

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
Anton S “Sam” Arneson, Jr.  
Infantry, U. S. Army, World War II

2004

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**Arneson, Anton S., Jr.**, (1926- ), Oral History Interview, 2004  
User copy, 1 sound cassette (ca. 45min.), 1 7/8 ips, mono  
Master copy, 1 sound cassette (ca. 45min.), 1 7/8 ips, mono

### **ABSTRACT**

Anton (Sam) Arneson speaks of his early life in Barneveld (Wisconsin), his Army service during the final months of World War II and later in Occupied Japan, and his insurance business in Madison (Wisconsin) after the war.

A sophomore in high school when Pearl Harbor was attacked, he mentions his reaction and his aunt's who said, "Well at least he won't have to go." He was drafted in January 1945 after one semester of college and tells of his basic training at Fort Sheridan (Illinois) and further training at Fort McClellan (Alabama) and Camp Shelby (Mississippi). Anchored at Eniwetok Island (Marshall Islands) while the United States dropped the atomic bomb on Japan and later assigned on Leyte Island (Philippines) as replacement infantry to the 97<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, Arneson characterizes the atomic bomb attacks as saving their lives. After the Japanese surrender, Arneson was stationed at Kumagaya (Japan) to guard an ammunition dump that was close to a psychiatric hospital. Listening to the Japanese screaming in the hospital was scary for Arneson, who was still eighteen years old, and he describes spreading tin cans around the perimeter of his guard post. Due to his previous banking experience and college background, Arneson tells of his subsequent reassignment to the finance corps in Sendai and promotion there to tech sergeant. His homecoming first took him to San Francisco where he remembers drinking two glasses of milk and a train ride back to Fort Sheridan where he threw his dog tags into the Mississippi River. The tape concludes with his use of the GI Bill to complete his degree in business administration, his membership in the Barneveld American Legion Post No. 433, and a lengthy discussion of his career in the insurance business.

### **Biographical Sketch**

Arneson (1926- ) born and raised in Barneveld (Wisconsin), was drafted into the Army in 1945 and served with the Infantry. He was transferred to the Finance Corps prior to being discharged in 1946. Arneson completed a Bachelor's degree in Insurance at the Commerce University before starting his own insurance agency.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2004.  
Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2004.  
Transcription edited by John McNally, 2006.

## Interview Transcript

John: This is October 26, 2004, and this is an oral history interview with Sam Arneson in Sam's home in Madison. Sam is a veteran of World War II, the United States Army, and Sam, thanks a lot for agreeing to the interview. Why don't we start at the very beginning? When and where were you born?

Sam: Okay. I was born in Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin, October 5, 1926. The reason it was in Mt. Horeb was there was no hospital in Barneveld and my mother, I was the fifth of six children, and that is where the doctor was, and it was actually in his home that had been converted into a temporary hospital, which is no longer.

John: Wow. That is interesting.

Sam: But, I was born in Barneveld and lived my entire life until I went into the service and to the university in Barneveld. We lived on the edge of town. My father was a farmer's son who got into banking when he was fourteen years old. Barneveld Bank was organized in 1896. It was Jerome Jones, whose grandson is Jerome Frautchi. And he started the bank and when my dad got out of high school, he said, "Dan," that was his name, "how would you like to work in the bank?" He came and he worked in the bank and he was there all his whole life. And in 1943, he bought the bank from Jerome Jones who wanted to retire. Who was then living in Madison, and after that we owned the bank until we sold it to the Marshall Eisele Bank about eight years ago.

John: Okay.

Sam: My name is really Anton Samuel Arneson, Jr.

John: Okay.

Sam: How do you like that? And, so, but to differentiate me from my father, Anton, I am Sam and our second son is Tony, and he is the third. So that is the end of that. But we lived out entire life in Barneveld, and we had a wonderful life there. The town has three hundred and seventy-six people by virtue of the census probably in 1940 and now it has grown to three times that size. But we lived right at the edge of town and, on some property that was the farm property. I spent my early days as a young person occupied, because my uncle owned Blue Mound Park, which is now the Blue Mound State Park. He bought that when he married my aunt and back in the thirties, and developed it as a private park where he charged admission. So somebody had to collect the admission and my brothers and I were the ones that got the job of being there from eight in the morning until sunset to collect the tolls. Started out at twenty-five cents a car and you stand up on the

running board. You don't even know what a running board is.

John: Oh, yea.

Sam And collect the tolls. And that was a great experience for me because it taught me how to meet people and get along with people. And he was a great person. His name was John Minix, M-i-n-i-x. And he had been in the store business in Barneveld. And this was his second marriage, to my aunt. But he was great. Every time a car would come to the gate, and I would go down to the gate, and the car would turn around because they didn't want to pay the twenty-five or thirty-five cents, Uncle John comes sauntering out and say, "I see the car just left." And I would say, "Yes." And he would say, "Well, what did he say to you, and what did you say to him?" And so we would go through this lingo and he would say, "Well, the next time he says this, well, you say that."

John: Salesmanship.

Sam Ah, it was wonderful. And I enjoyed it, too, because it was good to get a little challenge, because you got paid a penny a car, and that was more money.

John: Now, someone told me about collecting tolls at the gate at Blue Mound. It was either one of these veterans interviews, or something. I'll think of it.

Sam Have you done any of these with my brother, Carl Arneson, from Barneveld?

John: No.

Sam Or my brother, Ted Arneson, from Barneveld?

John: No.

Sam Or my brother, Phil Arneson, from Sparta?

John: I'll, that is just, I remember someone talking about collecting tolls. I'll figure out who that was.

Sam We had a corner on that market because it was a summer job and it sure beat being out in the hay field, I'll tell you that. Or picking rocks, like we did, out in the field. But we had a wonderful life in that little town, and there were six of us. Six brothers and sisters. And if you took a map of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minneapolis. Minneapolis and Chicago. If you drew a line, you'd go right over Barneveld. Significance of that was that about three miles south there was a beacon that flashed on. Anyway, we'd be out in the yard playing ball and

whenever we'd hear a plane, everybody would run in the house and say, "There's a plane coming." And we'd all go outside and wave at it.

John: Yea, I remember those beacons.

Sam Cornball. But anyway, and then there was one up north of town, at Pike's Peak. But if you took those two beacons, you would go right over our house. But, anyway, we had a good life and we all went to school at Barneveld public schools. And there were six of us, and we were all valedictorians of the high school.

John: Oh, great.

Sam Isn't that magnificent? The high school only had seventy people. But anyway, we had a great life there. And graduated from high school I was just eighteen, I wasn't eighteen at the time. I was eighteen in October after that, so I didn't get my notice from my friends and neighbors until Christmas, at which time I was at the University with another friend that was even younger than I was. But the draft board was good enough to give me a thirty day deferment. And they drafted me the day after Christmas. It was pushed over to the thirtieth of January, which gave you a chance to finish that first semester. Well, I finished the first semester and went into the service. By the way, I got freshman honors that year for Phi Eta Sigma. Do you know what that is? Well, that's four A's and one B. There were no other guys in school. I didn't have any competition. Everybody felt sorry for me.

John: Can we back up a minute? Do you remember Pearl Harbor Day?

Sam Yes, I do. Well, we were listening to the radio on Sunday afternoon. After we got back from church. Played pool when the minister wasn't coming. But a portable pool table. But I can remember that Sunday afternoon, and hearing that word that they had been attacked, and it was incredible. And, of course, I didn't think a lot of it because, in 1941, I was a sophomore in high school. One of my aunts said, "Well, at least, he won't have to go." Wrong.

John: I was seven or eight, and the first thing we thought was, where's Pearl Harbor? That was what everybody was asking.

Sam And nobody knew. You know. It was some place a million miles away. Well, seems like that but it wasn't that far.

John: So you got your greetings.

Sam I got my greetings, and went to Fort Sheridan, and got sworn in and inducted, and got all the, I can remember they said, "Pay close attention to the shoes before you

put them on because if they don't fit, it is because of the can of dubbing in the shoes." Had to take it out. Anyway, after Fort Sheridan, then they sent us down to Fort McClellan, in Anniston, Alabama. That is a miserable place. It's somewhere near Montgomery. I don't even want to go back there. But it is sandy, and hilly, and it rains all the time.

John: A great place for an Army base.

Sam I think they have got some kind of poisonous weapons storage there right now. And it serves them right. So, we put in our time there and then, this was strictly infantry replacement. Because they passed...

John: This was when? What year?

Sam This was 1945. Just before the Germans capitulated. And the I passed the Navy mental exam. You went to officer's school. But I found out later, they had closed that thing down fast enough because the war was coming to a grind, and they didn't need more officers. But I was color blind. Both my brother, my older brother and I, were color blind. So we got drafted into the Army. So I just figured I'd wait it out and get that semester in, and because I had my tuition paid, because of this being valedictorian. The tuition was fifty dollars. Yea. I got a granddaughter in Michigan State, and I know it's not fifty dollars any more.

John: I've got a meeting this afternoon with my investment guy. The first two grandkids are freshmen in high school now. I've got about three years before I, we've got nine grandkids.

Sam Well, you are one ahead of me.

John: We want to help them all.

Sam What I've been doing is giving each one on their birthday a thousand dollars. For a college fund. Well, that sounds like a big deal, but when you get to the end, they're not going to have more than, even prudently investing it, there'll be twenty, twenty-five thousand dollars, and that isn't going to give them one year. That is how bad it is. Anyway, but we, after the basic training, we came home for a week and went to Camp Shelby, Mississippi. Which is another beautiful place. And about that time that the Congress had passed a law that there were no eighteen year old should be shipped overseas, and no serviceman should be shipped overseas until they had six months of training, and do you know, the day that six months was up, I was on a boat at San Diego harbor, heading out right to the sea. Anyway, we went across, sailed with a convoy over to Eniwetok Island and, you are familiar with that?

John: Yes.

Sam: Where is it? In there someplace. They put down the anchor and we sat there for about two days when they blew off those two atomic bombs. That was exactly when it was.

John: My birthday. August 6.

Sam: Is that right?

John: I was talking to a woman the other day. She was a nurse. She said there is a runway there, and that was about it.

Sam: All we could see was a few trees. We didn't get within a thousand yards of the place. But, anyway, now we went from there to Leyte Island in the Philippines, and it rained there all the time, too. And in those tents, it was just terrible. And we were there, and we were attached, assigned, to the 97th Infantry Division. Which had deployed from Germany and thought the war was over, and came back, and got a thirty day leave and then packed up and headed for Japan. And we were the cannon fodder that was going to replace the ones who weren't there. And the only reason they weren't there is because they had been killed, you know, or injured. So that, we were so glad that bomb went off. I can't tell you how glad I was. It saved out lives.

John: They figured a million casualties.

Sam: Yea. Oh, man. Those Japanese never stopped. So we stayed there until they packed up and went, after the surrender ceremonies, we went to Kumagaya. It's spelled just the way it sounds. It's ninety miles west of Tokyo, and it was wooden barracks there, and we were in charge of guarding an ammunition dump. But they had a mental hospital within about a thousand yards of there. And these Japanese screaming and hollering. That was scary for an eighteen year old kid to be sitting out there with a gun and waiting for the, I spread tin cans all around the perimeter of my thing, the wire, so anybody that was sneaking up on it.

John: That would be scary.

Sam: And because what we were guarding was the ammunition dump, which, of course, they wouldn't want. And then, of course, they broke up, they were sending the guys home. The guys went home on the basis of who was in the service longer. And I, because of my banking experience, and my university experience, transferred into the Finance Corps. So, one day this fellow from New Jersey came

and said, "I want to see you in my office." I thought, "Oh, my God, what have I done now?" Well, he said, "Two things. First of all, you make the same mistake on every payroll. They were checking the payroll. You make the same mistake on every payroll that you check. Here's what you are doing wrong." I said, "Okay, I'll do that right." "Second," he said, "I need a replacement. You are the best." He was a technical sergeant and in charge of accounting office. And so I took his job and he went home and I got five stripes so fast. Which is the good part. And then after the division broke up, why, they sent me to Sendai. This is my wife, Joan. They sent me to Sendai on the island of Okaido, on the northern part of Japan. And that town, everything was gone except one big cement building. Everything was burned. They fire bombed the place. And that is where we had our offices, until they sent me home. But it was nice. Going over, I was a buck private. The lowest bunk on the bottom of the ship. And all the officers had gone home, so when we went back, I was on top of the ship, the penthouse. Shows you what five stripes will do. Anyway, then we came home and sailed under the Golden Gate at San Francisco. And went and drank two glasses of milk. And we went on the train back to Fort Sheridan, and on the way across the Mississippi River, I was so excited about being there, I opened the window, my dog tags went flying out. They are down in the bottom of the Mississippi River somewhere. I'll catch a big old carp and he'll have a dog tag on him. So that was the end of the service.

John: Okay, when did you get out?

Sam About November 15, 1946. Went in in '45, got out in '46.

John: Okay. Then you came back to Barneveld?

Sam I came back to Barneveld and resumed my education, courtesy of the GI Bill of Rights.

John: That was a question I was going to ask. Did you use the GI Bill for anything else?

Sam No. What else was there?

John: Housing.

Sam No. I was single. Three and a half years at the university, and graduated in four years with a bachelor of business administration, in the Commerce School. And I majored in insurance, and I went into, went back to Barneveld and started my own agency. My father was a banker and he wrote a little insurance on the side. So I took that, because he wasn't well at the time, anyway. And started that. And eventually, I joined forced with her father, who had been in the insurance business in Ohio. But they moved to Madison, and opened another agency.



John: Where in Ohio?

Sam Bryan, Ohio.

Joan, Sam's wife: When you were overseas, I was in high school, and I went to Grace Episcopal Church and on Sundays gentlemen would come in from all around, and I began writing to a sailor, and he had these photographs of Hiroshima after the bombing. I'm trying to find them for you. Little tiny ones.

John: A good friend of mine, he just passed away here. We was with the Cap Times. John Patrick Hunter.

Sam Oh, yes.

John: He was on one of the first planes into Japan. Right before the surrender. And stole a truck and drove to Hiroshima. Just days, well, I don't know how many days after the bomb. If you knew him, he would do that. Great guy. Just a couple of questions. Did you ever do any organizations? VFW? American Legion?

Sam Well, that is interesting, because the first person, I think, that contacted me when I got back to Barneveld, before I even got my uniform off, was a member of the American Legion. And he signed me up to be a member of the local American Legion there. It's called Evelyn Trainor American Legion Post Number 433, of Barneveld. And I just got my fiftieth certificate here, a couple years ago. But, I have to tell you, I am a member of a lot of other things, including the Masonic Lodge and the Lutheran Church, and all those activities, and on the school board. And I just said, "Look, I'll pay my dues, but if you need some money for something, that will be fine but I am not going to be attending any meetings." I never attended a meeting. It's kind of shameful.

John: I suppose you get busy. You know, there are things to do.

Sam Joan and I had four children, and of course things got busier and busier. Then we moved to Madison and joined forces with her father. And we were in that business together until he passed away. And then twelve years ago, I turned, we turned the business over to our son, Tony. And he has now merged with the Neckerman Agency. On the west side, across from Oakwood. And he is doing very well.

John: That's good. That's great. Do you ever get together with anybody? That you were in the service with?

Sam You know, that is a funny thing. We just talked about that with Jim Bartell down

here. And I said, this Alexander, this builder. His father stood right next to me. He was taller than I, in the platoon. A platoon, down at Fort McClellan. And I never, ever got back in touch with him, and he is right up here in Baraboo. Shameful. But I did, I guess why I never done that, I did call on another fellow, who was a dentist in town, to reminisce with him, after I got out of the service. And he knew I was an insurance man, and he wouldn't see me.

John: I just got together two weeks ago with three other fellows from fifty years ago. We never stayed in touch. One got me on the internet. Found me on the internet, and he got hold of the other two, so after fifty years, we got together in North Carolina, the first weekend of this month.

Sam Did you really?

John: It was great. It's like we were just together a couple months ago.

Sam I probably should do that.

John: A question I always ask, this event took two years, just ripped two years out of your life. How do you feel about that?

Sam Well, I feel that there was my duty to do it, and I'd do it again in a minute. But I didn't enjoy a single day of it.

John: Okay. I know. I've done about a hundred of these interviews now, and there is a common theme" I didn't want it. I didn't like it. But I did it, and I feel good that I did it.

Sam Oh, yea. I told the doctor down in Milwaukee, he said, "Your blood pressure is pretty high." And I said, "I never had high blood pressure in my life." He said, "Don't you want to go in the service?" I said, "I'll die if I don't."

John: One fellow thought he had two bad teeth. So he went and had them pulled. And when the dentist got done, he said, "Why did you want the teeth out?" And he said, "Well, I was going to enlist in the Marines, and I thought they were bad, and they wouldn't take me." There was nothing wrong with his teeth. But he wanted to go that bad.

Sam You need that calling. No question about that.

John: And then you stayed in the area, here.

Sam Okay. My wife's family had some property in Maple Bluff, that relatives had, and

she inherited. And so we ripped that house down and we built a new house there. In 1965. Been there for thirty-eight years. We were in Nakoma first. We built a house in Barneveld and we were there for about five years. And then we went to Nakoma, and then we went to Maple Bluff for thirty-eight years. But when she broke an ankle about twelve years ago, whatever it was, we decided, here, we had a house with five bedrooms, four and a half baths, on the second floor only. So how do you get from the first floor to the second floor? So we just made up our mind we'd look for something like this, and this is what we got.

John: You saw pictures taken at this level? What a view.

Sam: I drove from North Carolina two weeks ago. I love to drive. And western North Carolina, actually, I was a traffic hazard because I was just looking at the scenery. It was beautiful. They weren't quite turning a lot but they were starting to. It was a beautiful drive.

Joan: A couple of years ago we drove down to the Smokies, in the fall. Magnificent.

John: Okay. This is a remarkable story. Thinking back, anything you want to add to this? This is remarkable.

Sam: Well, we, I loved the insurance business, and I enjoyed getting up and going to work every day. But twelve years ago, with I turned the business over, I never wanted to see it again. And the business has changed so in the last years, it is just incredible. Everything is on...I told the story to somebody else, I went to the office about five years ago, six years ago. And I said, "Is Tony in? Our son?" And he said, "No, he is not, but one of his customers is on the line." And I said, "Who is it?" And he gave me the name, and I said, "Oh, that is an old customer of mine. Let me talk to him." And I said, "Bring me the file." And she said, "What file?" We used to have it all in a file. No files. It's all on the computer.

John: I was baking nut rolls for Christmas. I like to cook and bake. And I dropped the dish, a mixing bowl. And I got a big cut. So I went down to my HMO and there was some doctor I didn't know on duty at night. And he said, "How did you do that?" And I said, "I was baking these nut rolls. Raisin nut rolls. And I dropped the mixing bowl. It broke." He said, "First of all, I want one of those. Now, let's see what we can do." And he turned around and here was my whole file, and suggested treatments. Just as a wind-up to that, he said, "We've got to close that up. I could stitch it. But that will just poke holes in you. I'm going to Super-Glue you." And I said, "Oh, you're kidding." And he did. I don't know if it was Super-Glue, but he took something and he put it on there. And a couple days later, it flipped off. My son-in-law works for Epic, the people who have most of those computer things. They're building a whole campus out in Fitchburg.

Sam            Oh, is that the one?

John:         A woman founded it. The interesting thing about her is that everyone knows she had a cot in her office. But that is because she sleeps over at night.

**[End of Side A of Tape 1.]**

John:         I write, when I'm not doing this. And a good friend of mine just passed away, Stephen Ambrose.

Sam:         Oh, yes.

John:         And he was talking to a bunch of World War II veterans at a meeting at the Historical Society, and he said to them, well, he was roaming around, and the current theme was, "Yea. I was in, but I didn't really do anything." And he said, "You know, that is wrong." He said, "You were giants. You went out and saved the world." And these guys thought, maybe I issued ping-pong balls in Indianapolis or something. You know, everybody went and did their job, and saved the world.

Joan:         I know I've had a couple of our granddaughters from outside Chicago call and ask Sam about it, what it was like during that time. And then they would talk to me, too.

Sam:         Can I get a copy of that tape?

John:         Yes. They will send you a copy of the tape or transcript. I'll ask them to send the tape, too. Have you been to the museum, downtown?

Sam:         You bet.

Joan:         We just took all my father's stuff in there.

John:         Oh, wonderful.

Joan:         We hadn't know what to do with it, and we were talking to Jim Bartell down there, and he suggested that.

Sam:         It was World War I stuff.

Joan:         And he was from Ohio. But he became a Wisconsin resident.

John: I was doing an interview with a woman yesterday in Lake Mills. And she had been a nurse. And her dad had been a surgeon in World War I. And she said she had some things she wanted to show me, and she was having a little trouble getting around. She walks with a cane. And she went down the cellar, and I thought maybe I could give her a hand. And she came up with this, it looked like a canvas attaché case, about so big. And I'll bet it weighed forty pounds. And she unstrapped it, and then folded it out about eight times, and here it was a complete surgeon's kit of several hundred sharp things. And it was in perfect condition. There was dirt on the canvas, and even the stuff was, there was no corrosion.

Sam: Is that right?

John: And I said, "Boy, you should give that to the museum." And she said, "Yes, we have two." But it must have weighed forty pounds.

Joan: My father was an ambulance driver.

John: Was he?

Joan: And we did, about ten or twelve years ago, we did a tour over there. Backwards, because we did, we started in Amsterdam. We were with some friends. And then we drove down. He had started in Nancy which is about twenty-five miles west of Strasbourg. Worked his way up to Flanders, up to Brouge, in Belgium.

John: Bryan, Ohio, is in the central state, isn't it?

Joan: No, it's about fifty miles west of Toledo. It's right on the border of Indiana.

Sam: It's on the Toll Way. About eight or ten miles off the Toll Way.

John: I was born and raised in Youngstown, which is the other side. There's another fellow I worked with, he is the historian that runs Old World Wisconsin down here. And he's from Youngstown. And every time we'd meet each other, we'd say, "Hey, I got out, too." Because things were pretty rough there.

Joan: But my dad was in the insurance business with his father, and his sister, who was twenty years younger, but my mother's family was here. They had their own, and my great uncle wanted to have him come and work here. So I was about seven or eight years old when we moved here.

Sam: That was a few years ago.

John: Yea, the economy was so bad down there. My wife's nephew, well, my nephew,

too. A high school kid was killed in a car crash near Akron. And we went down to the funeral. And he was a very popular kid. And it was quite a distance from the church to the cemetery, and they had a long caravan. And they had two cruisers accompany, you know, stopping traffic at intersections. And both cruisers were dirty and rusty. And, you know, if the police cars and the fire trucks are dirty and rusty, you got a problem. When I came out of the service in 1958 and went back home, the steel mills and Westinghouse Electric Company, and that, were laying people off that had twenty years of service. The only job I could get in the area was to join the Air Force, I was an electronics technician, to join the Air Force Reserve as an E T out at the airport. I didn't want to go right back in. So I ended up getting into the space race. We lived in Alexandria, Virginia. Okay. This is a remarkable story.

Sam: Are we done?

John: Anything else you want to put on here? I will have them send you a copy of the tape and a copy of the transcript. That is the only copies that will go out. They won't...

**[End of Interview.]**