd offer my words of wisdom.

Howe: And you have.

(39:25)