

Dartmouth College Oral History Project
The War Years at Dartmouth
Interview with Peter Beck '45
By Mary Stelle Donin
September 25, 2010

DONIN: Today is Saturday, September 25, 2010. My name is Mary Donin. We are here in Hanover, New Hampshire with Dr. Peter Beck, Dartmouth class of 1945 and Dartmouth Medical School class of '45, as well. Okay, Dr. Beck, the first thing we always like to find out from our narrators is how is it you that ended up coming to Dartmouth? Were you following a sibling here, which I think I know the answer to?

BECK: Yes, and that sibling's classmate in Montpelier Seminary was a nephew of Hopkins's wife, and from that connection, that nephew—who is still alive—introduced my brother, I believe, to the Hopkinses and that was a very personal relationship. In fact, my brother lived for some time in the chauffeur's quarters in the president's house here on campus and he was quite close to the Hopkins family.

DONIN: So, let me understand that. So, what was your brother's name?

BECK: His nickname was Skipper, but his real name was Adrian.

DONIN: So, Adrian came here in what class?

BECK: Forty-one.

DONIN: Class of '41?

BECK: Yes.

DONIN: And so he was living in the chauffeur's house behind President Hopkins's house.

BECK: No. It goes back earlier in that at Montpelier Seminary, he met this nephew of Hopkins's wife, who was also going to Montpelier Seminary, and I think my brother was sort of coaching and helping him; he wasn't terribly smart. He spent his life in the military and I think ended up being a sergeant, but a very nice guy and a very loyal guy. And I think that was the introduction that my brother had to the Hopkins family. And he was a

pretty unusual guy, even at prep school—Montpelier Seminary was a Methodist prep school—and so he had no trouble getting in here.

DONIN: So, when he came to Dartmouth, he stayed in touch, obviously, with the Hopkins family.

BECK: Yeah, because, as I said, he needed an accommodation and since that chauffeur's quarters weren't utilized, Ernest Hopkins allowed him to live there. I don't think he paid any rent.

DONIN: So, where were you at the time that he was here going to school?

BECK: Well, both of us went to a one-room schoolhouse for eight years. We didn't believe in high school, because if you didn't get educated after eight years there wasn't any point in spending any more money on you. And my brother went to Montpelier Seminary. I went for two years with an aunt and uncle, and I think that I matured a little bit faster than they gave me credit for, having run a farm by myself when I was thirteen.

They used to take half the day off to put me on the train and then I'd get off, have the conductor sign the back of the ticket, and then start hitchhiking from Boston up to either here or on the way to the Canadian border where my parents were. I had those experiences of sleeping at police stations in ungodly places. A lot of that came about because I couldn't start off early in the morning to get on those trains, so I'd be in there half the night.

At any rate, after two years of going to school with an aunt and uncle in Medford, Mass., I wanted to be closer—or the family wanted me to be closer to where my brother was, so they found me a place over in Norwich with a very elderly couple that were living on a sort of survival farm. They were very amusing because, well, we used to gather leaves for bedding for the cow they had, and at night, instead of having tea or something they would have hot water. And Mary, who was a big, tall lady with a wart with long hair growing out of it on her cheek, and Judd, who was a hunchbacked small person—Mary would say, "I don't think that water is as hot as it should be tonight, Judd." And Judd would say, "Mary, you know, don't apologize. If those poor Bulgarians only had half as much as we've got, wouldn't those people be happy? Wouldn't they be happy?" They both ended up at the Hitchcock and one of the reasons for their demise was advanced undernourishment.

DONIN: Oh, dear. So, you lived with them for how long?

BECK: I lived with them for quite a while, and then one time I was coming in the wintertime. I found a kid's wallet over in Norwich on the road and I saw

some kids down the road and I held the wallet up and yelled to them. And this kid came over running and saying, "Mine, mine!" And there was a man who saw this named Douglas and he was very impressed that I was returning that wallet, and so when I—how did that work? I think somehow or other I was looking for another place to live and I lived with somebody who was on the Dartmouth—I mean, worked the *Hanover Gazette*. And they had a kid and I was supposed to take care of this kid and that lasted about two weeks. That kid just wasn't housebroken and I slept with the kid and he used to wet the bed and I couldn't understand what was happening. But, anyway, at the end of two weeks the mother and I got together and we both decided that taking care of this kid wasn't cut out for me.

So, then I went to Mr. Douglas, who had seen me pick up the wallet, and he had a friend over here whose name was Bill Brock. Bill Brock practically owned half of the real estate in Hanover and these two were friends. And so Bill put me into a house down here where there was an attic and my duties were to take care of the furnace of that house when the other caretaker was drunk, which happened quite often, but actually I really had very little to do. That house was the widow of the only person that was killed in building the Baker Library. There was one person killed on that job. So, I felt like a king. I had my own quarters there and I was going to Hanover High School at that time.

So, the long answer to your question is the reason I came here and went to high school here was because my brother was here. But, my brother was so active in campus activities—you'll see that in that thing that I gave you—he could take part in all of the wonderful extracurricular activities that are available here as a student and still keep fairly respectable grades by crashing the books at the last minute.

DONIN: And how did you do when you got here in 1941? Were you well prepared from Hanover High School?

BECK: Well, I don't think I was well—I never knew what homework was. I had plenty of homework as far as being a farm kid. You know, we shoveled the cows by hand, and used horses, and I hauled wood out of Canada and all that stuff when I was quite—well, I left home when I was thirteen, hitchhiking. That was the first experience of riding freight trains, and sleeping in a police station, and getting eaten by bedbugs. But... Let's see. What were you...?

DONIN: Did you feel well prepared when you started here at Dartmouth?

BECK: Oh, that's right. You know, not really, because, as I said, you learned the three Rs in going to a one-room school, but there wasn't anything else.

Even when I got to Massachusetts I had to struggle compared to the kids that I was competing against down there. But, on the other hand, I was the salutatorian in my class at Hanover High, and the valedictorian and I were lifelong friends. He's been dead—he went to Dartmouth as well. He's been dead for a long time. He was a pilot.

DONIN: So, when you got here in the fall of '41, the war had obviously not been declared yet.

BECK: No.

DONIN: And Pearl Harbor had not happened yet, so you had sort of a traditional first semester at Dartmouth.

BECK: Yeah. Well, no. I was still in high school. I worked at one of these eateries, you know, that was run by—gosh, I can't forget the name. It will come to me. But, I remember when that was announced and everybody paused and wondered how their lives were going to be affected.

DONIN: And how was yours affected? What happened?

BECK: Well, I got my tuition taken over. I was in the army.

DONIN: Did you enlist right away?

BECK: No. It was almost sort of forced upon us. I was already in medical school. Now, wait a minute. How did that happen? I think when I was later in medical school, we were all thrown into ASTP.

DONIN: Oh, yes.

BECK: Army Specialized Training Program. And I didn't realize until recently that a lot of engineers and other specialties that the military thought could be useful down the road were also thrown into those programs. The navy had a V-12 program, et cetera. Shortly before the Battle of the Bulge, these other groups—particularly the engineers and whatnot—were all taken out of school and suddenly given their three months' basic training, and the next thing you knew they were in the Battle of the Bulge, and they took quite a lot of casualties there thinking they were going to avoid the war completely by staying in a classroom. I didn't know until recently that we were sort of a select few that they figured would be worth keeping in school.

DONIN: So, when you started here at Dartmouth, did you know you were going to be pre-med at that point?

BECK: No.

DONIN: When did you decide to do pre-med?

BECK: Well, you know, a lot of doctors will tell you that they got the urge very early in their lives and so forth, which I always take with a grain of salt, but my attitude was that everything had to be somewhat practical and it was probably the result of the Great Depression and the hardship of growing up on a farm—a survival farm, so to speak. So, I looked at the idea of a liberal education somewhat as: Gee whiz. I can pick that up anytime. I can pick up a textbook and figure out what else has gone on in the world, but if you're going to make a living in the world you got to figure out something. I probably would have become an engineer if my math had been better. When I ran into calculus here at Dartmouth, I worked very hard at it and got Cs. I don't know whether that was my stupidity or the professor or whatever. So, I gravitated into pre-med.

DONIN: Now, this was before ASTP, right?

BECK: Yeah, it must have been.

DONIN: So, how were your first few years here at Dartmouth? Were they impacted by the war? Did a lot of your classmates leave? A lot of your professors leave?

BECK: Well, before—you know, when I came here and then when Mr. Brock got me the place to live, and then I was working in one of these food places, and so—Well, let's see. The next thing that happened was that I was working for a professor who had been the Hungarian ambassador to the United States, and when the war was building up, or at some point along the way, he was without a job. I don't know if it was before or after Hungary got invaded, but he ended up here as a professor on the Dartmouth campus. And he had Old World ideas about having butlers and so forth when he would have gatherings with the students, and I was supposed to be serving them as his lackey, so to speak. And then I also would have to mow his lawn on a weekly basis in the middle of the summer when the grass, it wouldn't grow at all, and at that point he lived somewhat out of town. I had bought my first motorcycle from somebody who had gone off to war. That's a long story. That motorcycle was the biggest piece of junk going. So, I was spending most of my time working

on that motorcycle, which I thought was going to save me time getting back and forth.

And then a man heard about me, who lived in Lyme, and he called me up and said that he wanted me to move up there. So, I began to try to find out the parameters of what he wanted or what I was supposed to do and he would just throw them aside and said, "Don't worry about that," or whatever. And he was a very nice guy who had survived the Great Depression by having an insurance, and he had some kind of an injury. And, somehow or another he was getting a lifetime remuneration. I think it was a huge amount, something like \$650 a month. And he had this incredible place in Lyme where you were up high. If you went up the hill in the back you could see the whole presidential ranch. And if you looked down you could see that pond as you drive outside of Lyme. And I had this old motorcycle thinking I was going to get back and forth on that. And so, he went out and bought me a motorcycle. So, when I started—I don't know, that might have been the second year in school. Anyway, I was commuting back and forth from Lyme. And he also rented a place on campus: a room when it was raining. But, I would take off early in the morning for an eight o'clock class and roar down along the Connecticut River through the early fog that was coming up out of the river and then arrive up here in my class at eight o'clock, you know, having just had this wonderful exhilarating experience.

DONIN: So, did you ever live in the dormitories?

BECK: Yeah. Actually, the first year. Yeah. And early in that—I lived over in Wheeler and the first thing I remember is that they had a—the upperclassmen in the dorm told all of the freshmen that they had to gather as a group down at the bottom of the stairwell, and while we were down waiting, wondering what was going to happen next, the upperclassmen on the top floor were there with big buckets of water and all of a sudden that whole crowd was doused in water. And then a fight sort of developed and water was flying and buckets and whatnot. And then Wormwood. You remember him? You've heard that name?

DONIN: Nelson Wormwood.

BECK: Yeah. He was called to the scene. He was slowly crawling up the stairs and somebody let go a bucket on top of Wormwood and the next day all hell broke loose, but eventually society regained its posture and we went on from there. I don't think anybody was punished.

And then later on, there was a—As the war heated up and everybody knew that they were soon going to be heading off to god-knows-where, there was a sort of feeling of, you know, you'd lost control of

your future, so eat, drink, and be merry. Anyway, one of the guys built a bar over at the workshop that we had over in Bissell Hall. It was a beautiful piece of workmanship and it did a very good job of serving guys. They would buy beer by the keg and bring it in there and everybody would pile in. [Laughter] So, that was my first experience at getting drunk and seeing bar girls sitting around on stools and whatnot.

DONIN: And this was in Bissell Hall?

BECK: This was—No, that was in Wheeler.

DONIN: Wheeler. So, it sounds like your class stayed around for a while before they started going off to sign up to go to do their military service.

BECK: Yeah, pretty much, because we were sort of a younger bunch. I remember, I think it was mandatory that you had to spend your first year in a dorm or have a dorm room, and I always felt myself a little on the outside of the average Dartmouth student who didn't have the background I had of being a foreigner born abroad speaking another language. My brother, when he went to grammar school couldn't speak any English and so forth. And you lead sort of an isolated existence if you're on a farm. You go to school, but then the minute school is out you go back and work. And so, I was looking forward to having a roommate. And this was a guy named Bill Freese, and he had a band. He came from Pittsfield, New Hampshire, and the motto of his band was: "Billy Freese's music pleases." And I think poor Bill Freese didn't know what in the world he was stuck with when he had me as his roommate.

I remember I was trying to grow sunflowers in the middle of the winter and was heating them with electricity in their dirt. And so there were these sunflowers kicking around the thing—they never got very far—and other things. So, he finally figured his only salvation for having a worthwhile experience at Dartmouth was to move out on me. I can't remember who I got as a replacement. I don't think there was a replacement. Bill Freese, he died very early.

DONIN: Oh, dear. So, did you have occasion to spend time with Earnest Martin Hopkins since he was—

BECK: No.

DONIN: No?

BECK: It's bothered me a great deal because my brother had so many friends here on campus and he was so active in the debates that were going on

about shall we go into the war, or shan't we get in. He was very much against going in and then later on, he—I remember one of his remarks was: "It's a bad war, but it has to be fought." And whatever he did he threw himself in wholeheartedly once he made up his mind. And so—What was the question you asked again?

DONIN: Well, we were talking about how he was so friendly with Ernest Martin Hopkins, but you—

BECK: Yeah. Well, the thing that bothers me—He goes out and he gets himself killed, and I've tried desperately to keep some of those contacts going and really haven't—You can't form these bridges that go on to other members of the family, with a few exceptions, but none very good.

DONIN: And how about President Dickey? Did you have any interaction with him?

BECK: I did because I was trying to give away a property—we grew up—this farm that my folks settled on is a mile from the Canadian border and it used to be part of the United States until the Webster-Ashburton Treaty and they straightened out the Canadian border. And Webster, as you know, could twist anybody's arm and Ashburton, I think, was sort of an easy-going guy. And they straightened that border out and that area became—came back into the United States as a result. We also got the Mesabi [Iron] Range up in Minnesota as a result, which fueled the Industrial Revolution. But in our part of the country there was an added incentive, because the Americans, after the revolution, had decided to build a fort on the Richelieu River, where the waterways were the main connection going up to Montreal and so forth. And they decided to build a fort and it was a beautiful, classic fort where you came across the swamp and there was a berm—you didn't see it. You came and all of a sudden, you got over this berm and here was this moat and big iron gates, a semi-circular fort made out of Ile aux Noix limestone—huge blocks. And then inside of it you had a semi-circle where troops could parade or maneuver and boats could pull up. And then there were slits for artillery pieces on the second floor, and even a dungeon where you could shove somebody down, I guess.

But the unfortunate thing was that there were so many cost overruns and time overruns in building this fort that they nicknamed it Fort Blunder. And then they found out that they had built it in Canada and not the United States, so they had an extra reason to want to get their fort back. So, that's what happened and that property that my parents bought had actually been occupied by a Tory, who, after the revolution wanted to get the hell out of the United States and he built an inn up there and when my folks came along the inn was all tumbled down, but my mother in particular had experience in the hotel business and they decided to rebuild

this inn and turned it into a hotel. And then the crash of '29 came and they exhausted all their savings and that building never got finished to this day. It's a big building that sits there and inside is not finished out.

DONIN: So, what was the connection with President Dickey?

BECK: Oh, okay. We were trying to figure out—I was trying to figure out—I think it was after—yeah, after my brother died—how to—Well, I was looking for a very long time to give this property away. It has quite a lot of waterfront. It's the original survey when they took it away from the Abenaki Indians. I was looking for somebody to give this to in my brother's memory, and also to keep it in the public domain, and to keep it intact, because most of the farms that are waterfront farms up there have been—the waterfront has been sold off and so forth. And—I've forgotten—I approached Dickey and we met because he had a place up there very close-by over in—well, it's a big bay right next to St. Alban's, which is about twenty miles. But I only met Dickey once in that connection.

DONIN: So, when did you actually finish your schooling here? When did you graduate from the medical school?

BECK: It was '45. Everything was suddenly compressed. You went to school around the year—all year long—and by the time '45 had rolled around, I had earned a degree from Dartmouth, but also from...

DONIN: The medical school.

BECK: Medical school: a two-year school at that time.

DONIN: And when had you done your service?

BECK: Well, we were inducted while I was in med school and that was Rolf Syvertsen. He exercised—I mean, I owe that guy a tremendous debt and I'll never forget it.

DONIN: In what way?

BECK: Well, he sort of singled me out and made me feel that maybe I was worth the time of day. In other words, helped my ego, I think. And he was somebody that was sort of a father figure to me. When I got married, I first had to go and bring my fiancée up and let Sy take a look at her and see if she passed his muster. And he agreed that she was okay.

DONIN: How did he initially discover you and decide to take you under his wing?

BECK: Good question and I'm not even quite sure how it happened, because my grades were erratic here. As I say, I don't think I ever learned really how to study properly. I can remember when my grades had been poor one time, I figured: All right, I've got to learn everything. So, I can remember taking a three or four-hundred-page sociology book and practically learning every word and page that was in there, just drilling it into your head. But, I don't think that's the proper way to study. It was rather difficult and traumatic.

I remember—you know, we were all required to take English when we came here and so I had this professor—I think his name was White. And so we were supposed to give an autobiography. And I wrote my autobiography, and we go to class, and he singles out my autobiography for what a great autobiography. Then I get the paper back and I had a C on it. And I couldn't figure out why the hell I was getting a C except by grammar and—what do you call it? Punctuation was screwy. And so here was this earth-shaking biography being reduced to a C because of the punctuation. That whole experience was rather traumatic, because I was always banging down on my—and at the end of it, I went to White and I said, "Gee, you know, I put so much damn work into these things, I'd like to have them to keep." And he said, "Oh, no. We can't do that. They might be plagiarized."

DONIN: Oh.

BECK: But I never got my papers back. I never forgave that guy. Of course now you could put them on a printer and have it done in two seconds, you know? But that was before the days of—you had that—what was that? The wheel that you had?

DONIN: The mimeograph?

BECK: Yeah, the mimeograph wheel. Not everybody had one of those.

DONIN: So, Syvertsen was the dean of the medical school, right?

BECK: Yeah.

DONIN: And so he discovered you when you were still an undergrad?

BECK: I don't know. I guess he must have seen something in me. There was a relationship there with him that was—a lot of, I think, my peers will tell you the same thing—that went beyond. I mean, it was very personal. You know, he probably wanted a son, but I think he had five daughters or something. He had nothing but daughters. And his wife came from Prince

Edward Island and I've often wondered what happened to her and even what happened to the daughters; it was a large number. But, you know, he was a sort of a father figure, and there were endless stories that centered around him.

DONIN: Was he also a teacher?

BECK: I don't recall that he was. I think probably administrative stuff was consuming enough. I don't know. But I don't remember him as a teacher, no.

DONIN: So, did you have a graduation ceremony?

BECK: Not really. The whole idea, you know, of Dartmouth being a caring institution of small classes and getting to know your professors and the intimacy of the student-professorship being very low, I miss all that. I mean, that whole period was so compressed, and basically being a pre-med is a heck of a lot of memory and study and so forth, and so I don't think I fully had the advantage of the Dartmouth experience.

On the other hand, my brother, who was involved in practically everything, had some very intimate, close relationships with some of the professors. In fact, one of them became life-long friends of my parents, would come up to visit up there. And I benefitted a little bit by his connections, because there was a German professor—my brother took some—I did, too—courses under—not Rosenstock Hussey, but... I can't even remember his name. He was an incredible guy. They never made him a full professor and a lot of us felt as though it was political. Anyway, when I came along he immediately put two and two together that I was my brother's brother.

DONIN: So, any other memories of your undergraduate days here? Did you participate in any sports?

BECK: No, and I think that's now coming back to haunt me, because when you grow up in the Depression on the farm, every muscular contraction is devoted to doing something practical, and so the idea of throwing a ball from one end of a court to another, or going out and exercising, what did you have left over when you got through? So, I always figured I might as well apply these things to some productive enterprise, which I have all my life, but then about ten years ago I brought back a twenty-three-room house—well, two houses—that were open to vandals. And did a huge amount of work every night; after being a doctor all day I would go over and do all the resurrection that needed to be done. And all of a sudden that stopped, and if you don't pick it up with—you know, if you don't use it

you lose it. A lot of the trouble I've got now, that plus an airplane accident in which I got a spinal cord injury, but not too bad. But that has come back to haunt me somewhat.

DONIN: Not doing the exercises.

BECK: Yeah.

DONIN: Right. And did you have a social group here that you spent time with doing things?

BECK: Not really. I think most of my socializing occurred after graduation and when I came back to the reunions. And most of the people that I've met at reunions I hardly knew when I was here, and a lot of them, of course, I forgot. I was just talking to Samek and he was reminding me about the time I took him on a motorcycle and then turned the motorcycle over to him to ride and he didn't know how to ride it and rode it into bushes the only time he ever rode a bike, but...

DONIN: So, you've stuck with the class activities, then.

BECK: Oh, very much. But of course it's easy; it's just a two-hour trip for me.

DONIN: When you left Dartmouth, did you feel a loyalty to the class or to the college in general or both?

BECK: Well, it was a non-specific loyalty. I don't know, but I didn't come away with that kind of close friends from the class, except, well, there was closeness in the medical school, because the classes then in the medical school were only twenty-four students. So, you got to know guys and you were pretty intimate there. But, I don't know what friendship really means. I can remember once when I was in that Massachusetts thing trying to earn a few pennies by selling honey door-to-door and I meet this fellow who had some kind of a yogurt factory or whatever. We became quite friendly and he was saying, "Look, if you have as many true friends at the end of your life as you have fingers on one hand, you can count yourself very lucky." And that has sort of stuck with me.

On the other hand, I see people who have all these friends, so-called, and when push comes to shove, I wonder how real those are. I mean, in the case of my brother, who had a lot of friends, was very social and people were drawn to him like a magnet, nevertheless, after he died, there was not a continuation that one would normally expect, and I think it's very hard to define what friendship really means, because ultimately we're all trapped in our own skins and how far are we going to go in

sacrificing? That was one reason that I feel bad about not having gone to war, but as my brother wrote, he said, “You know, you have this glorified idea about what we’re doing. We’re just ordinary people hoping that we’ll do the right thing at the right time.” But, you know, you figure a total dependence could be around the corner and the guy who is beside you and you had the same obligation to him, that’s about as close as you can get between human relations and I don’t see that happening very often. So, I didn’t feel, you know, that intimately connected. I don’t know.

DONIN: But you felt a loyalty to the school more than to your classmates.

BECK: Yeah, but I often wonder if schools are these—schools are always crying for money, and yet—well, we have good friends who run TASIS, the American school in Switzerland, and that thing is like a counterfeit machine. It makes piles of money, and the woman who was running it, who had a tremendous ego and thought she could take on anything, would go out and spend millions on some stupid idea—buying a chateau in France, and doing another thing, opening a school in Italy that didn’t work out and so forth, but it was all generated from this school. And yet, you have these Ivies with these huge piles of money and they’re always asking for more. And I don’t know. Is it because they are poorly run? I don’t know.

DONIN: Right. I don’t know, either.

BECK: You don’t know either. Good. I thought it was just me.

DONIN: No, I don’t think so. Okay, Dr. Beck.

[End of interview]