

Bernard Handel's Recollections of World War II

by Candace Lewis (edited)

In 2007, Bernard Handel was video-recorded in an interview about his World War II experiences for the PBS Website (published on September 20, 2007 on YouTube). The interviewer was a New York City professional actor (he did not appear in the interview). In this article, we have reproduced the original interview of 2007 and added a more recent interview of this September, 2019 as an update.

In the years after his service in the U.S. Army during World War II, Bern Handel returned to New York to become an accountant, a specialist in health insurance, pension plans, and retirement plans. He would be one of the consultants who came up with the concept for A.A.R.P. and was involved in its development (1954). Later he would move from New York City to Poughkeepsie, New York and set up the firm The Handel Companies. He is also the founding member of The Handel Foundation, a charitable organization. Although he is semi-retired, Bern claims to one of few 93-year-old fellows who still runs his own company.—C. Lewis, editor



Figure 1. Bernard Handel in his U. S. Army uniform, in Hawaii. 1945. During World War II.

*Interview of Bernard Handel in Poughkeepsie, NY
September 13, 2019:*

C. Lewis: Could you please tell me about how you entered military service in World War II?

B. Handel: That's easy. I was drafted.

C. Lewis: How old were you?

B. Handel: I was eighteen years old.

C. Lewis: What was your life was like at that time?

B. Handel: I was a junior in college, a student at CCNY [City College in New York City]. I was going to school at night and working for the *New York Times* during the day as an unpaid intern—for experience. I wanted to be a newspaper reporter.

At the time, I had two majors, English and Accounting. My English professor at school said it is a terrible idea to be a newspaper man. Be an accountant. So, I was working at the *New York Times*. I got cigarettes, got coffee, did little jobs. The journalists—they were all complaining. They had long hours, lousy pay, no recognition. It made me into an accountant.

More than that, at age 18, I could not tolerate the ultra-conservatism of the *New York Times*. The paper hated FDR. I liked Roosevelt. Oh yeah. All young people did.

Anyway, nobody read the *Times*. My father read the *New York Daily Mirror*. That was in the old days when we had many papers in New York.

C. Lewis: Once you were drafted, what do you remember of your first days and weeks in the Army?

B. Handel: I went first to Fort Dix, then to Camp Blanding in Florida. My most memorable experience was being arrested going into a men's room. It was labeled "Color Only." I thought, what can they do? Arrest me? They did, but the M.P.s bailed me out.

*Interview of Bernard Handel in New York City, NY
September 20, 2007:*

I served in the U.S. Army from the end of 1944 through the end of 1946. I served in Hawaii, and in Okinawa, and in various places preparing for

the invasion of Japan. And after the war, I served in the Office of the Commanding General Pacific Ocean areas in connection with Ordnance, registration, relocation, and reshipment back to the United States. Originally, I was supposed to go into the Army Specialized Training Program in the Air Force. Because of the casualties suffered in the Battle of the Bulge, there was a sudden demand for troops, or would-be troops.

I was a full-time employee, going to college part-time. I was in my sophomore year. And when you reached 18, you were drafted. You were—it was conscription. There was no choice. The original decision—my original choice—was to go into what was ASTB, which was a program where you actually went back to college as a [pause] while you were in the Army. I was supposed to be sent to the University of Delaware and then, suddenly, the Battle of the Bulge changed all that and they eliminated all the specialized training programs that was leading to specialist and put everybody into the infantry.

And I went to Camp Blanding in Florida and I was rushed into the very efficient basic training which, in 12 to 15 weeks, really produced. It remarkably changed all of us. And I and all my fellow soldiers really became very efficient and trained. And for a city boy who had never fired a gun in my life, I was amazed how efficient they were in training everybody and making us into people possibly capable of fighting a war.

Because I was a college junior and I was thrown in with a bunch of eighteen-year-old kids who came from all over the country, I became sort of the Cyrano de Bergerac of many of the kids from the South, and Appalachia, and other areas. I became their consultant by writing their love letters to their lady friends. This had some advantages. Since I was a city guy, who had no real experience as an outdoorsman—who was not very handy—I needed help in things like assembling a rifle, a machine gun, and building a tent, building a foxhole. My talents as a literary author or co-author of their letters came in very handy in barter for all the services I received in helping me. And I must say that many of these people were tremendously nice, and helpful, and courteous. And the amount of assistance that people gave each other was always impressive in the Army.

Once we completed our training in Florida, we were sent to Fort Camp Rucker in Alabama as a group. They probably were going to arrange to have us sent to Europe but the war in Europe came to an end. So suddenly, we were redeployed. After a short visit home, we redeployed and went on a rather weird 12-day meandering railroad trip across the United States to

Seattle. We were then, after this long trip—and we stayed in Seattle at Fort Lawton for a while until they then put us on a troop ship. We set a meandering zig-zag path across the Pacific over eight days to Hawaii. In Hawaii, we were all assigned as infantry replacements. We went to Schofield Barracks and started to undergo very vigorous training in jungle training and fighting in the war in the Pacific. This was after we had been through village training for a war in Europe. So it was a major change in the training policy.

And so then we were reassigned after that as infantry replacements. We were shipped to various islands in the Pacific. I ended up in the last stages of the war in Okinawa. I was very fortunate in that the war came to an end in Okinawa. So we had very little combat experience.

Then we started going on a long training period for what would be the invasion of Japan.

One of the humorous things was the fact that everybody knew of a certain date, which was November first. If there was going to be a major invasion, it was certainly the worst kept secret in history, whether that date was correct or not.

We went on numerous amphibious landings preparing for battles in the Japanese mainland. No one looked forward to the war in the Japan mainland, based upon the vigorous battles put up by the Japanese in Iwo Jima and Okinawa with the huge American casualties, as well as the tremendous civilian casualties in Okinawa.

We were doing a landing on August 6th, 1945, one of our part dry landings, which were very difficult because of the heat, and getting water in your boots, and making numerous landings on the same day. And suddenly, one of my—one of the other soldiers said to me, hey, Joe College—because I was the only college man, I completed two years of college, in the group. What do you know about the dropping of a bomb? Could you make a bomb out of atoms? Having taken physics in college, I nonchalantly said, don't kid yourself; there's no such thing. It's impossible. It never can happen. One of my clear memories of the war and everybody believed me.

Then when we got back that night, the story had been told that the United States had dropped an atomic on Hiroshima and, of course, that led a week later, after the bombing of Nagasaki, to the end of the war. Many of us, including myself, firmly believed that most of us owe our lives to the fact that we never had to invade Japan and the war came to an end after the

dropping of the atomic bomb. We think Truman was a great guy for making that decision.

Well, after the war ended, they suddenly started to determine what they would do with us. They were going to redeploy many people that served many years overseas back home and they went through our specialties. I was assigned, based on my accounting background and office background, to the Office of the Commanding General in Ordnance and ended up in a fantastic interesting job for over a year in finding out where American war equipment was in the Pacific; locating it; inventorying it; and determining what should be shipped back; what we declared surplus; and what would be abandoned as war losses.

Other than the short period of being constantly afraid of getting killed in combat, and I was fortunate in that respect, I would say you come away from military training with an unbelievably high opinion of the operational capacity of the U.S. Army to develop troops, to turn citizens into fighting men, their professionalism, their discipline, and the way they train people, and the high level of professionalism they display in all their capacities.

The U.S. Armed Forces are maligned very frequently. However, we did not see that. When I was in the Army, I had a high opinion of the officers and the enlisted men. I ended up a sergeant. I thought most of the people I met were very efficient, and very professional, and did a great job. I think the great experience of the war is all the people you meet, the people you—the gentlemen that you dealt with, how fine they were, the comraderie that developed. People really did work together of all types, despite their backgrounds and they all had a common cause.

The Second World War furnished that cause. Most people had a high opinion of the reasons for the war. I think that is the major difference between the Vietnamese War and the War in Iraq today is that many people question whether we should have been in those wars and the extent to which we were in the wars.

The other thing, of course, the major difference between certainly the Iraq War at the present time and the Second World War, everyone in the Second World War was involved. Conscription took everybody of all ages, all people. There was no choice. It was a citizen Army. Whether that's good or bad is something else but they were citizens who received unbelievably professional, quick training which changed them from being laymen into professional soldiers in an unbelievably short period of time. I don't think that could happen again today because the technology involved in warfare

today would make it impossible to really use citizen soldiers in the same way. I think it probably requires a year or two of training today to produce a soldier who could fight under today's conditions. But I think those are the major changes that have occurred since the Second World War.

After the War, we lost a lot of friends because, under the GI Bill, people did not go back to their original schools. They went many places. It was hard to keep track of people. I have some people---friends---I remember, I knew afterwards but only a few. And I must say we have kept in contact over the years.

Interview of Bernard Handel in Poughkeepsie, NY
September 13, 2019:

C. Lewis: It is now several years since your interview in 2007. It is now 2019, a long time away from the events of the 1940s. As you reflect again on your time in the service, do you have any comments?

B. Handel: The American soldier was loved. He gave candy to children; he gave cigarettes to civilians. He freed populations from servitude. We have lost that. We were respected.

Another thing. The Second World War was won by civilians. The best were citizens who had had other experiences in their backgrounds. They brought these experiences and training to their service in the military. They worked hard. I wonder about that now.

Are the people the best for the military now? Now we do not have the draft. Of course, the all volunteer army has its advantages. And the disadvantages are obvious. Of course everyone would be on the government payroll if we had the draft. Everyone could go to V.A. hospitals forever.

C. Lewis: Any other thoughts about World War II?

B. Handel: For those that survived it, World War II was the experience of our lives—of my life. Going to different countries, meeting people from all over our country, getting along with all kinds of people. This was terrific. No one really cared about your political views. People were really patriotic.

- ¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8YLJA8xuls8xuls&t=158s>. The proceedings of this interview have been electronically recorded for the Dutchess County Historical Society and a transcript produced by Kimberly J. Zogby of American Legal Transcription, Poughkeepsie, NY 12601. We would like to express our gratitude to Mary Kate Babiarz, the leader of that organization.