

Eugene Narsete Oral History Interview

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Hansley: Dr. Narsete, could you please tell us when and where you were born.

Narsete : I was born at home in 1922 on January 10th in Chicago.

Hansley: What was it like in the neighborhood you grew up in?

Narsete : It was a tough neighborhood, but everybody was good people. I felt safe; I could go anywhere I wanted. Strangers, people looked at them a little differently but left them alone.

Hansley: What line of work were your parents in?

Narsete : My father was a tailor. My mother was a seamstress. They worked together and had a tailor shop. This is how they made a living.

Hansley: What was it like growing up in the depression?

Narsete : Terrible, everyone was all in the same boat. We all just got along. There were times, but I never went hungry. My mother was a good cook and she would cook lots of pasta. We had a lot of spaghetti, spaghetti with butter, everything. We had a lot of beans.

Hansley: Do you eat a lot of spaghetti and beans now?

Narsete : Yes, I love spaghetti. I like to cook my own spaghetti. I know how to get them just right. Beans, it's hard to cook them wrong. You can under cook them, but you can never over cook them.

Hansley: What was going on in the world as you were growing up?

Narsete : That depends on my age. When I was very young, I lived in a very, very tough neighborhood.

Hansley: Where at?

Narsete : In Chicago. I forget what it was called; maybe around Austin Avenue, also near Garfield Park.

Hansley: How aware of the war were you as a young man?

Narsete : Very, I worked for my uncle selling newspapers downtown. I read the newspapers about the world, about what was happening. I kept track of things. I was very, very interested in it. I knew in my heart that eventually I was going to be drafted. I was in the Boy Scouts, I was an Eagle Scout. I think I had at least 33 merit badges.

Hansley: Did you have any relatives in the war before you enlisted?

Narsete : Not in this war. My father was a private in the Italian army in WWI.

Hansley: Do you recall if there were any protests going on during WWII?

Narsete : There were protestors, but they were all peaceful. I didn't agree with them. I didn't let them know they were doing the wrong thing because we were protecting their liberty. But some people didn't realize it.

Hansley: What high school did you go to?

Narsete : St. Ignatius High School, a Jesuit high school.

Hansley: Did you participate in any sports or clubs?

Narsete : My freshmen year I was a center on the football team. After that, I couldn't do that because I had to go to work after school.

Hansley: Were any of your friends from high school drafted?

Narsete : To my best knowledge, I would say no.

Hansley: Were you able to attend college before you enlisted?

Narsete : They had the ASTP, and I joined that voluntarily. There was a Sergeant in school and we learned how to march. It was at the high school and we learned to march and I think we also did a little marching while we were in college.

Hansley: What does ASTP Stand for?

Narsete : Army Specialized Training Program.

Hansley: Did you do this after school, after hours?

Narsete : No. In the morning, we always had to go to roll call. However, when we were in medical school some of the students were in this clinic or that clinic. Usually when they were there, they stayed there. They were fed and their laundry was done. They made rounds with the doctors. This was part of the teaching.

Hansley: Where did you enlist at?

Narsete : I think Chicago.

Hansley: How long after high school did you enlist?

Narsete : I enlisted for the duration of the war. It was right after Pearl [Harbor]. I think that's what really made me angry; those "blinkety-bleep-bleep" Japs.

Hansley: Where did you do boot camp?

Narsete : Fort Custer.

Hansley: Were you in the Army at that time or in the Air Corps?

Narsete : I was in the Army. The Air Corps used to be called the U.S. Army Air Corps, but when they split they were called the Air Force.

Hansley: You started in the Army?

Narsete : That is correct.

Hansley: What were your experiences in boot camp?

Narsete : I was treated well as a boot. The only thing I was worried with, I had to go under that wire fence and they had that machine gun shooting over you. I kept my butt down.

Hansley: How did you get to boot camp?

Narsete : I don't remember. I think by bus.

Hansley: Was it all military?

Narsete : I think it was all military.

Hansley: Did you go directly from boot camp into medical school?

Narsete : When I was in medical school, I was in the ASTP but on graduation I believe we were given a commission as second lieutenants.

Hansley: You were in medical school for how many years?

Narsete : Three years.

Hansley: Did you see any overseas duty?

Narsete : I went to Alaska.

Hansley: Did you go to Japan or Europe?

Narsete : No.

Hansley: It was strictly stateside then. Where in the Alaskan area did you serve?

Narsete : Fairbanks, as a flight surgeon. I flew all over Alaska, all over the Aleutians. I remember once, I flew into Canada. I flew to a lot of places, however a lot of times I didn't know where we were going. I used to ask the pilots, "Where are we going?" They'd say, "Doc, just get in."

Hansley: Were they different air bases or were you being a surgeon for the units that were there?

Narsete : At that time, I was a physician in a lot of places. I was flown to those places. Not only that, I was assigned with two other people to rotate on night emergency. Let's say something was to happen, they would fly us to that place. This was every third night, every third day; if we were needed.

Hansley: You were based out of Fairbanks, though?

Narsete : That's right.

Hansley: What type of emergencies were you handling?

Narsete : Let's say there were people who bailed out and when they landed they broke their leg. There was a person who was bleeding from his "you know what" and when I got there I found out the guy had syphilis. I was infuriated. I don't know who was in charge at the time, but I cussed the guy out. "You blinkety-blank, you're not taking into consideration the danger to my life, the crew and the airplane and the pilot, co-pilot and the engineer!" I was really pissed.

Hansley: Were there any other injuries?

Narsete : There was one that we couldn't do anything about. The only way I could help him was for me to jump out. But this was a person who jumped out and broke his leg and is frozen. I said, "We can't afford to lose another flight surgeon, then there would be only one." Not only that if I had jumped and got there and put him in a splint, how am I going to get him out. It's a different program today. Now they have helicopters, etc. At that time, we didn't have those.

Hansley: Was there a hospital at your base where people were brought?

Narsete : It was a hospital, but it was a very small hospital. It was a station hospital and I used to get permission from my commanding officer to go to that hospital. I

wanted to keep in touch. There was a case there that I was trained to do, but I couldn't do it because I wasn't on the staff. I asked the Major, "I can do this operation, but you'll have to ask my commanding officer for permission." Your commanding officers are very difficult because they would say, "You belong to me, and you do what I tell you." I was very smart that I talked to the major and then I did the operation and my commanding officer was very, very proud of me that I saved this guy's hand. I used to do that when I was a resident. I learned a lot; like talking to our commanding officer. I knew one doctor that I replaced that never talked to his commanding officer. If the commanding officer said, "I want to talk to you." He would ignore him, and he got away with it. He used to say, "Alright! What are you gonna do put me in jail?" This guy was a nut. All he would have to say, in a nice way, "I can't do this, could you get somebody else?" He would not do that. You have to know your commanding officer's problem. My officer was a colonel. He had generals who were his commanding officers. You have to know where you stand.

Hansley: Did you ever feel like you were in danger?

Narsete : Often.

Hansley: What type of danger?

Narsete : The Russians would fly over our place. I didn't know if they had bombs or not. Honestly, I could see them. After I made this report, my officer where I treated patients, there were stacks of bombs. There must have been 5,000 of them, overnight.

Hansley: Fairbanks was an active airbase?

Narsete : Yes.

Hansley: Where were they flying?

Narsete : We did the flying. Civilian flying, you could do that. You couldn't go around it. You had to go to Anchorage and back. With the military at that time as far as I could tell was that way. Sometimes I suspected that there were military people flying civilian planes. I wasn't sure; I just kept my mouth shut.

Hansley: Having bombs there, they were probably loading them on to either Air Corps or Air Force Planes...

Narsete : On to B-29s.

Hansley: On B-29s, where were those planes flying to?

Narsete : I don't know. To be frank with you, if I did know, I would tell you, "I don't know."

Hansley: We can respect those answers. What did you do for your daily down time?

Narsete : Write poetry or write to my wife.

Hansley: When did you meet your wife?

Narsete : I met my wife when I was a medical student and OB. She walked in; she was fully dressed in a nurse's coat. Why wife was a stickler. Her hair was perfect and of course she had a damn good body. I looked at her and I said, "Gee, I'm gonna marry that girl." I dated her, and I told her, I said, "I'm going to marry you." She looked at me, "The hell you are!"

Hansley: What's your wife's name?

Narsete : Barbara.

Hansley: Was she also in the military?

Narsete : No. She was just a nurse. They had some student nurses in her class that were in that [the military], I think. I never thought of the military when I was an intern or stuff like that. I didn't realize the importance of the military. A lot of people look down on the military, but they don't understand what it means. Then when Pearl Harbor came they were blaming everybody. They were blaming the Navy, they were blaming this guy, and they were blaming our intelligence. They always look for a fall guy.

Hansley: When did you get married?

Narsete : God Bless. I don't really remember. I was still in school. Her mother said, "Oh you should wait until..." I make a little bit [more money]. She was a very nice woman but she was spoiled. Her nose was always up in the air.

Hansley: Did your dad have any advice to you when you enlisted?

Narsete : I don't think he liked it. My father was a buck private in the Italian army. He was in the Italian army for six years. In the Italian army at that time, only the upper class became officers that became nurses and doctors. The peasants, my father was considered, had all the menial jobs?

Hansley: Wasn't he afraid that you would be drafted and not be able to do what you wanted to do and be a doctor?

Narsete : He didn't like me to be drafted like most men at that time. There were a lot of draft dodgers. I didn't feel that, this is America, there is a lot of freedom here, we have democracy and then anybody can make a good living if they are willing to work for it. That was it for me.

Hansley: Did you write home a lot to your parents and your wife?

Narsete : Yes, at least once a week. Once in a great while I was able to get to a phone which wasn't often and I would call. I wrote frequently.

Hansley: What type of planes were you riding in?

Narsete : [I rode in] C-47s. But then the C-54s came in. Most of my work was in a C-47, but I did frequently fly with every pilot we had. I wanted them to know that I was with them all. Being a doctor is not only being a doctor but you know the [pilots], how much they drink. I watched that closely. I used to tell the pilots, "If you show up and I can smell alcohol on your breath, I'm going to ground you." If you ground a person, it takes a general to overcome that.

Hansley: It's for their safety, yours and everyone else's.

Narsete : You got it. Especially when they are carrying 2,000 gallons of high octane [fuel] in their aircraft.

Hansley: You were also stationed in Washington, DC. When did that occur?

Narsete : I don't remember that. I tried to figure, "What in the hell was I doing in Washington, DC?" I think I was for an interview of some kind.

Hansley: You were assigned to Headquarters, Army Air Forces in Washington, DC; Aviation Medical Officer in 1946.

Narsete : I forgot.

Hansley: That happens, not a problem. How many flight surgeons were based in Fairbanks?

Narsete : Two or three at the most.

Hansley: Did you make friends among the pilots or the other doctors?

Narsete : The pilots, I made friends with all of them. The doctors, I would go to the hospital and talk to them because I wanted information on how my men were treated. I was on good status with them; with the exception of one doctor. He wouldn't talk to anyone in the military. He wouldn't talk to his commanding officer. He wasn't interested; he would make rounds and wouldn't write. They should've kicked his ass out but they didn't.

Hansley: Did any of these friendships last past the military?

Narsete : No, none to my recollection. When I got out, I went out. They continued flying up there doing their duty. I was out making a living then.

Hansley: You finished up your active duty in 1948? You transition from Air Corps to Air Force?

Narsete : I did, but I don't remember the exact date. I became [part of] the Air Force.

Hansley: Since you were basically stateside in Alaska, even though it was a territory at the time, was your wife able to come up and visit you, did she live near you or did she stay here?

Narsete : Getting living quarters, decent living quarters, would be difficult. To have your own place you'd have to buy it. Not only that, which I discovered when my sergeant's wife had a lot of money and wanted to live there. I looked into it. I found out the most dangerous thing is getting your foundation because your foundation was on ice. The permafrost was always ice, but you put your home on it and you have a furnace, then the heat is going to seep down. That stuff is going to melt and your house is going to slide away.

Hansley: After the service, did you go into the National Guard or Reserves?

Narsete : No. My wife wanted to force me.

Hansley: You started a practice; did you go into practice with someone else?

Narsete : No. I started on my own. You see when you have a practice of two or three guys they rotate their calls. They have three doctors, they split it and when the other doctor is off then they go to the doctor. There is a break of communication there. The important thing in medicine is to communicate with your patients and a lot of times the patients don't give you the right history or they misunderstand what you tell them. It's a subtle thing; it's something you can't write.

Hansley: What was your practice in?

Narsete : I had a residency at Loyola, at Northwestern and at Boston; Harvard. I have a Harvard certificate, and that's how I learned. I learned techniques from this, what they call "practices." I had a good basic knowledge plus you could practice better and do better; and not only that but you can do it faster and safer. There are a lot of doctors that are very, very slow and it is a danger to the patient because of the anesthesia. The longer you are under anesthesia, the harder it is for your patient.

Hansley: What was your practice in, was it surgery or internal medicine?

Narsete : No. I practiced surgery, period. Internal medicine, I'd say, "No, you go see somebody." "Oh doc, get me your open..." I'd say, "No, do you have trust in your doctor? Now, if you don't have trust in your doctor, get another one." That's what I used to tell them. Because when you lose contact with your patient, if you are worried that your doctor frightens you or you are not sure. Or you work in the doctor's office and it smells of alcohol (laughs).

Hansley: When you left Alaska, how did you get back? Did they fly you back, did they train you back?

Narsete : I flew back, if I remember correctly. I flew back to the United States but not to... I took another aircraft to get home.

Hansley: Where did you discharge from?

Narsete : I can't recall. I can't find my discharge papers. They're driving me nuts. I've been looking for three years and I can't find them.

Hansley: They're in a box somewhere.

Narsete : I know that, where? (Laughs)

Hansley: I know you received some medals. You didn't get them right after discharge, you got them recently. Could you please tell us about that?

Narsete : That young lady, my daughter-in-law, she does work for the military. I don't ask her details.

Hansley: You just got your medals back in January 7th of 2012, why do you think it took so long for you to get your medals?

Narsete : They lost my papers. They misspelled them. That lady found them.

Hansley: What was it like going to Washington to receive them?

Narsete : I was stunned.

Hansley: How did you find out about it? Did you know she was working to do this?

Narsete : No. I got them on my birthday. I almost wetted in my pants.

Hansley: Was this a surprise? Did she take you to DC?

Narsete : No. I lived in DC. It was my birthday. I figured, "Oh, my birthday party." Then there was this sprung on me. I figured, "I must be going nuts, I didn't do this."

Hansley: I thought that was very nice of her to dig in and get you those medals.

Narsete : Yes.

Hansley: Since you just got them, you probably haven't had time to think about it but what do those medals mean to you today?

Narsete : They are my blood.

Hansley: Explain that please.

Narsete : It's my life now. I volunteered to help this country to be what it is and to protect it at all costs, period. I think most people in the United States do not realize what we have. The government, yes I'm a Republican and those G*ddamn Democrats (laughing), now I'm walking into danger. But that's what I like, just because it's just like religion. I respect the Muslim for their religion but I don't like when they start killing people because they are not Muslims.

Hansley: Obviously since you went to medical school during the war, the military did prepare you for civilian life. Did you take any extra training on the GI Bill to do extra medical training?

Narsete : Yes I did.

Hansley: What type of training did you take?

Narsete : Surgery.

Hansley: During the military you could do surgery, but you weren't specialized in it?

Narsete : That is correct. But, you see I was an intern on the surgical service and I had a superb teacher. That teacher taught me how to do things. He would explain things while he was doing it. That is an education in itself. You get on the job training.

Hansley: That's almost the best kind.

Narsete : That's the best kind.

Hansley: Where did you take that training at?

Narsete : I took that at Mercy Hospital which was an associate of Loyola. I went to Children's Hospital in Boston which was Harvard and then back to the Chicago area and got my Northwestern [training].

Hansley: Was your practice geared more toward adults or toward children or both?

Narsete : In the beginning I took everything. I began little by little I began to get more vascular surgery. That's what I liked the best.

Hansley: Do you belong to any Veterans organizations?

Narsete : No. To be honest with you when they had a drive of this or that I would send in a check, but I figured when I'm in an organization I participate. I was living alone, I have to do my own shopping, my own cooking, etc. I enjoy painting and collecting stamps.

Hansley: What kind of paintings do you do?

Narsete : Nudes (laughs). Now, I knew that would get you. No, any kind. It all depends, I may do a tree but the most difficult ones are the nudes and do them right. Not the way a lot of these cartoonists draw. Painting a nude properly is the most difficult things to see.

Hansley: But having learned anatomy...

Narsete : Yes. It's not anatomy. It's your interpretation of anatomy. With anatomy, for instance, like breasts, women's breasts, anatomy is a little different than the painting.

Hansley: When you were in the service and you were basically pretty much out of the country because you were all the way up in Alaska, did you miss any major birthdays, any births of your children, or deaths of loved ones?

Narsete : I'd say yes to all of them because I forget my own birthday, I forgot my wife's birthday. (Whispering) Did I get the sh*t... oh. "I'm sorry dear, everything is fine." I brought her some flowers just for the hell of it. I used to do this periodically. She looked at this, she took the flowers. "I like those," [she said], "You forgot my birthday." I forget my own. I'm very bad on birthdays.

Hansley: Have you gone back to Alaska?

Narsete : I would love to. Alaska has changed. I've kept track of it. The cities are much smaller, modernized. I don't know if the natives are building their own igloos or not. I'd love to go up there, but I figured at my age, why do it.

Hansley: What kind of extra training did you get, if any, for being stationed up in Alaska?

Narsete : The training was on my own. I took a little bit of Russian on my own, but I gave it up. That's a hard language to learn. Then I used to sketch a lot, but then I think the best thing I did was hunt Ptarmigan.

Hansley: What's Ptarmigan?

Narsete : Ptarmigan is a small bird, a beautiful bird. I would only shoot one. The other one I would fry in olive oil and butter.

Hansley: Is that something compared to a chicken?

Narsete : It's much sweeter than a chicken.

Hansley: The size of it?

Narsete : The size of it was smaller. I got to the point, "I don't like to shoot these small birds." They're too beautiful, so I gave that up.

Hansley: I understand there is something about building an igloo.

Narsete : Yes, building an igloo. You see igloos curve, so what you have to do is get the corner stone on top. Just like a Roman arch. Once you get that down, then you're in good. Otherwise it will fall. The important thing is once you get in the igloo you have to be very careful to build a fire because the snow up there will melt if the fire is too hot and then it will fall on you.

Hansley: Why did you decide to learn to build an igloo?

Narsete : Things were very dull and I had nothing to do.

Hansley: That's as good a reason as any.

Narsete : That's the whole thing up there. It's so bleak and there is so little to do a lot of people get upset with that. They don't know how to do this; they don't know how to do that. You have to learn how to walk in your snow shoes, how to use skis.

Hansley: Do you ski today?

Narsete : No. I didn't ski afterwards.

Hansley: How did you feel about the boots that you were issued in boot camp? Were they comfortable, did you hate them?

Narsete : My boots, you know what I did with my boots? I soaked them in water.

Hansley: Why?

Narsete : To get them soft. I would polish them or put olive oil on them and rub them. I would rub them until you no longer had olive oil, then I put what you called water proofing over it. It worked real well.

Hansley: They were comfortable?

Narsete : They were comfortable, but it takes time to break in those GI issues.

Hansley: Did you have different ones for winter and summer, or special ones for being up in Alaska because it was so cold?

Narsete : I used to have some boots, but then I would put goulashes over them.

Hansley: Can you tell us what you feel your definition of a Citizen Soldier would be?

Narsete : That's a very difficult question to answer. I think the important thing you must do is duty. That's number one. He can hate his commanding officer, he can hate his sergeant, he can hate the president, but he must do his duty. To me, it's very simple.

Hansley: Is there anything else you would like to add that I didn't touch on?

Narsete : You're putting me in a tough place.

Hansley: It's my job.

Narsete : I know it's your job, but you have the sensitivity when you do your job. Get the person relaxed. Nobody enjoys talking about themselves, particularly when they have a bad reputation. Or they may love it, people are unpredictable.

Hansley: Is there anything else that I missed, any stories that you'd like to tell?

Narsete : No, I can't think of any stories. I have fishing stories to tell you. I took my family fishing, my wife fishing. She got to be a better fisherman than I was. She would catch small fish, I would go for the big Muskies and she would just sit there. She would just give me a look, "I've got one." I'd say, "Dear, I know. I'm the biggest fish you ever caught." I've been fortunate, she was a great woman.

Hansley: Where did you like to go fishing?

Narsete : Northern Wisconsin.

Hansley: I was going to say, with Muskies it would have to be at least Wisconsin or Michigan.

Narsete : The Muskies were a challenge. Our first [son], Tom, he would fish 24-hours a day.

Hansley: How many children did you have?

Narsete : Four.

Hansley: What are their names?

Narsete : There was Barbara Ann, Eugene, Jen and Tom. I used to call the boys different names, though when I got angry, "You ragamuffin."

Hansley: Where were you and what were you doing when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

Narsete : I was in the theater and I walked out and I saw this in the newspaper.

Hansley: You didn't hear it on the radio; you basically heard it later in the day?

Narsete : When I turned the radio, it was on the radio all the time. That's how I learned. I couldn't believe it.

Hansley: What was your basic reaction? What was the reaction of the people around you? Obviously the people were in the theater and everyone was coming out and seeing it.

Narsete : They were "sh*t house mad." They were really angry. They would think, "We gotta beat the sh*t out of them."

Hansley: You weren't at home listening to the Bears v Cardinals game like so many others?

Narsete : No. They interrupted the game to say?

Hansley: Yes.

Narsete : Well, that makes me feel better. If they'd let the show go on.

Hansley: My understanding is they did interrupt once they had the actual definite information.

Narsete : This is America, people; they don't really care for the military until situations... They say, "Where's our Navy, where's our Marines, where's our Air Force?"

Hansley: How do you feel about what's going on today with the military since 9/11? What was your reaction when you heard about 9/11?

Narsete : I said, "Well, we're gonna go to war." Period, that's all. I didn't blame anybody, because the military has different morals. The Japanese, the people were under basically a military dictatorship. The Germans, they were out to conquer. Many people thought Hitler was crazy, he wasn't. He was a genius, because he knew how to handle his troops, [they] would do anything for him. If he'd say, "Go out and kill those 10,000 people." They'd go out and pull out their machine guns and just mow them down. The Russians have always been that way. The people, they think if you are a problem, you shoot them. No trial. They all believe it. We had to protect ourselves against it. I'm for this... we don't get our people in the military and treat them poorly. We train them, we feed them and we take care of

them, and it's the same way with our Air Force. Another important thing is our submarines, because a submarine can carry torpedoes and they can have these flying missiles. They can blow a whole country off the map with our missiles.

Hansley: A lot of deterrent.

Narsete : Yes. The people say, "We are wasting our money." I'm for increasing the budget, because right now most of the countries don't declare war.

Hansley: Dr. Narsete , thank you very much for your story.

Narsete : Thank you for your patience.

Hansley: No patience involved here I enjoyed listening to your story. The Pritzker Military Library appreciates that.

Narsete : Good.