

## Wendell Hood: Story of a local World War II Soldier

In early June of 1941 the second draft from Spearfish, South Dakota, was called to join the Army just before the United States joined World War II. The young men with low draft numbers were the first ones called. Wendell Hood, at the age of twenty-three, was one of these men. Before he was drafted, Hood was ranching at his home near Spearfish; he made money doing odds jobs for family and friends and working on the family ranch. He worked hard, and his earnings averaged to a dollar a day, which he valued as “good money” at the time.<sup>1</sup> Hood had graduated high school in 1936 and chose to stay home, or that was his plan at least. Hood never had plans to join the military or even leave the ranch, but after he was drafted he spent nearly four years serving his country. After his number was called he was sent to Camp Riley, Kansas, where he was inducted into the United States Army on June 24th. Then he headed to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, where he received his uniform, passed the medical exams, and then boarded a troop train to Camp Roberts in California. In California, Hood completed the nearly six months of basic training before he headed down to Ford Ord where his platoon met up with the National Guard at that station.

Wendell Hood was on duty at Fort Ord in California the morning of December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941, when Pearl Harbor was bombed by the Japanese.<sup>2</sup> During the Sunday morning attack, eighteen ships were damaged and eight vessels sunk. Upwards of two-thousand men lost their lives and another thousand suffered injuries. The United States had been prepping the bases in the Philippines for an attack and were not expecting one this close to home. The United States underestimated the abilities of the Japanese and, thus, everyone sprang into action immediately after the attacks unsure of what was next to come.<sup>3</sup> Hood and his fellow soldiers were moved away from camp and into the dunes due to a fear of invasion. Once it was deemed safe to mobilize, Hood and his men headed for San Francisco.

When the US entered World War II, Hood was on the Golden Gate Bridge standing by the massive cannons to guard the West Coast. Shortly after, Hood was sent to the Mojave Desert in California for training. For a while, Hood was trained in demolition where he learned to blow up bridges. Soon after, he was transferred to reconnaissance for the infantry division, a job he deemed much more dangerous. Hood, and most of the men who entered the army before Pearl Harbor, had no choice in what branch they served or what duties they performed because the army decided the division and roles of those who were drafted. In the very beginning of the war the military was sending people overseas but were unsure of the duties they would perform once they got there and the organization process left something to be desired. Hood was told three days before departure that he would be stationed in Australia; he did not know where that was.<sup>4</sup> Regardless, Hood headed to Australia where the men landed but their supplies didn't. Luckily,

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<sup>1</sup> *Army Days: World War II Memories*, Interviewer Reed Richards. Performed by Wendell Hood. Spearfish, SD. April 7, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Kelly Kirk. “Pearl Harbor.” Lecture, United States History II, Black Hills State University, Spearfish, SD, October 19, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Kelly Kirk. “Pearl Harbor.” Lecture, United States History II, Black Hills State University, Spearfish, SD, October 19, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> *Army Days: World War II Memories*, Interviewer Reed Richards. Performed by Wendell Hood. Spearfish, SD. April 7, 1996.

the people in Australia were very welcoming of the presence of the United States and they fed the troops until their supplies could arrive.

After spending six months near Brisbane, Australia, Hood was sent out to on the island hopping campaigns. The island-hopping campaign in the Pacific Theater depended on the army and marines, as they utilized amphibious assaults to gain small islands and territories with the intention of stopping Japanese expansion and getting close enough to threaten mainland Japan. The amphibious assaults were some of the most dangerous campaigns and often ships would not get close enough to shore and men and their supplies would get wet rendering their defenses somewhat useless until they could dry.<sup>5</sup> Hood's first combat experience in the war was on his first amphibious landing; after leaving their base in New Guinea, Hood's platoon piled on the large vessel that would bring them close to shore and release them into the water ready for active combat with the enemy waiting on land.<sup>6</sup> As Hood remembered it, in this kind of experience, training typically took over and the soldiers did not think about shooting, they just did. The Japanese were painted as the enemy and it became ingrained from the very beginning that the only thing to do was kill because the Japanese soldiers did not surrender. Much of Hood's two and a half years overseas were spent in battle but that time was not all spent in active combat. It included dedication to reconnaissance, building camp, traversing islands, and traveling from island to island. Hood noted that throughout his island-hopping, it rained a lot, so he and his men often slept in the mud. Between the weather and the amphibious landings many men were damp the entire time they were deployed.

Hood recalled some of his worst experiences during the war, but he also stated how sometimes the brain blocks out certain memories or details to protect itself. He did recall his worst night was in the Philippines. Night attacks were always a concern and a significant amount of ammunition was wasted during the night even though there wasn't always anyone out there, according to Hood. One night, Hood (who was then Sergeant Hood) was sent to go investigate a lantern that was glowing in the distance. Hood and another soldier followed the major's order to go investigate the light. All they knew of the terrain was the river they'd have to ford. Hood was relieved when the lantern went out and they could return to their platoon; however, this was when Hood realized he could potentially die from friendly fire. In the dark it was impossible to distinguish friend from foe, so Hood and the other soldier snuck up quietly to their platoon, close enough to be heard, and announced their password and prayed. Hood said it was one of the scariest experiences of his time overseas as they snuck up on their own men praying nobody would shoot them. But Hood made it through this experience and many others during the war.

Hood recalled his day-to-day living experiences; he remembered forgetting what a hot shower felt like and instead learned to enjoy an occasional cold shower. Every outfit had an unofficial barber who would shave and cut other men's hair in exchange for a little extra money. Everyone needed the civilizing act of a shave after sacrificing so much for the war effort. The wet conditions caused health issues for many soldiers. Every morning Hood took his "little yellow pill" to prevent malaria but was hospitalized twice for infections in the ankle. Despite the struggles, he remained in the war effort until the end. After two and a half years in combat, Hood

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<sup>5</sup> *Army Days: World War II Memories*, Interviewer Reed Richards. Performed by Wendell Hood. Spearfish, SD. April 7, 1996.

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received news that the war in the European theater had been won. His outfit was training for a mainland invasion of Japan when it was announced they were being sent home instead; they knew nothing of the atomic bombs. Married men got to leave first as well as those who had accumulated the most points. Hood was on one of the first boats headed back for the United States. Wendell Hood was honorably discharged from the First Cavalry on October 8<sup>th</sup>, 1945, at Fort Leavenworth. He was recognized for four campaigns, received a combat infantry badge, good conduct medal, bronze arrow head, American defense ribbon, Philippines Liberation ribbon, and was discharged from platoon sergeant to his occupation of farm hand general.

When Hood got home he felt like “a fish out of water” with no job, no friends, and new experiences, some of which could never be put into words, but experiences that would remain with him his whole life. When he returned home he met up with some old friends and went pheasant hunting. When his friend fired the first shot he hit the ground quivering before realizing what had even happened. Another time a small farming plane flew overhead and Hood dove for the nearest cover reliving the days of Japanese bomber planes. Hood recalled feeling silly but decided to take a break from hunting for a little while until he wasn't bothered by it anymore. Wendell was able to adjust to life back home and settled down with his family. He never forgot his days in the service and proudly wore his uniform during an interview at a family Easter in April of 1996. The video created from that interview was able to provide insight into the life of a local World War II soldier and hero. On November 30<sup>th</sup>, 1997, at the age of seventy-nine, Wendell Hood passed away and was buried at Black Hills National Cemetery.

## Bibliography

*Army Days: World War II Memories*, Interviewer Reed Richards. Performed by Wendell Hood. Spearfish, SD. April 7, 1996.

Kirk, Kelly. "Pearl Harbor." Lecture, United States History II, Black Hills State University, Spearfish, SD, October 19, 2018.