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Oral History Number: 150-003

Interviewee: Wally Gertson

Interviewer: Charles “Milo” McLeod

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Project: Military History in Montana Oral History Project

Milo McLeod: This is an oral history interview conducted by Staff Sergeant Milo McLeod, 103rd Public Affairs with Staff Sergeant Wally Gertson. Staff Sergeant Gertson was one of the first original members of Troop E of the 163 Regimental Combat team. Is that right?

Wally Gertson: Right.

MM: Okay. Wally as you’re aware some of this information may be used by researchers in the future—people interested in the Montana Guard.

WG: That I do.

MM: And you have no objections?

WG: No objections whatsoever.

MM: Okay, well thanks very much. Let’s begin. When did you first join the Montana Guard, Wally?

WG: I joined the Montana Guard when the unit was reactivated after World War Two, and it was in March of 1949.

MM: Okay. Had you been in the service before that time?

WG: I had been in prior service in the Marine Corp.

MM: In World War Two?

WG: World War Two, right.

MM: Okay. Can you tell me why you joined the Guard?

WG: Must have a—

MM: Any idea?

WG: Military behind me I guess. I like it. (laughs) Yes.

MM: A love-hate relationship?

WG: Well, not really, no. I enjoy it. I like the military. Wished I'd stayed in. Job conflicts after I got out of the regulars. I was in Guards and Army Reserve units and here and there. I followed the construction trade, so different areas there was no Guard or Army Reserve unit.

MM: So you did have to take some breaks in it?

WG: Yes I was in and out. Maybe a lapse of seven, eight, maybe nine years, then I'd go back in.

MM: Are you going to get your 20?

WG: Oh yes. Yes. its four years down the line yet, so I'll have it in then.

MM: As I understand it Company E first drilled at Mara's Grocery Store (?).

WG: Mara's Grocery which is now the Bing and Bob (?) building—sports center downtown Havre on Third Avenue.

MM: Major Sterns and I stopped by there earlier, and we got a photo of it. It appears to me like it's really changed from the photos I've seen in '49 and '50.

WG: It was quite different, right. I remember we used to have to come in the back door and go downstairs. We had a shooting range and so forth down there. Wasn't too much space, but at that time there wasn't too many people either.

MM: How many people were in the first year?

WG: I believe there was only around 25 or 30 when the first initial swear-in ceremony.

MM: Were there many prior service?

WG: Basically about half and half.

MM: Okay. Chinook has had a unit for a long time.

WG: Yes they have.

MM: Was there much rivalry or any conflict between Chinook and them?

WG: At times there was, yes. Basically it was a friendly rivalry that...But they get along. At one time the Chinook Unit and Havre Unit were in a combined force and as one unit, and then they went back off on their own again.

MM: You only drilled that at Mara's for what, two or three years?

WG: Something like that, and then they moved to the third floor of Colin Hall (?) at Northern Montana College. It was not completed or nothing at that time.

MM: Okay, so that was still kind of a temporary also?

WG: Right. I don't know for sure how many years they were there because I had left Havre in the meantime.

MM: Okay. Were you in the unit after they built...the Guard had helped build the gymnasium?

WG: No I wasn't. When the head unit was built, I was probably in the Alaska National Guard.

MM: Oh really.

WG: (laughs) Yes, I was up there for a couple three years and got into the Guard unit there as an AST. Then moved back down here to Havre. Got away from it again. Then Sam Clawson (?) caught ahold of me one day, and that was...I was back in again. But I've got no regrets.

MM: Those first couple of years when you were in the guard, you'd go to summer camp at Fort Harrison, wouldn't you?

WG: Right. I never made a foot camp at Fort Harrison, but I remember it was, what? Wednesday night drills we had. At the time that they went to camp, I didn't have to go because I was a prior serviceman—

MM: —and job conflicts.

WG: —and excused, right.

MM: What sort of things would you do on those Wednesday night drills?

WG: Oh, basic soldier skills.

MM: What were they three or four hours?

WG: Four hours, right. Seven to 11.

MM: Seems like that's not really enough time to—

WG: No, you just barely get into, and you'd have to leave.

MM: Like weapons training?

WG: Right. You'd just get a weapon tore down and have to put it back together. Sometimes it was cleaned and sometimes it wasn't. Usually there wasn't time enough to do anything.

MM: Did they have pretty good turn out?

WG: From what I can remember, yes, they did. It was very good turnout.

MM: I don't know. I would think myself, I didn't really have trouble, conflicts trying to schedule a Wednesday night drill, but I guess myself I really prefer the weekends.

WG: I do.

MM: In order to advance what—

WG: I do, yes.

MM: It gives you time to at least get into a military frame of mind.

WG: Right. I know the California Guard...Now I was an AST with them and they was activated right after the Korean War, and they had Wednesday night drills for a while and then they went to a weekend-type once a month. It was a lot better situation.

MM: What sort of uniforms would you wear in drill? Was is fatigues or—

WG: Class A, that was the old army drab.

MM: Ike Jacket?

WG: Right, or fatigues depending on what the company commander specified in the drill letter. Most of the drills were in Class A uniform.

MM: They didn't serve any meals or anything?

WG: No meals were served in strictly a four-hour situation. You'd show up and—

MM: Stand formation.

WG: —stand formation, get into your things, and about that time it ready to start putting stuff away.

MM: This is kind of off the subject of the history, but did you go to camp this year?

WG: Yes I did.

MM: You've been in the service a long time. Active duty in the Marine Corps World War Two, also in Korea?

WG: Right.

MM: This question isn't for...I guess it's more for my own interests, because I've been in for quite a while and also in Vietnam. How do you think the Guard stacks up today?

WG: These unit—Montana unit—I would say probably be activated within 60 days probably be in A-1 shape.

MM: That's kind of my impression. I'm really impressed with them.

WG: I am too.

MM: I was in the engineers for several years over in Missoula and also in Special Forces before I went into public affairs, and there is good esprit de corps, good morale, good troops.

WG: There is. Just in the last few years I've noticed the difference very much so.

MM: Were you in the Guard in the '50s and '60s?

WG: I was in the Californian National Guard in '53, '54.

MM: When I was in the service in '68, '69, '70, the Guard was kind of thought of at least by people in the regulars, that that's where people who didn't want to go to Vietnam, who didn't want to go get drafted went. They spent their six years at home. Do you think there was any truth to that?

WG: Oh, there probably was in some instances, but I think basically it was because they wanted to be in Guards. But in some instances there was...it's a place to stay home.

MM: Yes, you can serve at home.

WG: But like in the '60s, the Alaskan National Guard it was a six year...They had to, one or the other get in the unit—our active Reserve Unit—and serve their time. But basically they were all the volunteer type that it's what they wanted. Because they didn't want to go active duty, because their job conflicts. Like Alaska the fishing people, that was their mainstay and that was their living up there.

MM: Did you ever do any work with the Eskimo Scouts?

WG: Off and on. I had a rifle company called First Rifle Platoon. It was composed of about 50 percent Eskimos Scouts, and the...some of them people I'd never see them until we went to camp.

MM: Major Stearns (?) and I were talking about the Eskimo Scouts on our drive up from Helena today. That's a unit and a situation that really kind of interests me.

WG: They're year round people. (laughs)

MM: They're on active duty all the time.

WG: They're in active duty all the time, and they might be from 14 to 65 or 70. They're scouts, that's it.

MM: It's kind of a carry-over of the old Indian scouts.

WG: Well yes and no. They were kind of formed during World War Two. To protect along the Bering Sea up there, is what it basically was. It just carried on and...crack people.

MM: They are really good.

WG: They are. Their stuff is dropped into them, and that's it. Like I say, you might see the camp, you might not, depending on where they were and what they were doing at the time.

MM: Where do they go to camp, or do they?

WG: Fort Richardson, yes, in Anchorage. And depending on what's going on it might be in January or February, it might be in the summer months. It's hard telling. The scouts in the Alaska Guard many times are used as an aggressor force for regular army towards guarding the people.

MM: I imagine they'd be good aggressors.

WG: Right. Like all the Alaska Guards, all their uniforms was the white—snow shoes, the boots, the whole nine yards was white. It was good cover.

MM: Did they carry live ammo?

WG: Yes, they do.

MM: They're ready to go.

WG: They're ready to go, right. The Guard units within the cities, like oh, Anchorage, Fairbanks, Kenai, wherever they don't carry the live ammo, but your Eskimo scouts do.

MM: A full basic load?

WG: Yes. As far as I know they did. Now it's been 15, 18 years ago.

MM: As I said, I am kind of interested in about three things: one your history with Troop Company E here, Troop E; and two just your experiences in general in the Guard and the military. This is one thing that a lot of people, if we don't get your experiences now, probably 30 years from now we aren't going to have the opportunity.

WG: Won't have it, right.

MM: Looks like it's about quarter of two.

WG: Yes, I think I better kind of mill around a little bit.

MM: Well, thanks very much.

WG: Okay, Sergeant McLeod, thank you.

MM: Really, great talking to you.

WG: Okay.

MM: Appreciate your information.

WG: All right, I wished I could have been more helpful. (laughs)

[End of Interview]