

Dartmouth College Oral History Project  
The War Years at Dartmouth  
Interview with Robert '45 & Marge Paulson  
By Mary Donin  
September 17, 2007

DONIN: OK, Bob. You matriculated in 1941?

PAULSON: Nineteen forty-one, in early September.

DONIN: And it was Mr. Hopkins at that time.

PAULSON: Dr. Ernest Martin Hopkins was the dignified president over there in whatever hall it is. I can't remember. Sitting at a big desk in a big room, looking very mature, stern. But a very personable gentleman.

DONIN: And matriculation was over at Parkhurst?

PAULSON: At Parkhurst, right.

DONIN: Uh huh. So as a freshman, what dorm did you live in?

PAULSON: I lived in College Hall on the third floor, Room 302 College Hall. And one of the reasons College Hall was chosen was that I came here on a full-tuition scholarship. I don't know how I landed it. In fact, I don't know how I landed here. Except that the headmaster of my high school, Ruel Tucker, was class of 1923, and he was the headmaster at Brockton High School. I don't ever remember applying for Dartmouth. He just told me, you're admitted and you have a full-tuition scholarship. So all I could do was smile because my parents were not well to do. And they knew I was graduating from high school, but they didn't know what they could do about college. And so nothing had been discussed.

DONIN: That's great. And was this the first time you'd seen the campus, when you matriculated?

PAULSON: The first time I saw the campus, yes, was in September, and we didn't have a car. So friends of my parents drove us up to Hanover over 120, actually from Route 10 because [Interstate] 89 was not in existence in 1941. And came into town, and saw it for the first time with a farewell at the end of the day as my parents and their friends drove back to Massachusetts.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

PAULSON: And there I was.

DONIN: Can you describe again the event that you spoke about at the dinner last night, December 7<sup>th</sup>, an important day in history?

PAULSON: Well, before December 7<sup>th</sup>, everything was a surprise, including meeting my roommate, Jim Knowles, from Fairmont, West—by God—Virginia, who spoke with a funny accent. And of course I was the first time out of Massachusetts, who also spoke with a Massachusetts accent. So we amused each other for several months up to the time of that Sunday afternoon on December 7<sup>th</sup>, when we had a gathering of people. Jim and I had a nice little two-room suite. So we had sort of a living room and a radio. And classmates, they were all residents of the third floor of College Hall, and we were all gathered to hear the Columbia Broadcasting Symphony starting at one o'clock. And at one-oh-eight the radio broadcast was interrupted by a stern announcer's voice: "We interrupt this program to inform you that Pearl Harbor has been bombed." And there was a deathly silence in the room. Then they went right back to music. [Laughs] A deathly silence as we all realized that our lives had just begun to take a change for whatever—we didn't know what.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

PAULSON: So it became a somber sort of afternoon.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

PAULSON: And there was lots of radio broadcasting later in the day and the days following to get the information on what had happened. And the fact that 2700 people were killed, I think. And waves of Japanese bombers had come in over from the north, from carriers off to the north that hadn't been detected. So it was a completely surprise attack. The news developed with all the terrible information about it. And there were pictures in the newspapers shortly thereafter. And in the weekly news magazines that came out then like *Look* and other magazines that were photojournals with captions underneath all the pictures. So we were able to see within the week what had been described on the radio as a real catastrophe, with all of the battleships blown up.

DONIN: Was there already talk on campus at that point of the undergraduates signing up?

PAULSON: No. We were sort of oblivious. We knew that there was a war going on in Europe. But we didn't have much concern that it was any of our business because it was a war in Europe, and we were not in it. And of course President Roosevelt on Monday in his speech at Congress said we are declaring war on Japan and on Italy and Germany as well. And that started the conversations.

DONIN: Right. And what was the reaction at the college here in terms of their involvement. The Naval training school hadn't started yet.

PAULSON: Oh, no. No. The first thing the college did was shorten the semester so that we were all through with our freshman year in March instead of in June. And I never did get back to the Dartmouth campus until after the war ended. Because when I left here in March, there was a certainty of the draft ahead of me, and I just happened to sign up for a Signal Corps training program that I'd seen advertised in the *Boston Herald*. It was right in line with the sort of things I was interested in because I wanted to be a radio engineer at that time, since television hadn't been invented. And I wanted to get into radio because there was so much good music involved. But a buddy of mine from Brockton, my hometown, and I both signed up for this program. We went to a school at Northeastern, Boston Teachers' College, Northeastern, for something like nine months. Had a marvelous education, technical education. Among other things I remember we had an instructor who was shocked when one of my classmates said, "Are we talking about radar?" Radar was a top secret word then. And he swallowed and didn't answer the question.

DONIN: What was the message from the college when you left here in March? Did you have an understanding that you would be welcomed back here anytime to complete the program?

PAULSON: Well, I hadn't said I wasn't coming back.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

PAULSON: It's just that when I got home, things started to happen. So I never did come back for another semester until 1946.

DONIN: And when you came back, you were entering as a sophomore then?

PAULSON: I was fortunate because I had stayed in touch with a Professor Proctor who was head of the physics department all during my tenure in the Signal Corps. So I had 26 semester hours of credit for the education that I'd gotten in the Army when I came back here. So that's why I came back not as a second term freshman but as a second semester sophomore sort of almost first semester junior based on the 26 semester hours.

DONIN: That's terrific!

PAULSON: Yes.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

PAULSON: And then because of the training I had in the military, I was excused from all of the engineering labs at Thayer School and got myself a job. We were talking about it at the meeting this morning. That the Office of Naval Research had an ionospheric research program sponsored by Office of Naval Research, but managed by the Thayer School. And so I got a job [laughs] as a student on a part-time basis. I don't remember how many—I think I worked 20 hours a week. Which set me up beautifully since we were then student residents of the Wigwam Circle complex.

DONIN: So you came back with a wife?

PAULSON: I came back with a wife.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

PAULSON: Yes.

DONIN: And was the college prepared to have married couples on campus?

PAULSON: Oh, absolutely. Yes. That whole Wigwam Circle was built from barracks at Fort Ethan Allen up in Vermont. And they were designed four apartments upstairs and four apartments downstairs to a building. But one bedroom, a living room which had sort of a kitchenette capability at one end of it, and a very small kitchen with a two-burner hotplate. A small refrigerator. But they were very nice quarters for \$120 a month I remember. And we were very fortunate

being upstairs dwellers to have our home heated in the wintertime by hot air generated by the kerosene stove on the first floor.

[Laughs]

DONIN: Oh, great.

PAULSON: So we had warm floors all the time. And we're staying with Bob and Nancy Joy who were the people downstairs.

DONIN: Oh, that's wonderful. You've stayed friends all these years.

PAULSON: Yes. Well, we didn't see each other for a long time because Bob was a pediatrician down in Danbury, Connecticut. And I just lost touch with him. He and I sang together as freshmen. He was a beautiful tenor voice, and I was a sort of a good baritone voice. So we did duets together. And met each other in the freshman glee club. And at one point—and I can't remember when it was; whether it was in 1941 or in '46 after we came back—but he came down to my church in Brockton, and we sang duets on a Sunday.

DONIN: Oh, terrific. What was the social life like here when you came back with a wife?

PAULSON: Everybody was in the same boat. There were very few of the students who came back with children. But it was a baby boom place.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

PAULSON: And as I think I told you, we had two sons in '47 and '49. And the first daughter conceived in the parsonage in Norwich. That's my theory when conception occurred. The night we were going to get on a train and go down to New York to Great Neck, where we had rented an apartment. When we came back in '46, we were all in the same boat. And in my building—our building—we had the Joys, before the Joys, Dick—I can't remember his name. Do you remember his name, dear? Jane and Dick Elston. They were the first residents in the building.

MARGE PAULSON: His father was a professor here.

PAULSON: A professor of I don't remember what. But that was a reason he was here. And then the Joys came after they moved on and moved out. But they were '45s. And we had two more '45s with wives in

our building. And we had several other friends up and down the street.

DONIN: Uh huh.

PAULSON: So that we had a really friendly community of people all in the same boat. Married but without kids, but kids came along quite quickly.

DONIN: Right.

PAULSON: So we had a good social time.

DONIN: So when you got back, you started back into your classes?

PAULSON: Mm-hmm.

DONIN: Here at the college both as an undergrad course and then moved on to the Thayer School.

PAULSON: Thayer, right.

DONIN: And the percentage of students here then were all like you. They were sort of catching up with what was left of their undergrad years.

PAULSON: I think the median age was somewhere over 22 that first year of '46. There weren't very many freshmen that were straight out of high school or prep school. Most of the people who were students here were returning war veterans.

DONIN: Mmm. Now were you involved with a fraternity at all?

PAULSON: No. Freshmen were not allowed to join fraternities at that time. I don't know whether they are now or not. And when I got back we had our own fraternity—fraternity/sorority. So never did get into fraternity life.

DONIN: Uh huh. And was there I guess you'd call it a mess hall or dining hall?

PAULSON: Well, in College Hall was freshmen commons. And then the rest of the upper classmen ate over at the Thayer Dining Hall.

DONIN: But you didn't need to do that when you came back—or did you?

PAULSON: No. In fact we got a little income because two—Bill Levy and his friend Ralph somebody—were single undergraduate war veterans. And they came down for lunch every day.

DONIN: Came down to your apartment?

PAULSON: Yes.

DONIN: Oh, terrific.

PAULSON: It was just a short walk from the center of campus. So we made some money feeding them lunches, and they were voracious eaters. [Laughs]

DONIN: How did the campus feel when you came back, as opposed to how it was when you came as a freshman? Was there the same sort of sense of class unity?

PAULSON: No, it was completely different because freshman year, the freshman wore beanies and were treated as freshmen and not very well integrated into the life of the college. But when we came back it was different because we were all in the same boat. We were all married. And we did have single friends who lived here on campus—or lived in rooming around the town that we had known—that I had known in '41. So we had a good social life because there were lots of people that I had already met as a freshman.

DONIN: Uh huh. And what sort of activities did everybody undertake socializing, when you came back?

PAULSON: I don't have a clear answer to the question because I just don't recall what we did beyond get together for picnics or parties. Together with Bob and Jean Loomis, who were at the other end of our building, we did go on a weekend up to Moosilauke and stayed at the camp. And there was an adventure there because Marge and I walked a very well-marked trail up to the top of Moosilauke. And then decided to take a shortcut coming down. And the shortcut left us maybe 30 feet below where we started from. Within 15 or 20 feet going forward, we dropped something like 30 to 40 feet. And the mess that we were hiking through was blow down from the 1938 hurricane. So we had to go over trunks or under trunks. And it was a long, long walk, and we were exhausted by the time we got back. In fact there was a searching party—search party—coming out of the Moosilauke cabin area up a dirt road. And we were met by a

phalanx of people who were starting to get worried about us because we hadn't come back.

DONIN: Mmm. Mm-hmm.

PAULSON: And it was my decision. That having lost so much altitude so quickly, that we might as well just keep going. And I didn't realize how bad it was going to be. So it took us a long time.

DONIN: Scary.

PAULSON: Yes. I don't know if we really could have climbed back up to the top of the mountain and gone back down the trail. I never did think about it. We just kept going. [Laughs]

DONIN: Uh huh. Now when you came back there was a different president here as well.

PAULSON: John Dickey, yes.

DONIN: How did that feel to you, a new president?

PAULSON: Well, he wasn't a new president then. I think he'd come maybe a semester or two before in 1945. And we didn't come back until '46. So I knew that there was a new president. I did meet him early on, I think some sort of a formal let's get acquainted with you guys. So I knew him as a very personable gentleman from the beginning. And I'd read lots about his State Department experience and the esteem in which he was held by the public in general.

DONIN: Mm-hmm. And were there members of the class of 1945 who for whatever reason had not served in the military who just graduated routinely?

PAULSON: They all graduated, and it was accelerated graduation. So I think the first of the people who didn't go into the military were graduated in 1943 with the equivalent of a bachelor's degree for four years of education. But they had been taking accelerated courses year round. There was no summer vacation.

DONIN: So it was really a compressed experience.

PAULSON: Yes.

- DONIN: And that applied to the students—I mean they accelerated the courses for whether you were going into the military or not.
- PAULSON: They just accelerated the courses, yes.
- DONIN: Yes.
- PAULSON: As I said, I finished in March, my first semester, and I think in April the second semester started. But it was not long afterwards. And then they brought the V-12 in, too, so there was a training program for Naval officer candidates, right from the beginning of 1942.
- DONIN: You were gone by then. Were you gone? Well....
- PAULSON: I left in March.
- DONIN: Right. And was the V-12 finished and gone by the time you got back?
- PAULSON: Yes. I think it ended sometime in late 1945. After the end of the, declared ends of the wars, it was closed down.
- DONIN: Mm-hmm.
- PAULSON: There was no sign of it when we came back here.
- DONIN: So some of the dormitories—I mean in addition to Sachem and Wigwam Circle—some of the dormitories were also turned over and renovated for—
- PAULSON: The Mass complex, I think. Main Mass, you know, and on the other side, whatever the name of that one is; I've forgotten. But it's another three-building complex right behind all of the administration buildings on the west side of campus.
- DONIN: Right.
- PAULSON: And there were changes with the addition of a little kitchenette kind of capability. So that there were married students living there, too.
- DONIN: So was the campus more married returning vets than it was single traditional undergraduates?

- PAULSON: That's my sense, yes. That there weren't very many single freshmen people at all in the year we came back. And then it very quickly started to go back into normal sized, unmarried, non-veteran students. So that had happened by 1947. Any Dartmouth student who wanted to come back was welcomed, whether they were single or married.
- DONIN: And how about V-12 students who trained here? Could they come back as a regular student?
- PAULSON: Yes. I can't remember that I knew anybody who had been in V-12 and was continuing, but I probably had several acquaintances that fitted that description.
- DONIN: They'd had such a good experience training here, that they wanted to come back as students.
- PAULSON: They just wanted to come back as students, yes. And of course with the GI Bill, it was easy to apply for admission because you had your tuition paid by the GI Bill.
- DONIN: Was it your sense that they basically took anybody that asked?
- PAULSON: I think so, yes. Yes.
- DONIN: So it was a very different admissions picture because of the GI Bill and the V-12.
- PAULSON: I think what the college wanted to maintain was a welcome back kind of atmosphere as long as you had been here at some point, in V-12 or as an undergraduate.
- DONIN: Uh huh.
- PAULSON: You were welcome to come back and finish. In the class of '45, there were some number of GIs or veterans who finished their education somewhere else. So I know at reunions I've met men that graduated from Northwestern or Iowa State or somewhere else.
- DONIN: But they're still considered part of your class?
- PAULSON: Absolutely. Yes.

DONIN: Once you've matriculated, you're always—Dartmouth never lets you go.

PAULSON: Yes. And for the years I ran the newsletter, there was a lot of comment from people like that that had never come back to complete their education here, who would write in and tell what they were doing, just maintain the relationship with the class as something special.

DONIN: Mm-hmm. Do you think the war experience for all of you enhanced your feeling of class unity more than a sort of traditional undergraduate experience where you come here and stay the full four years and then go?

PAULSON: Well, it enhanced the Dartmouth life experience because class didn't matter. Maybe you were '45 or '44 or '46 or '47. It was everybody together who were veterans with some strange class designation [Laughs] based on the way they served.

DONIN: In fact it sounds like there was actually more class unity. Because you had Dartmouth that brought you together, but you also had your veterans status which brought you together.

PAULSON: Our unity as a class, I remember, starting sometime in the fifties when we started having these minis. But I don't think there was anything— Well, there was 1950, we had two boys, and we came to a fifth reunion that was held here on the campus. We had a picnic out at Occom Pond and did all kinds of things together. And we had two sons with us.

DONIN: That's wonderful.

PAULSON: Then after that we didn't attend a reunion for quite a while because we moved to New York and then moved to California. So the first time we came back here was in September of '66. And I was thinking of that as we walked by the C&G House on the corner. When we came back to town, we were living in a motel down in Massachusetts waiting for our house to be ready. And we decided to come up for a football game. And there sitting on a bench at the C&G House was Roger Barr. Roger Barr?

MARGE PAULSON: No.

PAULSON: Roger Brown.

MARGE PAULSON:Brown.

PAULSON: Roger Brown. And I had known him beforehand. Marge knew him because he came from Belmont, I think?

MARGE PAULSON:Belmont or Newton.

PAULSON: Or Newton. Yes. And so Marge had had a friendship with him and other people in high school in the Belmont area. And so we were back.

DONIN: Great. That's great. Well, we're almost at the end of our time.

PAULSON: Okay.

DONIN: So if there's something else, a final thought about your time here that you want to sum up for the last few minutes of the tape, you should feel free.

PAULSON: Well, the feeling of gratitude I have can't be defined. The fact that somehow I was admitted here, I think with the maneuverings of my headmaster, Ruel Tucker. But it was such a great experience. My parents never would have thought of my going to Dartmouth—or letting me go to Dartmouth—because they couldn't afford it. And yet somehow I managed one semester of the freshman year and was financially okay because of the scholarship I had. And then after that, I was on the GI Bill. So no problem. So I am most grateful. Well, for another reason I'm grateful is that Dartmouth was a single specialty institution that had never given multi-faceted degrees to anybody. And when I got my degree in '48, it was a bachelor of arts *cum laude*, but without specification. Because I had taken enough courses to have a minor in music, a minor in English, and all the courses to get me into the Thayer School. So I just have a BA, and I happen to have a 3.3 I think it was average. So I have a BA *cum laude* from Dartmouth. And I was proud to get—with the family pushing behind me—a master's degree in '49. My bachelor's degree was '48. 'Forty-nine I had a master's degree with distinction as I had gotten even better grades at the Thayer School.

DONIN: At Thayer. Terrific. It's a great accomplishment considering the turmoil of that time, that everybody was able to come back and finish their degrees.

PAULSON: Yes, yes. And of course I had a completely unusual World War II—I had a good World War II because I went to Camp Crowder, Missouri, for basic training. Went to Fort Monmouth to OCS and to officers' school. And then I worked in the Signal Corps publications agency. That took three years. Then the fourth year I was in Italy as an administrative officer. So I had a great World War II. I had all of the benefits that eventually gave me under the GI Bill. Because in addition to the \$120 a month, all my books were paid for. I remember I had an elegant Keufel and Esser slide rule that was something like a \$50 item that was paid for by the GI Bill.

DONIN: That's impressive. Nice to hear there's a happy ending.

PAULSON: Oh, yes. There certainly is.

**[End of Interview]**