

# Doctor Robert Heerens

Interviewed by Lorraine Lightcap  
Without a tape  
Midway Village & Museum Center  
6799 Guilford Road  
Rockford, Illinois 61107  
Phone 815 397 9112

## Doctor Robert Heerens

**LIGHTCAP:** My name is Lorraine Lightcap and I am a volunteer with the Midway Village & Museum Center in Rockford, Illinois. Along with my co-volunteers we have transcribed approximately 50 tapes of interviews of World War II veterans. This was a project begun by the State of Illinois on the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of World War II. The project is almost completed and I have wanted to do a few more interviews of Rockford citizens for the research library at the museum, who participated in the catastrophic events in the European and Asian Theaters.

Today is October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2001, and my interview is with Dr. Robert Heerens who lives at 5664 Spring Brook Road. His military service took him to the Asian war areas from Saipan to the islands in the Pacific and briefly to China. My first question, Bob, is to ask you to tell us about your family, place of birth and your educational opportunities.

**HEERENS** I was born in Evanston, Illinois in July of 1915. My father was Joseph Heerens and my mother was Karen Larson Heerens. I had one brother and two sisters. One sister died at an early age. I attended high school in Evanston. To earn money for college I worked for one year at the Abbot Laboratories in their Chicago branch. After that I went to the college in Kalamazoo for 4 years. After college I worked a year at Abbott Laboratories in North Chicago in the biological-testing lab. Then I attended 2 years at the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa and then graduated from Northeastern Medical School. M6 internship was at the Great Lakes Naval Hospital. My mother had been a receptionist for an obstetrician and I suppose because I knew the doctor she worked for, it was a key to my interest in the medical field.

**LIGHTCAP:** Tell us a bit about your life before entering college.

**HEERENS** I believe I was an average young boy with a close family living in Evanston. I was proud to be associated with a Boy Scout Troop and eventually achieved the Eagle Scout award. Classical music was a favorite. This is something I picked up on my own not particularly something my parents was interested in.

**LIGHTCAP:** Were you aware of Hitler's Actions and speeches at the onset of the war in Europe? What about the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

**HEERENS** I remember hearing on September 1, 1939, that Hitler had invaded Poland. I was headed to medical school in Alabama and was wondering how it would affect my future. The Sunday the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941; I was home with my parents listening to a symphony concert. At first I thought it might be another Orson Welles "scare". The radio resumed airing the concert and it wasn't until later that I realized that Pearl Harbor had really been bombed by the Japanese. By then I was furious.

**LIGHTCAP:** Tell us about your decision to enter the Navy and about the hospitals you were at in the United States.

**HEERENS** After internship at Great Lakes, I was medical officer at the midshipman school in Chicago, then ordered to Fleet Marine Force at Camp Pendleton, California. From there I was shipped to Saipan. Actually I had applied for admission to the Navy as a medical officer as I did not want to be part of the army. I chose the Navy because I loved ships. I did not need any basic training as I enlisted as a doctor. I spent 9 months at the Great Lake Naval Hospital. I was commissioned as a 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant, Junior Grade, and became a full lieutenant after serving in Okinawa. In May of '43 I received orders to proceed to Camp Pendleton and assigned to the Fleet Marines.

From there I was assigned as a replacement which ended up in Saipan. Then I was detached and flown to Pelew [Palau] Island in the Mid Pacific. On December 7<sup>th</sup> I entered combat with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment, 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division.

**LIGHTCAP:** What were your parents' feelings about a son serving in the Navy?

**HEERENS** They were happy I was going as a M.D. and trusted my judgement. They did not overtly show that they were worried. By this time I had been married for about a year (August '43) and had to leave a pregnant wife. This was in 1944.

**LIGHTCAP:** Tell a bit more about your experiences I the South Pacific.

**HEERENS** From Saipan I was flown to the Pelew Islands which is an atoll island along with 3 other doctors. We were titled Battalion Surgeons and became part of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion. We were in the combat zone in the center of the Pacific. There we put up and aid station where we were abler to take care of the wounded. I incidentally, one can't dig a "fox hole" on these islands but we did secure the island in 2 months. After many days we finally were prepared a good meal otherwise we existed on K-Rations. It really was "scary" being at the "other end of the world". In April of '45 we were with a marine infantry group that invaded Okinawa. We had no opposition from the Japanese when we landed. By then I was supplied with a 45 revolver but I never had to use it. I think I would have preferred to hit the enemy on the head rather than to shoot him but I never had to make that decision. The first day after the landing we still had no opposition. Something of interest is that in the year of '45, Easter and April Fool's Day were the same day. We moved across this island in 3 days and finally reached Yontan Airfield which the Marines were to protect. There was not much combat around us until about May 1<sup>st</sup>.

Our group was actually the last to be in combat at Okinawa ending June 21, 1945.

**LIGHTCAP:** Where were you when the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan?

**HEERENS** I was in Okinawa for training when the bomb was dropped, training for the invasion of Japan. The bombs more or less ended the conflict with the Japanese. Along with my battalion, I was sent to China. After landing at Tanku, China, we boarded a train to Peking. We even celebrated a holiday (on the Hi-o River). "The triple 10<sup>th</sup>", 10<sup>th</sup> day 10<sup>th</sup> month, 10<sup>th</sup> year, with [Kuomintang political party]. . . [We] stayed in China from October to February. I then returned home via Hawaii.

*[Heerens is referring to the Double Tenth Agreement signed October 10, 1945 recognizing the Kuomintang as the legitimate ruling party of China and the Communist Party as a legitimate opposition party.]*

**LIGHTCAP:** Was it possible to correspond with your wife and parents regularly? Were you able to received packages of things you would like to have?

**HEERENS** I wrote letters but mostly to my wife, Marty. I especially liked Limburger cheese and she would send some to me. Being surrounded at times with dead Japanese, I finally decided they smelled alike, cheese and dead Japanese, and I have no desire for it anymore.

**LIGHTCAP:** Do you still keep in touch with the men you served with? Have you attended any reunions?

**HEERENS** The men who were in my battalion have not had a reunion but there are several that I do keep in touch with frequently and have had the opportunity to visit. One man in my battalion I knew from my Boy Scout Troop in Evanston. He was Alex Agase who later became a coach of the Northwestern football team. Incidentally,

two doctors were assigned to a battalion and my partner is still living.

**LIGHTCAP:** How long did you serve? What medals or citations did you received?

**HEERENS** I was in the service from December of 1941 to 1947. When I was retired, I was a full lieutenant, which corresponds to a captain in the army. If I had remained a little longer I would have become a Lieutenant Colonel. I received two combat mission citations, presidential citation, good conduct medal and the Asiatic/Pacific Theater medal.

**LIGHTCAP:** Was it difficult to adjust to civilian life?

**HEERENS** No! I had no problem adjusting to civilian life. At first I was in orthopedics at the Great Lakes Hospital. I was told that there was a need for doctors in the Rockford area and my wife and I made the decision to begin a private general practice here. I had that practice for 40 years and was associated with Swedish-American Hospital. I retired in 1987.

**LIGHTCAP:** Did you have any doubts about whether our country could be successful fighting a war in the European and Asian Theater?

**HEERENS:** No, because the enemies made more mistakes.

**LIGHTCAP:** Did you think the allies were “doing a good job?”

**HEERENS** They won but with much waste and mistakes.

**LIGHTCAP:** How did you cope with seeing such devastation with many wounded, dying or dead?

**HEERENS** I did my job as humanly as possible and efficiently as possible. Feelings were for civilian life.

**LIGHTCAP:** Did you have to treat wounded Japanese prisoners?

**HEERENS:** No. We killed them all. If I had to, I would have because they were also human.

**LIGHTCAP:** How many were in a battalion? How many battalions were you with? How many servicemen and marines were you with? How many doctors?

**HEERENS:** Three battalions each, 1200; Regiments, 5000; and Divisions 10 to 12,000. There were 2 M.D.s to a battalion, 2 at regiments, 8 M.D.s. The Division had a company hospital and 4 M.D.s. The division hospital had many M.D.s. our battalion aid station was sited 500 to 1000 yards behind the front lines. The other M.D.s and I would “leap frog” with our aid stations and personnel as the troops and the front line moved.

**LIGHTCAP:** Wars have just never accomplished lasting peace. Do you fear that our technology and weaponry will deter large-scale wars? Do you think we can control terrorism in this country?

**HEERENS** Our present technology and weaponry will only be good for large-scale wars. As far as terrorism, we can fight it but probably never counteract it.

**IN ADDITION:** Dr. Heerens and his wife Martha met in Evanston, Illinois, where she was in nurses’ training and he was working as a [? M] and medical student. They actually met in the operating room. They moved to Rockford in 1947. They have been blessed with 5 daughters. Bob has been very active in the Rockford community serving on the board of Community Chest. The Board of Visiting Nurses founded the Board of Health in 1960. He has also been President of the Chamber of Commerce, Winnebago County Medical Society, Illinois Academy of Family Physicians and Swedish American Medical Staff, and a member and

former president of Northwestern Area Agency on Aging from 1970 – 19 \_\_. Was a member of Board of Directors and the Vice President of American Academy of Family Physicians. He was also active with Rockford's Center for Learning in Retirement (C.L.R.) and can often be found talking to retirees at local retirement centers.