

Ft. Lincoln: The Radioman

Kurt Peters — Seattle

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I interviewed Mr. Peters by telephone in 1993.

I was a young radio operator in the Standard Oil Tanker fleet. On one of our trips from the Caribbean, we arrived in New York City the day before Hitler crossed the Polish border and began the Second World War. Standard Oil, knowing what the consequences of this act would be—that it could not keep its German crew on the ship because it would be sent to England or France and all of the crew would be interned—decided to replace the entire crew with an American one. The company housed us in downtown hotels, took us to Rockefeller Center, which is the headquarters of Standard Oil—or was then—and explained the situation, saying simply, “At the moment, we are going to take care of you, but we don’t know where this is all going to end.”

After several weeks, they finally said, “This is possibly going to last quite a long time. So, because of the cost, all of you are free to move out of your hotels and find your own lodging. Give us your addresses, because you are still employees of Standard Oil. You will be paid every other week and you are entitled to all the benefits of the Standard Oil Company.” I moved as all the others did, and found an apartment in Queens. The only condition was that we could not leave, could not replace other American citizens in jobs, and had to do the best we could with what was available. Because the pay for 1939 was adequate, I was able to live well. This went on for approximately two years.

I went to evening school, where I improved my English, and after a bit it was possible for me to enter Columbia University.

These two and one-half years in New York City had two distinct aspects. One of them, of course, was very exciting. New York was a fascinating city. On the other hand, I had no idea what was happening back home with my mother and father, and I worried that they did not know where I was. I felt like we all did, that this rather idyllic life would have to end at any moment because the whole situation was rather precarious. It did end.

The situation on the East Coast was becoming tenser all the time. There were German organizations—Nazis, saboteurs, people who were prepared to undermine the security of the United States. The United States had a look at that and discovered for the first time that in all our history we had never had a real alien registration act. Until 1940 there were thousands of aliens of all nationalities in this country who just wandered about and never thought about legalizing their status, and the government probably never pursued the subject.

Q: Had you made up your mind to stay in the United States and become a citizen?

I probably made that decision long before. If I may reach back a little bit, the

very reason that I was in the tanker fleet was that that might present an opportunity for me to go to America. I had parents whose courage allowed me to learn about democracy and parliamentary procedure. I was not exposed to such things, of course, during my school years and Hitler Youth years in Germany, from 1933 to 1939. My parents, at the very risk of their lives, did set me down and began to educate me in the social and political arenas, about things I had never heard of. So the result of this three- to four-year “education-in-the-kitchen” in secret was that my mother and father decided that I should get out from under this if it was at all possible. Growing up in the city of Hamburg, which is a big seaport, it was normal for young men to seek a career that would take them to sea.

In New York I went to various agencies and people—immigration service, the FBI—those who would listen to me. I explained to them that the ultimate purpose of my going to sea in was the possibly I would end up in America. They took all this down, but I was always told that because of my illegal status in this country—no visa, no nothing—I could not begin to make a declaration of intention regarding citizenship. However, these recorded statements helped me later on when, during my Fort Lincoln time, I kept trying to get out. At the hearings, which resulted in my release two years after internment, they had all that on paper. They said, “The reason that you made those statements before you were in Ft. Lincoln helped you a great deal.”

Ellis Island was a bad experience, and they kept us there about a month. I think the reason we were all there was that they decided—with all due respect to our government—that to put us all on

Ellis Island was a good move, but somewhat impetuous. Once they got us there, they probably scratched their heads and said, “Now what the hell are we going to do with them?” They couldn’t deport us; we had not offended anything, we were not soldiers, but we had violated a law.

It took them some time to discover this spot in North Dakota: Fort Lincoln. They converted it from an army camp by putting a fence around it and machine gun towers at the corners, preparing it for the arrival of about 175 Germans who had been on the oil tankers. We were the first ones to arrive.

Q: Were there political differences among the seamen?

Not among us. We started the camp, which was administrated by the Border Patrol. They were scared to death of us. It was so funny because we had all lived in New York for two and one-half years. Quite a few of us had formed attachments—there were even some married ones and they had become Americanized. All of a sudden, here we were, put into this camp, and I remember the first night we were in the middle of what was then a football field. They had us lined up in blocks of twenty-five, surrounded us with guns at the ready, and one or two of the guys—we all spoke some kind of English—stepped out of line. Well, those Border Patrol guys were nervous, and they probably had been indoctrinated to “Watch these guys” and all this sort of nonsense. However, it didn’t take them very long to catch on that what they had been told was not that serious.

The crews were put in the brick buildings; the officers lived in barracks that are no longer there. Since I was a radio operator, I was considered an officer, not that it’s important, but at the time it

was. *The Germans soon had little gardens with flowers and vegetables. Out of the people who were interned, only a very small group did nothing. Some of them were just plain lazy, and all they wanted to do was play cards. And some of them, the "ultra" ones, felt that if you lifted one finger—grew a flower, grew a carrot, grew a potato, raked the garden—you would help the American effort. I began publishing a weekly newspaper, the Bismarck Echo. That was my baby.*

The administration said that if you grew as many vegetables of your own as you could, your diet would be that much better and it would help them in the kitchen. So I wrote an editorial and encouraged this and I got hell for it because I was helping the American war effort. Yeah!

The whole character of the camp changed instantly when all the other German crews arrived. When we were there alone, the Standard Oil people, we ran the whole camp on a democratic basis. We elected a camp commander and a committee, of which each member was representing certain interests. In my case, I was representing education. Another was recreation. I ran a weekly newspaper, as I mentioned; I ran the library; I taught twelve English classes; and I was busy, which was the best thing I could do, of course. We had an entire educational academy. The mates taught navigation and math, and we had French and Spanish. We had an acting theater. We had a full orchestra and a complete choir, and we had programs going all the time.

When the others began arriving, things changed. The captain of one of the freighters that I told you had been scuttled was a reserve officer in the German navy. When he walked in he

automatically usurped the position of the one we had elected, who was an elderly, gracious captain with Standard Oil, and he automatically became the camp commander. He was a military man, a Nazi, and there wasn't any debate about it. He walked in and that was it.

Q: How many of these new crews were there?

Eventually, several hundred; they outnumbered us rather quickly. The Columbus's crew alone was several hundred, and the other two or three freighters must have had forty or fifty crew members each. The civilians didn't start arriving until after Pearl Harbor.

They created an entirely new and different camp for the Japanese, also with high fences and barbed wire, in which about a thousand Japanese were housed after Pearl Harbor. We were entirely separated; we never had any connection with each other. We were told they were the very militant Japanese, not the ones who unfortunately were out of the West Coast. Whether they were prepared to do damage or not, I don't know, but they were there and we didn't speak to them. We just saw each other across the road. We saw them in the morning doing their military calisthenics.

The Germans arrived in small groups, sometimes just one person. They came from New York, or wherever they had been picked up, and they mixed with us. In fact, in my barracks, known as "96," there was an elderly gentleman who was very much involved in scientific work in this country. He held forth every night. He was a very elegant type. We didn't particularly take to them, and the Nazis in the camp didn't feel so good about them either because they felt they should

never have left Germany in the first place.

Others, like me, felt that they had been somewhat unfair in making their life in this country. They'd been here a long time, making a good life in this country, never bothering to become citizens, never declaring any loyalty, and the first time there was an opportunity to be anti-American and pro-Hitler, they were. I resented that; I didn't want to talk to them; I felt very strongly about it because I thought it was not justifiable. That caused some tension. We felt that if you're pro-German, go home! You should never have come here in the first place. I would say the majority was of the type that took advantage of this country and then made the turnaround and said Hitler would be good for us. It just made me madder than hell. They made no bones about it, because they felt that inside the camp, outside of the hearing of any Border Patrolman, they would instantly get our sympathy because we were all Germans.

The word got around that "Peters is pro-American." I was never actually persecuted, but there was some tension and there were long, long.... Germans are great arguers, and they can have a political argument at four in the morning, even without beer! I defended my position and they defended theirs, but it was primarily a matter of having ideological pursuits, and of course I was twenty-two, very youthful. When you're twenty-two, you know it all. The majority was harmless. They weren't going to blow up any bridges; they just talked too much. It was an attitude that I didn't think was proper.

Everything fell into a routine. I ran the newspaper, taught English, and wrote a thousand letters to senators and people like that. I told them my story

about being interested in becoming part of the country, and that this had been a serious intent of mine long before events catapulted me into this situation. The result was that I began to get hearings from people who came out of Washington and asked a thousand questions. They contacted the people I had known in New York who might be character references. Finally I got a very short notice that, "Based on the information we now have, you are paroled as of June 1943," under the condition that I not leave the area, and that I have somebody who would vouch for my behavior and my good character.

You've been in a camp looking at a city from three miles away. Now, how do you get a job? I joined the millions of people who write letters to the editor. I laid out my story. The next day the publisher of the Bismarck Tribune and her manager came out and interviewed me. We sat for three hours; they tested me, looked me over. I told them all about my background, my mother and father, and how I got to Ft. Lincoln. They said, "We will not only vouch for you to the government every six months, we will give you a job." With that taken care of, I left the camp and went into the town of Bismarck. The following Monday I began work at the Tribune.

The first night I went to a hotel. I'm a very private person by nature, and what I suffered more from in camp was not the deprivation or anything like that, but no privacy. Living with twenty-six men in a barrack day and night was, for me, difficult. So the first joyful thing I did, I got a room, locked the door, put my feet on the windowsill, and just sat there, knowing that nobody could open the door and nobody could interfere with my thoughts or whatever! I don't know whether that's easy to understand for someone who's

never gone through this, but just the idea that, I'm my own man, I'm private, it is quiet.

I was rather nervous about what people in town would feel about me. It was a much smaller city at that time—about twenty thousand—and everybody knew everybody. All the young men are gone, I'm obvious, and I am wondering what the prejudice might be. I got this rather nice apartment on Mandan Street, and the son of the lady who rented it to me was a first lieutenant, then fighting in Germany. She took me in like a son, knowing all about me. She was one of those motherly types who said, "This is my place and now it's your place." That's something you don't forget. She could have said, "No Nazi in MY house. My son is fighting those Nazis. He could die and here you are!" Germany was winning the war at that time. We seem to forget that now. But that never happened, in spite of all my fears. In fact, it wasn't a week or so before I had all kinds of dinner invitations from people who were curious. I will never forget their graciousness.

I got a call that there was a group of gentleman at the Paterson Hotel, who wanted to see me, so I went over there. "You want to become a citizen?"

"Yes."

"How serious are you?"

"Very serious."

"OK, we can help you. We will take you to Washington D.C., put you through a school for six weeks, give you ten thousand dollars and make you a citizen overnight."

"Why this?"

"We're training you as one who can help the American effort. We can't all be frontline soldiers and you have all the qualifications and all the talents of someone who can do a lot of good work

behind the lines; that's where we will parachute you. You speak the language, you know about radio, you act normally as a German, and you can gather a lot of information that we desperately need. On the other hand, you have got to understand that if you get caught we've never heard of you."

That's the way they put it. I was still nervous and intimidated. One of them had a uniform with all kinds of stuff on the front. The other two were very impressive gentlemen in impressive suits. I was young and nervous, and certainly not very secure. My English was halting. I was awestruck and afraid. I walked out of there, saying, "I can't give you an answer immediately, but I will try."

"We have to know by nine o'clock in the morning. We are flying back to Washington."

I was shaky, and I walked the streets for hours and hours: "What am I going to do? On the one hand, of course, the offer sounded like what I wanted. On the other, I did not want to become part of this country under those circumstances, and probably I was a little afraid. I finally ended up with this very gracious lady who was also my employer, and she immediately said, "Let's get General [Herbert L.] Edwards and ask him about it."

We got him out of bed, and he told us that those three people were doing their "jobs." Since then, I have assumed it was the OSS. General Edwards explained to me that although they could intimidate me, and probably would like to have me, "If you do not want to do this you don't have to. They are using their position and their power. They know you are scared, but if you say 'no' they will just drop it." So I went back the next morning and told them and they very curtly said, "You take the conse-

quences.” I walked out. That was the end of that!

It did put into my head that this sort of thing could happen again. My whole situation was very tenuous. I never slept very well. Since I was quite serious about citizenship I went to the navy recruiter and said, “I want to join.” We had a law at the time where, through service in the armed forces, you could obtain citizenship. They accepted me, but I had to wait for a while until my citizenship could be arranged. One day they called me and said, “You are supposed to go to the courthouse at Sand Point, Idaho, with a couple of witnesses.”

I grabbed a couple of my navy friends and we went to Sand Point to the courthouse, where it turned out I was the only citizen prospect. The judge leaned over the bench and said, and I quote, “You’re wearing that uniform, so I don’t suppose I need to ask you what the United States means to you, do I?” He signed my papers and I became a citizen at ten o’clock in the morning. The two of us had a beer and I went back to the base.

During all these years, there was an occasional letter from my mother, which I got through the Red Cross. So I was able to keep track of my mother and father who lived in an apartment house in Hamburg. You know what they did to Hamburg. Actually they bombed Hamburg for several years, but the great one that everybody knows about was in June 1943, when they killed forty-four thousand women and children, and that’s when my mother died and our apartment building was totally destroyed. My father was sixty-five at the time, and they gathered the elderly, skilled men into troops that would go out immediately after an “all clear” and douse fires and save lives. That’s what he did throughout the

war, which, as he later told me: “If you want to describe Hell, that was it.” He wasn’t at home that night; they were stationed in barracks. So when he got there the next day, there was nothing. I lost several cousins during the three or four years of bombings—seventeen of them. All children—all younger than me.

After the war I went back to Bismarck because the people at the Tribune had said, “As soon as the war is over you can work here for the rest of your life.”

During my Fort Lincoln years, one of the Border Patrolmen, second in command, a man by the name of Bert Fraser, befriended me, as he did everybody. He would come into the compound in the morning and go from one place to another saying, “What can I do for you today? I’m going to town.” He would always end up with a long list of things that guys wanted, from toothpaste, to radios, to underwear. He was that kind of a person. He befriended me in particular, and we kept in contact. After the war he was the director of what was known as UNRRA. He was kind of a biggie in Europe, and he said, “I’ll find your family.” So he took the car up to Hamburg. Being a VIP he walked into the British commander’s office and said, “My name is Bert Fraser. My very good friend Kurt Peters has lost his family. Can you help me?” This British VIP, who was in charge of the entire city and state of Hamburg, said, “What is the man’s name?”

“Heinrich Peters.”

And this guy sat up straight and said, “Heinrich Peters? Come with me.”

They went to a workshop. He said, “Is this the Heinrich Peters you are looking for? I have a Heinrich Peters who is a master craftsman. He is building a bedroom for my daughter in London who is getting married.” It was my father.

So my father sat down—this was our first contact—and wrote a letter in which he told me about my mother and his own life. I immediately wrote back. Of course Germany was in terrible straits, and so my wife Naomi and I began to send CARE packages to him, and the biggest treat in the CARE package was coffee; he absolutely loved coffee all his life, like I do. He hadn't had it for so long; it was quite a treat for him and his friends. I wrote him and said, "Would you like to spend the rest of your life with me? I'm

married now, and I have a three year-old daughter."

He wrote back, "You're the only person in the world who is close to me. Let's get the wheels rolling." I inquired here, and because he was an immediate relative, it was no problem at all. In six months he was here; came on a Liberty ship. Naomi and I picked him up in New York and he joined us until 1960 when he passed away.

Kurt Peters passed away in October 2001.