

CPL Richard “Peter” Petrashek—Chemical Warfare

Mr. Petrashek was drafted on December 7, 1943 and went to Fort Crook in Bellevue, Nebraska. In late 1940, the Army Air Corps chose Fort Crook as the site for a new bomber plant. The plant's construction included two mile-long concrete runways, six large hangars and a huge 1.2 million square foot aircraft assembly building. Production operations began under the Glenn L. Martin Company in January 1942, with the plant reaching full-scale production June 8, 1942. A total of 531 B-29 Superfortresses (including the Enola Gay and Bock's Car), and 1,585 B-26 Marauders were built at the Martin-Nebraska bomber plant before the end of World War II. Production ended on September 18, 1945, when the last B-29 rolled out of the assembly building.

After training, Mr. Petrashek went to Guam, where he spent 14 months. He loaded many bombs onto B-29s and drove decontamination trucks to carry water to mess halls. The trucks were loaded with big water tanks and carried chemicals to mix with the water for decontamination in case of chemical attack. He also flew on several missions over Japan as an unofficial crew member with a lieutenant buddy, Leland Harlow, who was a bombardier. Mr. Petrashek graduated from High School with Leland Harlow—a class of 16 in Table Rock, NE. You can imagine their joy when they finally hooked up with each other on Guam. But with Harlow being a Lt., they had to be careful when associating with each other. They DID get drunk together, and Mr. Petrashek was court-martialed ... As he tells it: “After obtaining some officer's bars and wings, we drove my decontamination truck to a Navy Officer's Club, got stinkin' drunk and I couldn't drive back. Leland didn't know how to drive! Somehow Leland got the truck in gear and drove the truck into a ditch! The colonel in charge of the motor pool was right behind us and he got out. Fortunately, Leland had taken the bars and wings off of me, so they didn't get me for impersonating an officer. But they did get me for associating with an officer and they got him for associating with an enlisted man. I was fined \$30.”

Other recollections from Mr. Petrashek follow:

“The first atom bomb that dropped on Hiroshima probably saved my life because I was scheduled to be transferred to the infantry for training for the invasion of Japan. After the atom bomb was dropped, everything was put on hold and I didn't have to go to the infantry.

An interesting thing happened to my lieutenant buddy and me—we were driving in my truck toward the south end of the island. While we were driving, we saw what we thought were three Chamorros (Guam natives) waving their hands at us. We thought they probably wanted a ride so we stopped the truck; they were Japanese. They had come out of the jungle where they had been hiding. They were probably starving and decided to give themselves up. We became very cautious when we realized they were Japanese. My buddy said we'd better frisk them. We were patting them down and I was very surprised to find one of them was a woman! We decided they didn't have any weapons, so we put them on the truck and drove to the stockade and turned them over to the MPs. It was sort of funny to think we captured three Japanese.”

After service, he joined WOW radio, and quickly moved to the TV station at its beginning and became film editor, and later news photographer and reporter. He served the station for 40 years until his retirement in 1990. He was interested in magic early in life; during the 1960s he joined the Omaha Magical Society. He was National Magician of the Year in 1989. Mr. Petrashek is now 84 years old and is still entertaining as Peter the Near (Great) - Comedy Magic For All Occasions. He averages one magic show a week. His wife, Babe, used to help him, as his assistant, but he performs solo now since she wanted a raise in pay (HA!).

