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Oral History of the Korean War/ Leslie Pendleton

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Student Interviewer: Jennifer Jill Reynolds

Interviewee: Leslie Donald Pendleton

Time and Location of Interview:

The interview was conducted in one session on November 2, 2015 and lasted approximately 50 minutes. It was conducted over the phone while Leslie D. Pendleton resided in his home in Hendersonville, N.C. Only the interviewer and interviewee were present.

About Leslie D. Pendleton:

Leslie Donald Pendleton was born in Leominster, Massachusetts, USA, in 1932 and has lived most of his life in South Lancaster, Massachusetts. He served in the Korean War in 1953-1954 with the 43rd M.A.S.H, Army Medical Corps and was with that division sixteen months until he was released from overseas service in 1954. This interview covered topics ranging from his service as an ambulance driver in Korea to his post-war life.

Pendleton is eighty-three-years-old and entered the service as a corporal, two years after completing high school. He was a conscientious objector and drove a relief ambulance in South Korea, near the front lines. His service took place after the truce between N. and S. Korea was signed July 27, 1953.

In 1955, shortly after the war, Pendleton pursued higher education at Southern Adventist University on a GI Bill. During his sophomore year of university, in 1957, he married Barbara Shirley Beans an Elementary Education student also attending Southern. He graduated in 1959 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration and Industrial Arts. Soon after completing his degree, he and his wife Barbara, of nearly forty years, were called by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists to be missionaries in Africa, in 1960. Pendleton served at the Union office of Seventh-day Adventists in Tanzania Africa, the most remote mission in the world. He was an accountant for this Union more than four and a half years before moving back to the United States and working in various accounting and auditing positions for the Seventh-day Adventist church. Two children were born to Leslie and Barbara: Carl Douglas Pendleton, "Doug," and Julia Jill Reynolds (Pendleton).

Pendleton enjoyed an early retirement at age sixty-one and has spent his time pursuing a lifelong passion of nature photography. His business degree is still useful to him as he regularly invests and engages in planned giving.

Interviewer: Jennifer Reynolds (JR)

Interviewee: Leslie Pendleton (LP)

JR: I'll ask you some questions here, and I'm going to try to ask them in chronological order. During the Korean War, student deferment was available, and because of this there was a chance that male students between the ages of eighteen to thirty-five could be drafted. Since you had just previously completed high school and were within that age bracket, did you consider attending college instead of being involved in the war?

LP: Did I think about going to college then? Uh, no, I don't think I had any interest at that point.

JR: Do you know what caused your interest in college after the war?

LP: The people I worked with urged me to after the war because I had the GI Bill, that made a big point of me deciding, I used it all four years. Yeah, that was good. It helped a lot.

JR: So you told me that in 1953, you volunteered for the Army Medical Corps...

LP: I volunteered for the draft, I was a non-combatant, so they put me in the medical field, you know.

JR: What caused you to want to volunteer, instead of waiting to be drafted?

LP: Get it over with (laughed), yeah.

JR: Was there a disadvantage to not volunteering and being drafted later, or did you have the same options?

LP: I think they're the same.

JR: So I asked you Friday if you had to undergo medical training before you went overseas, and you said you went for about six months to Camp Picket, what kind of things did you train for there?

LP: Well, basically it was basic training. Basic, yeah, Camp Picket Virginia. There was actually a lot of exercise and army stuff, and, uh, ya know, different duties, different things they would ask you to do. I don't know if it was six months, let's see... January... yeah, I guess it was about six months. It was quite awhile.

JR: Did you train for any kind of medical relief while you were there?

LP: You know I'm not sure where I got all my medical training, it was all there. I didn't go any other place. It would have to be. I don't remember much about that.

JR: Did you receive certification for the medical training that you underwent at Camp Picket?

LP: You know I can't remember any medical, I was there for a whole six months, and I don't remember what I had. I remember we did a lot of marching stuff, guard duty, work in the kitchen, stuff like that and the weekends I would go back to Lancaster where my parents were living. I used hitchhike all the way from Camp Picket to Lancaster, and then I'd have to hitchhike back and I did it several times. A few times I went to Washington, you know, near Tacoma Park, always hitchhiking. Isn't that something? I remember one time I saw a fellow who was driving a '50 Ford, and I think he was actually drunk (laughed), but any rate, a lot of risk you take when you hitchhike. Yeah, so any rate, that was back in 1953. I went there January of '53, and left there in July or August. And then I was shipped to Japan, and I was in Japan when the truce was signed. I was several weeks in Japan waiting. When I was in Japan the war ended and then they shipped me to Korea. There was still a lot of casualties, I picked up people that had passed away and moved people around here and there, drove around a lot. It was quite an experience, lived in a tent and, uh, I lived with Mr. Gagnon, George (laughed).

JR: William's grandfather, wow!¹

LP: Well, we never knew back then what would have happened, I really liked George. He was a special friend. He was always optimistic, ya know. I wished you could have met him; you never met him.

JR: I actually did, but when I met him, he had Parkinson's.

LP: Oh, you did meet him? In that little house? I actually talked to him too, ya know, sometime before then, this was four or five years ago. I talked to George.

JR: So this is interesting, the Korean War was over July 27, 1953, and that's kind of the time you arrived, so the fighting was over...

LP: Yeah, yeah, the fighting was pretty much over. What happened was there were a lot of minefields and they were everywhere. I remember a doctor had us, uh, well let's see, there was a doctor that, I think he lost his legs or something and I had a picture, terrible picture. We looked at him, he got injured very bad, a doctor in Korea. So we picked up a lot of casualties because of that. I remember another time, somebody got into a manhole, and somehow it blew up and the fellow got burnt, he got burnt up. And I remember another time, nobody wanted to take the body. It was a dead person, nobody wanted it. In Seoul there was a hospital and I just dropped him off and left. What could I do? There was nobody to take him but I just dropped him off. I let them... He couldn't stay in the ambulance (laughed). I had to do something. I thought about the poor parents, or the wife, or whoever

¹ William is my boyfriend and has met Leslie Pendleton, my grandfather, several times.

it was, ya know and it was terrible. War is terrible, a lot of things happen. I wondered about the people that were related to him, wondering what happened, what information they got. But any rate, I knew, but I didn't know who they were. Yeah, that was in 1953, I remember. I came home in 1954, must have been in October or November, I was over there for twenty-two months. I remember I went to Lancaster and, you know, later I went to Florida where my parents were living. Later, I went to Southern. Decided to go to college, just to try it out because I had the GI Bill. It's a good thing I did, that's where I met your grandma... Meme. And were married nearly forty years.

JR: Yeah, that's right.

LP: I decided I wanted to learn more about business. The first year I just took Industrial Arts courses, and the second year I took Business Law and Accounting and decided I would go that route. But I already had a lot of subjects in Industrial Arts, so I had a double degree like you when I graduated. I had two BS degrees.

JR: When we talked Friday, you told me you were stationed with the 43rd M.A.S.H, on the 38th Parallel.

LP: Yeah, that's right.

JR: Okay, so for the twenty-two months you were stationed in that area you were mostly picking up the wounded?

LP: Yes, and the sick. You know most every day you had something. You wait, and they call you and you got a trip. Sometimes you go to Seoul, sometimes you go to other places. They had a big hospital down there in Seoul. And, uh, a little later my brother came to Korea. He was older than me but he let the draft put him in. He had moved to Florida. So I saw him. I took a lot of pictures when I was over there. I still have a lot of pictures, you know, black and white ones... I got big albums full of them. Two or three albums full of them.

JR: Wow! How often were you given R&R rotations?

LP: I'm not sure, probably every six months. Yeah... I went to Japan, when I was in Japan I traveled around a little bit. I've been to one end of Japan to the other. And I saw where the Atomic Bomb was, that was what stopped the war you know?

JR: Yes, the war in Japan.

LP: Yeah, so I went and saw that there was a lot of devastation. But I've seen it. Twenty-two months was how long I was in including my basic training of six months, that's total.

JR: So was the 43rd M.A.S.H located at Camp Mosher? Do you remember?

LP: I don't remember where it was, uh, I can still see it but I don't remember what town it was in. I could see the mountains. Do you remember seeing the 43rd M.A.S.H TV show?

JR: Yes, yes!

LP: Well, it looked just like that. Then another time I lived in another place, George didn't live in the other place. George lived at the 43rd. Another time I was in just an ambulance company way up close to the 38th Parallel. I was there for a long time too. I don't remember how long I was at each place, I moved around a little bit. They transfer you around. I was there from about July or August of '53 until I left the military... and when I came back, I came back to New Jersey where I was discharged. Then I came back to Lancaster because I wanted that money from the town. So I got that there, and moved to Florida. I wasn't there very long, I must have stayed in Florida until August of 1955 and then I went to Southern. It was fully my intention to go just one year, but then I met Barbara and we got married. So I decided just to stay, you know, go back next year and get the business. So that's what I did. It's a good thing that I did that.

JR: Yeah, you used that business degree a lot.

LP: Yeah, I used it, but not the other degree, as far as earning money. My first job was in a hospital in Florida. My first job working for the church. That was in 1959. I had volunteered for mission services, Barb and I went up to Washington to volunteer for it and we went to Africa. That was in December of 1960, I think it was. So we arrived in Africa to the mission station where I worked for all those years, on January 1, 1961. And the General Conference president was there at the time because they were having a dispute with the teachers, they were on strike. But we were there, and there were big meetings at the mission I was at. I was there four and a half years... I was in the military twenty-two months. When I came back, my first job was at Blue Mountain Academy and then from Blue Mountain I went to the Potomac Conference where I was the Assistant Treasure. But the interesting thing there, when I was at Blue Mountain, I was renting from a lady that was going to sell the house. I had to move all my stuff out of the house and it was put in the moving van. So I didn't know where I was going to live. But in the meantime, I got this call from the Potomac Conference for an Assistant Auditor and they asked, "When can you move?" and I said, "My stuff's already on the truck" (laughed). They gave me the call, and the president and treasure of the conference helped me unload.

JR: So grandpa, you said that when you got to Korea, because the war was already over, you mostly helped the wounded, and there were also sick people there. I was reading that a lot of people got dysentery. So were a lot of the sick people that you helped, sick because of dysentery?

LP: I really don't know, I just put them in an ambulance and took them out. I don't know what they were sick of, I just had to move people around. I really don't know what their illness was. Some were burned, I remember that one fellow that was burned pretty bad, or

the ones that lost limbs, I did see that. But I didn't pay much attention to what their illness was or their diagnosis. Sometimes you wouldn't do much for a day or two but you'd always get calls and they'd tell you where to go and pick them up. They'd put them in the ambulance and they'd tell me where to take them. I used to have to keep the ambulance clean, use to wash it. Go down to the creek and sometimes some of the natives would want to wash them for you.

JR: Did you ever get sick yourself?

LP: I don't ever remember getting sick, no. I do remember the snow, in the tent. Just sleeping on a cot, you know. Yeah, it was cold. I was over there from July or August of '53 until about October of '54 and I came back from the military and moved to Florida. From Florida I went to Southern and that was the best thing I ever did is go to Southern. I love Southern, and I had good teachers, some of the best teachers, Dr. VandeVere and an English teacher, Dr. Maduick. I only made "C's" but they were real Christians. They made a big impression on me, and I probably wouldn't have graduated. I wasn't an "A" student like you, I was a "C" student. Dr. VandeVere gave me a "C" so I could graduate. Wasn't that something? And Dr. Maduick helped me put some of the stuff on the trailer. I rented a trailer from somebody, one of my classmates, borrowed a trailer and moved to Florida. All my earthly goods were in that trailer, which wasn't much. It had a flat tire and I had to get a new tire on the way down, and any rate... I moved down there and moved to a little apartment in Orlando. I had a little job working at some place where they did blueprints or something. I was there a week or two and then I got a call to the hospital, so I had to move there. We moved to a little house there, we had to rent. I think the rent was sixty-five dollars a month and my salary was like sixty-five dollars a week. So I paid one week's salary, which covered the rent... any rate it was something. They had to fumigate the place, and it always had the smell. It was close to the hospital, I remember that. It's a nursing home now, but it was a hospital when I was there. That was my first job with the church, that was in 1959. I had a little Falcon, the Mercury I had I traded it and got a Ford Falcon. When I left for Africa, I sold it to a lady in Lancaster. She bought it from me and Howard helped me with it. I went back there in 1970, the car was still around in the area. I lived in Lancaster, well I lived in Maine, then went from Maine to Lancaster and I lived there from 1970-1983, or end of '82... that's when I came to Carolina.

JR: So grandpa, I was reading that a lot of Korean civilians died during the war, did you also medically treat these people if there were wounded?

LP: If I was instructed to, yes. I just went where they told me, you know. It was mostly between a clinic and a hospital, you know I just moved them. I was just an ambulance driver. I wasn't in any medical things. I was only a driver. That's all I did. I never did medical procedures at all that I remember.

JR: Now you went into the Army as a conscientious objector, what was your reason for this?

LP: Well, that was the church. That's what the church recommended to us, so that's what I did, you know. I didn't bear arms, and that's just the way I did it. But that was the reason they put me in the medical, because when you're in medical you don't have to bear arms. It's good. There were some of the Adventists that would bear arms. Now my friend that lives up in Maine, Wrecker, I don't know if he was a conscientious objector or not. I'll have to ask him. I don't know if he was. He was in the infantry, so I don't think he was. He lives up there in Limerick, I think. He's up there, his wife was a nurse. He was related to my best friend in Lancaster, Tex Graves, his wife was a Wrecker too... But it was a good experience, the military I enjoyed it up to a point, you know. But, uh, my buddy, he went to Germany, Tex Graves. He lived in Collegedale a number of years. His son lives there now, Rod Graves. We talk every so often. I go to stay there sometimes when I go to Collegedale. Well, do you have more questions? Go ahead and ask them, I have plenty of time.

JR: Okay, I just have a few more. So, I've been reading about the Korean War and I know that you were a conscientious objector but I read that when a soldier has to kill someone, it takes a part of him away, and he struggles with this reality for a long time. Did you have any friends that weren't conscientious objectors and had to deal with this reality?

LP: Well, I had friends that were not conscientious objectors but I don't know how they've thought about it. I don't know, well... no, I really don't. I remember I had a fellow that was over that was a sergeant, and I was a pfc., or a corporal, and he was a black fellow. I can't remember his name but he came from Baltimore. I wish I knew if he was still alive, I could talk to him. I don't know who he was, I don't remember his name anymore. But I met a lot of Adventists over there. I met a fellow who lives in California and I talked to him a couple of year ago. I got in contact with him, and, uh, probably not far from your sister. I had a couple of experiences of people stealing from me and one time they said they'd buy my camera, give me so much for it and they showed me the money. So I gave them the camera, and they gave me the money. Well... they left quickly, but I didn't get the money I was supposed to. It was covered with money but underneath it was something else. But a friend of mine had several hundred dollars he was sleeping on it, but they got that too. They would cut in the tent, where we'd be sleeping, and they kinda had to know if you had money there. It was kinda an inside job, but I never had a lot of money, but I did lose a camera. A lot of things happened. But I used to go, they used to let me use the ambulance to go to church, in Seoul. I'd go to the church down there and I knew some of the people. They would have us all for lunch, at the mission where the hospital was and the headquarters for the church. Elder Hackett, Willis Hackett, he used to be the Atlantic Union Conference president... Atlantic Union, and I got a picture somewhere of me and him. I got the picture somewhere with me and some of my buddies. Yeah, so they let me use the ambulance to go to church, and that was good. That was quite a distance, probably an hour away. They would give me the gas and let me use the ambulance. That was pretty good, that was nice of them. I remember we used to pay our tithe. I used to pay my tithe to the people over there for the mission work. It was a war-torn country. It wasn't a big modern... there were no skyscrapers, the roads were bad. It was a third-world country. I'd like to see it today. The Koreans were very smart people, very smart. But the Japanese, back then, kinda looked down on the Koreans, I don't know why. I

don't know if it is that way anymore. They are both very smart, very good people.

JR: You never went back to Korea after the war?

LP: No, no. I've never been back. I left there in '54, and never went back.

JR: Did you ever lose any of your friends because of the war?

LP: No, I don't think so, but one friend of mine that lives in Massachusetts now, he adopted a couple of girls over there, brought them over to the States. I'm sure that George knew about it. It was a fellow that lived in Framingham. I saw him a couple of years ago at the Southern New England Camp Meeting. I think I asked about the girls. He brought them up. I don't think he had any children of his own. Any more questions?

JR: Yeah, I have a few more. What experience from your time in Korea stands out in your mind the most?

LP: The experience, well I'll have to think on that. You mean from my military?

JR: Yeah.

LP: Well, I was helping people, you know. People that were sick. I didn't have to kill any body. I was helping people. I guess that was a good thing. Serving your country, it's an honor to serve your country, it really is. And of course getting the help with my education, that was wonderful, you know, I wouldn't have gone if it wasn't for that. I believe my two brothers never used it, they could've used it too but they never used it. I took advantage of it and I'm the only one that got a college degree. Howard never really finished his degree at S. Lancaster Academy, Earl only went a couple weeks and quit. I was the only one that took advantage of it, and it was good. God really blessed me with that. You know, that I liked the South, 'course my folks lived in the South, then I went to Southern. I really loved Southern boy, It's a lot different from AUC. AUC you had to take a language. You couldn't get a BS when I was there, you had to get a BA which meant you had to take a foreign language or something... different courses. Southern treated me really good. I loved my teachers and even though I didn't get very good grades, I was glad for it. The teachers had a loving spirit about them, you know, and they helped me and were very good. I've always supported Southern and of course, I don't know if you did or didn't know but I was on the Committee of 100. They changed the name now to President's Counsel. They've made a lot of changes so I don't know if I'm still on it, I'm not sure the latest what's happened with that. I was a trustee for a few years.

JR: So you got the benefit from the military, the GI Bill, did you receive any other benefits for being a veteran because of your service?

LP: Any other benefits? I don't think so, but I was in the reserves for several years. Even

when I was in school I was in the reserves. You really didn't get a discharge, a full discharge for several years.

JR: Did you ever think that you would get drafted for the Vietnam War?

LP: No, no I don't think so. See, I was older then. I left there in '59 so I was twenty-seven, so I don't know how long the draft lasted, but usually if you were married, they wouldn't get you anyways.

JR: And you were in college too, so you were all set.

LP: Yeah, I was all set.

JR: After the war was over, were you recognized for your service, by awards or anything of that nature?

LP: No, but there's one thing that really did help me. When I got sick, when I had my thing, and left the church work, I actually was able to count my military time as time worked for the church work... it counted as well. I got to count that because I fulfilled all the requirements as far as counting and so I actually had thirty-three years with the church, but nearly thirty-six... so I was able to retire early without a penalty, and got counted as working for the church. That was a wonderful thing too. It all came together; it was so wonderful. It really was good. My friend, he didn't get his because you had to do it within a certain number of months when it came up. Mine all came up, and his didn't. I knew other people who's didn't... you had to do it within a certain period of time, you had to go to school, all that kinda stuff. Mine all came out good, they could count mine. So I was able to retire and get full benefits, full Social Security, and the church retirement. It all worked out, so I was so thankful and I was so glad I went to Southern. I still love Southern. I think it's the best university we have and I've been very loyal to Southern. I give, I'm gonna give Southern a pretty good amount, when I pass away, they'll get some money... you know, because they were so good to me and I graduated from there, and I loved the teachers. So my loyalties are at Southern.

JR: Yeah! So the last question I have: How would you describe, overall, your military experience?

LP: Positive, positive. I'm glad I had the experience. Some people it's good to have military.

JR: Well, thank you so much grandpa, for answering these questions.

LP: ...maybe I'll look, I've got certain metals from the unit I worked in, and the Korean Conflict and... I've got these metals. I'm going to give them to Doug, I've got them all ready to give to him. I think it's best to give them to my son, rather than give them to my daughter. I've got all these metals; I'll give them to him sometime. They're all different. When you have your uniform on you have bars on them, but these are actually metal things. People keep them,

keepsakes. I've got all those things. I'll give them to Doug sometime. I have a lot of dog tags. Do you know what a dog tag is?

JR: Yeah, its got your name...

LP: Yeah, it's got your name, blood type, your serial number, I still remember my serial number it's: US 51225831, US 51225832, I still remember that (laughed). Yeah, I still remember those Korean days, that was a long time ago, lets see '53, boy (laughed).

JR: Yes, over sixty years.

LP: Yeah, a long time ago. God's been good to me, Jen, God's really been good to me. I have so much to be thankful for. My health... next to see you at your graduation. I really support Southern, I love Southern.

JR: Thank you for answering all of my questions, grandpa, this was a lot of good information.