

Dartmouth College Oral History Project
The War Years at Dartmouth
Interview with Walter R. Peterson '47
By Mary Stelle Donin
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DONIN: First of all, I'd like to find out how it is that you chose Dartmouth in the first place.

PETERSON: Well, I didn't really choose it in the first place. I did later. I signed up for the—and frankly I don't think that with my academic record at that time I would have been selected had I attempted to get into Dartmouth. I signed up for the Naval reserve [...] and I went off to William and Mary. I got accepted there, and I was a kind of fairly decent basketball player. And I got a partial scholarship to be a basketball player. [...] And I played on the basketball team at William and Mary and all that kind of stuff, on the freshman team because freshmen couldn't play varsity. But I thought I was headed for a career doing what I liked to do best which was play basketball more than go to school or anything. But my father wanted to get me out of there. One of his friends said— And I didn't like the weather down there. I don't know if you've ever been down in Williamsburg.

DONIN: It's hot.

PETERSON: It's hot in the summer, and then it's very humid and damp in the wintertime. And I thought, well, it would be better to get back home. But I could've stayed right there. But some friend influenced my father. He came to see us. In the meantime, my brother was pretty bright, and he was applying for Annapolis, and he eventually did get into Annapolis.

DONIN: Hmm.

PETERSON: So he brought us both back to UNH and put us in UNH. Now UNH was very different then than it is today.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

PETERSON: It was smaller in every way. But I liked it fine, you know, and I'd play basketball there on the varsity. I could play. Went out and—I won't go into that; that's not to the Dartmouth thing. But I got through my

courses and did fairly well and began to be a little bit better student at William and Mary and at UNH. And then I got sent up to Dartmouth in the V-12 unit, immediately right after that.

DONIN: Oh! So what class—how many semesters had you gotten under your belt by then?

PETERSON: Two. One at William and Mary and one at UNH.

DONIN: UNH.

PETERSON: And then they sent me to Dartmouth. Well, I ended up going three semesters to Dartmouth in the V-12 unit.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

PETERSON: And then I was sent off, first to Asbury Park [...] and then was sent up to Columbia. [...]

DONIN: Okay. So you're at Columbia.

PETERSON: Yes.

DONIN: And you're still in the V-12? You're still training with the V-12? Yes?

PETERSON: Yes. Now I'm a midshipman.

DONIN: Okay.

PETERSON: Well, I was a midshipman at— But now I have a little more status, the same rank which is I guess the lowest rank in the Navy. I was an aspirant for the actual lowest rank in the Navy which is to become an ensign, you know, a second lieutenant; that's about the lowest rank I found out. I thought that'd be pretty good. Please my mother. [Laughs] [...] And of course one of the great things eventually that Dartmouth did for me was it was a real liberalizing kind of effect, I learned later, because I had, you know, many years in education later. And one of the best things that I brought from Dartmouth was the importance of diversity and bringing people together.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

- PETERSON: Now you can't take it for granted. Diversity can be a negative as well as a positive. They're beginning to find that out now. Because people left to their own devices will drift toward the familiar, people they know. If there are only a few, then they will have to by necessity reach out, and it works.
- DONIN: Right.
- PETERSON: Twenty times that is not necessarily better.
- DONIN: Right.
- PETERSON: It just requires different tactics.
- DONIN: Mm-hmm.
- PETERSON: To get the people to mix because that's the most comfortable group to be with. You see what I mean?
- DONIN: Sure. Right.
- PETERSON: I got to figure that out in my dumb little head. [Laughter]
- DONIN: So tell me how you got back to Dartmouth.
- PETERSON: [...] There's one thing about— A little anecdote about Dartmouth. You know Dartmouth people, they tend to look after each other. And I had to go up before a board and the chairman I noticed was from Dartmouth College, a Dartmouth graduate. I don't know his name or anything like that. He was like a full lieutenant or something. Here I was—and now I'm a new ensign. And that's where I would be coming in the lowest rank in the Navy. [Laughs] So I wasn't cocky at all about being an officer. I wasn't a boats person or anything. But I did see that Dartmouth College, see. And he looks down. There's like a three-man team, and he's the chairman. He says: "Dartmouth College, huh?" I said, "Yes, sir." And I smiled you know. "Yes, sir." And he said, "We've got good duty for you." And they assigned me the duty as the second officer of two on a yard tug. [...] By this time the war was over, and so you think, what are you going to do? And I wanted to get back to college. Now I'd been to the University of New Hampshire, I'd been to William and Mary, I'd been to Dartmouth.
- DONIN: Did you have to apply to be a regular student at Dartmouth?

PETERSON: Yes, I had to start all over again. But of course I had a big advantage having been there three terms.

DONIN: Yes.

PETERSON: And they kind of wanted to take veterans back. And that also resulted in some problems because there was a new group of young kids coming in as civilians, and here were a whole lot of guys when I was there who were pretty salty, you know, from being servicemen. I didn't have that problem because I was there to graduate and get through and get out, get out in the world and start earning a living with my wife. But now I'm in civilian clothes. I applied to get—I put an application in for all three schools. I got in into William and Mary; didn't want to go back down there. It's a perfectly good school, but I didn't want to go down there because of the weather. I liked the university; something about it appealed to me always because I said, well, the university is where the average person goes and gets a good education, and I shouldn't just be high-hat on that. But I got back into Dartmouth, and I decided that's where I really want to go. And the reason I wanted to go—I found it out in my mind when I was in the V-12 in the Navy there—was... I remember going down. And a man was speaking, and he was—and there was a circle of people around, some faculty, staff people, students, some of us in Navy uniforms, listening to him. And it was Ernest Martin Hopkins. And I honestly can't remember a damn thing that man said. But he was so sincere, you know, that it just got me. I said—I looked around, and I said, Geez, this is a beautiful place. And they've got good ideals and all this kind of stuff. And the thing that really got me was here—and this is very important; I learned this for education later—the whole idea of diversity was important, but the size and how you manage it was very important. I don't know why I was just taking stock of these things. And I also knew that there was a big advantage to being—see, of the three of them, the one that had the greatest diversity was Dartmouth. And there was a great advantage to being in a place where you'd be interested in the discussions. You'd hear lectures. The lecturing teaching was a big thing then. And I had a bunch of courses. I took like Russian civilization, Chinese civilization, all that kind of stuff. Sort of a second cousin to philosophy.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

PETERSON: And I liked that kind of stuff, and I was interested in it. And Wing-Tsit Chan and Dimitri von Mohrenschildt, they were teachers, and I liked them. And I would go in and talk to them in their offices. That's just how I operated. I wasn't conning anybody, honestly. And I just liked them, and they were nice, and I was trying to learn. So I did pretty well. In those kinds of courses I did well.

DONIN: So what was your major?

PETERSON: My major was education.

DONIN: Ah.

PETERSON: Frowned on now. And too much of that was wasted. Method courses.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

PETERSON: After I'd had one or two or three, that was plenty. More than enough—more than enough! I would have been much better off, being me, to have had a major in comparative literature if they had it. I don't even know if they had it. Because I like that stuff and the kind of history of the world through literature and how it evolved. And I would go up in the Baker Library and read and read and read.

DONIN: Up in the Tower Room.

PETERSON: The Tower Room, that's where I spent hours up there, reading. Did I know how to comprehend it all? No. I didn't. But I knew more than if I had never done it.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

PETERSON: And I read Karl Marx, and I read all these things.

DONIN: So how many semesters did you have to do to get your degree?

PETERSON: Three.

DONIN: Three more?

PETERSON: I had three and three more.

DONIN: Right.

- PETERSON: And so....
- DONIN: And they were going year round at this point, weren't they?
- PETERSON: No, no. Well, I guess they were. But they had not developed the Dartmouth Plan.
- DONIN: No, no.
- PETERSON: That came when I was governor.
- DONIN: Right, right. But for a while Hopkins had been running the school year round in order to get the V-12ers trained and out of here.
- PETERSON: Well, I think the V-12ers—and in this Dartmouth is no different than other colleges, very fine colleges and universities around the world—they needed the money, too.
- DONIN: They sure did.
- PETERSON: The support that—they performed a very vitally important service. And I don't think there was the anti-military feeling or any of that kind of stuff. That was a different era. That was an era when people were called upon to sacrifice.
- DONIN: Mm-hmm.
- PETERSON: Which is the great thing that's lacking today, in my judgment. Because, you see, I felt that I was fortunate to have a chance to study and maybe become an officer and get all this, somehow training you for something. You didn't know what the heck it is. And I thought later, the fact that you were at a selective college, however you got there, that it was either sink or swim, and I worked hard, you know. And I had some excellent teachers. But I was not one who thought the teachers alone were what did it. What made the experience so valuable was that in the classroom there were very bright people, geographically dispersed. [...] I was much better equipped when I came back.
- DONIN: You were a much better student, you mean.
- PETERSON: Well, I was a better—I wasn't a great student. But I was better. And I got—I learned a lot that's not shown in my marks. I learned a lot

about myself through the experiences of a naval officer and having responsibility and all that sort of thing. I obviously learned the value of what Dartmouth's extra qualities that set Dartmouth apart, which now are mirrored in different ways by particularly private colleges all over America. I've since been a college president and everything. But I learned how to raise money, and I got some money from Dartmouth people, from my little college, by telling them why, how I'd learned at Dartmouth. And that's what I put in my application. But I said what I'd learned at Dartmouth about the value of each and every student and the importance of peer effect on you was tremendous. [...] What it did was sensitize you to how other people looked at things because their life experience was somewhat different than your life experience. And so therefore you take that into account in all your personal dealings with them.

DONIN: Sure.

PETERSON: With respect, not you're a dumb Southerner or a whatever, which shows how ignorant you are if you do that.

DONIN: Mm-hmm. Exactly.

PETERSON: But to parents who tend to be afraid of that influence, they think it's all the faculty. Well, it's initiated, many of the thoughts are initiated by faculty. But what is it that makes it carry forward until it relates in something concrete and substantial.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

PETERSON: And that peer influence is very, very important. And a place like Dartmouth, the peer influence was a very high ability because they had to be good to get in.

DONIN: Who was your social group when you came back after the war? Did you join a fraternity?

PETERSON: Yes, Beta Theta Pi. Yes. I liked it there. There were some jocks in there, but they were bright. I liked some things about it; some things I didn't like about it. I liked the—I didn't mind the jock culture if it's about sports. I'm not one who likes to condemn somebody else or some other rivals. I like to fight hard and with honesty and effort. I learned it's much more important. Some of your greatest friends are people you compete against.

DONIN: Right.

PETERSON: You win their respect or you respect them, you know.

DONIN: Were you able to play basketball when you were back here?

PETERSON: Yes, I played some. Not much. I actually was probably good enough, but I had about three semesters to go, and then I was going to get out. And the reason I say I was good enough to do it, I played against four out of the first five most valuable players in the NBA All-Star game, and I did well against those people. I played the games and scored.

DONIN: Wow!

PETERSON: I was a good scorer, and I could play.

DONIN: But you were focused on finishing up.

PETERSON: Yes. And that was no longer.... You know you're okay, I'm okay, that kind of thing. And I'm good at something I like to do. But I'm not stupid. [...]

DONIN: How about your memories of— So when you were first here as a V-12er....

PETERSON: Yes.

DONIN: President Hopkins was here, as you mentioned. But when you came back, President Dickey was here. Is that right?

PETERSON: Yes. Dickey came when I was there.

DONIN: November of '45.

PETERSON: Yes. I came to think that Dickey was just about the greatest. He was my model for being a good college president.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

PETERSON: John Dickey. I really admired him. See, I used to go to alumni meetings and hear him talk. And I watched him come around. He came over —he would walk around the campus and say hello. In those days you'd come into—you'd get an interview with them.

There were—I never got on the carpet or anything with him. I certainly wasn't one of the big academic producers. So you know, I was just right out there in the middle. That didn't mean I wasn't learning.

DONIN: Right.

PETERSON: Sure. I was.

DONIN: And how about—I'm curious about your class assignment. When you applied to be a regular student here after the war, how was it that they assigned you to the class of 1947? Do you remember?

PETERSON: I don't know. I had a roommate who conned me into— Paul is dead now—he was a very good athlete here. And he got me to buy a class ring in 1948. Now actually, if I'd been a really good student, I would have been in the class of '45 or '46. I'm 87 years old now, you know. So I'm finding my classmates are 83, 84 or something like that.

DONIN: Oh, I see. Yes.

PETERSON: You see because of the war and everything—

DONIN: Yes. But there were a lot of people in your position who had been away for, you know, a number of years.

PETERSON: Yes. That's right.

DONIN: In the war. And they came back to a random class that doesn't really necessarily match their age.

PETERSON: I find that most of my classmates are like maybe three years younger.

DONIN: Did you identify with the class of '47 when you were here?

PETERSON: Yes, I did. I liked it once I got to know the class. I identified with the class of '47, and I identified with a lot of people in '46.

DONIN: When did you actually graduate?

PETERSON: I graduated from my class. I finished in February. So I never came back to my graduation. [Laughter] Can I tell you a little story?

DONIN: Mmm.

PETERSON: Years later, after I was governor, I was president of Franklin Pierce College. And Dave McLaughlin, whom I knew well, came down to see me at Pierce, and he was in a jam because the students had.... You know I had—you have to get the thing in context. I was the governor when they took over Parkhurst Hall.

DONIN: I know.

PETERSON: And all that. [...] But that day, just briefly, about the takeover of Parkhurst Hall, Dickey.... Bill Johnson came to me. We set up a command presence off the campus. I felt the worst thing you could do is have the governor right out there visible. That they're trying to finally draw you in. And how we handled that was to get a cease and desist order from the judge. Send a civil rights lawyer in, a local person very highly regarded in that field—also a particular friend of mine—to read... to let the students, advise the students—because they were in the hands of, you know, people who were manipulating them—and tell them what their rights were and everything else. And then when— I also got, I got the Vermont state troopers to NH and swore them in as deputy sheriffs. Bill Johnson came to me. He said, "Walter, John Dickey is very, very uptight and very afraid because he heard one or two of the deputy sheriffs, who aren't the sharpest guys, you know, saying they want to get their hands on several of these protestors. That's how they feel, you know." I said, "Don't worry." And this is like an experience you never forget in your life. Here was my president, whom I thought was the very finest, epitomizes excellence in leadership. And I had to go in a room with him and calm him down. And I could understand because I'd had a similar experience myself. I said, "I want you to know I'm going to go and talk to these people before they come."

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

PETERSON: And there'd be no clubs, nothing. And I knew how to do that. You're talking about an inspirational speech. But my tack with them when I met with them down in the Lebanon...

DONIN: Armory.

PETERSON: Armory was that... This is probably one of the most important events in your life. "Anybody who hits anybody, does anything, is

letting down all of his fellows because the test and the exercise is going to be carried out in a fishbowl with everybody watching. And if one person lets him down or does anything, he lets everybody else down. This is a test of your professionalism. My faith is in you. And I'm telling you no clubs. They'll deal with you, but no violence."

DONIN: So no guns, no clubs, no nothing.

PETERSON: No guns, no clubs, nothing. I said, "Frankly, if you people with your professional training can't go in with your bare hands with some kind of terrified, scared kids who don't know quite what they're doing, something's wrong. And I don't believe that's the case." "I believe," I always say, "I believe you can do that." And I know because some of those fellows now—some of those people who were in that audience are now in positions of leadership in law enforcement in the state. And they'll say, I remember that. There was tremendous movement. Oh, and that galvanized them. They couldn't touch— See, they could not do anything; that was our limit. And they came back, when they came out, the students— What was it? Something for Democratic Action.

DONIN: Students for Democratic...

PETERSON: Sure. I'm not trying to condemn anybody else.

DONIN: Right.

PETERSON: They thought what they were doing was right. But when the time came, they weren't getting arrested; let the students get arrested, see. And, well, the way the law works, you can't protect the students from what's going to happen to them. But you can change a lot of effect. And so, I had to speak afterwards and some of the parents were upset. They thought their kids could break the law or do anything. I don't know what they were thinking. But, you know, this was a pretty darned important thing. It was important to be handled right. I know that I wasn't on the ins with the Nixon administration or any of those people. But I did find out that they felt that these kinds of offenses had happened all over, at every Ivy League college and so forth. And the best it was... The best place it was handled in the whole country was Hanover, New Hampshire. So I've always been very proud of that. [...]

[End of Interview]