Beryl Walther – Life During WWII

By Beryl Walther

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Oral Interview conducted by Boyd Soule

Transcript copied by Luke Kirkham

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Brigham Young University – Idaho
BS: When were you born Grandma?

BW: April 8, 1922 in Chicago, Illinois.

BS: Did you live in Chicago your whole life?

BW: I live here, except for traveling and trips, until the end of 1943.

BS: How old were you on December 7, 1941?

BW: I believe I was 19 years old.

BS: So three years later you left Chicago?

BW: No that… No I stayed there… Ok ’41 and all of ’42 and in the beginning of 1943 I went to Washington to work for the government.

BS: Did you decide to work for the government because of what happened?

BW: Yes that’s part of it.

BS: December 7, what do you remember about that day?

BW: Ok, I was at home, I was getting ready to go to Chicago Stake Conference at Auburn Square there was a stake calling of a President and I think I had to give a talk at one of the sessions; the radio came on and announced the attack on Pearl Harbor. I was so shocked and I felt like it was cataclysmic and I knew it would change my life and I felt that way and I felt kind of despondent and felt that in a sense that my life was over.

BS: Really?

BW: But, yes, but I knew that we would win and I had no doubt about that, I knew we would win, then after that that feeling kind of left and I went on with life is what I am trying to say.

BS: Sure.

BW: I went onto college and I graduated and got a state job but everything changed.

BS: So you heard about the attack and a couple years later you worked for the government?

BW: No just one year later, I kept on going to college and finished in December of ’42 and I took a big civil service junior professional assistant examination downtown at the big Chicago post office, I think it was the biggest in the world, and there were thousands of people taking this examination, a lot of them were older and I was one of the first ones
finished, and I got a very high grade and it was in the civil service, one of my professors had been one of the heads of the civil service some years before and he encouraged me to go to Washington DC government job there.

BS: So after the examination, that’s how you got your job.

BW: Oh yes that’s how, I went to DC and then what you do is go from interviews to different departments and they take the top three and I was one of the three, the civil department wanted me when I got there but they did not have their funding and they were waiting for their budget to be passed then when I was there a few weeks I got a call from the war department and they asked me to come down for an interview, my name was on a list I guess. I went down to the Pentagon, which is where I worked, and I knew when I walked into that department that I was going to have that job, I just knew it, it turned out to be the one, they did not need to worry about funding so they hired me right away.

BS: So what did you do in your job?

BW: Well, I had a classification it was a classified job, I worked with personal and so some of the things were confidential and you know they checked your background and your patriotism and so on you know so that did not have anyone who would be a spy or anything like that, it was very interesting.

BS: So were you typing papers up for people.

BW: No, no I would not type I would go and interview people and then give the papers to a typist to type up, I did not do that at all, I guess now a days you would have a computer, but then we had a typist to do that for us.

BS: So your job was… to?

BW: I was the brains, ha-ha, I was the brains for the interview and to write up the reports and then give it up to the typist to make up and then it would be classified and so on that’s about it.

BS: Did you make a lot of friends in your job?

BW: Yes, I lived with three girls, one was my sister in a very nice apartment and beautiful area on 16th street I think it was 2440 16th NW, and that was the street the playhouse was on at the end of the street, we were all LDS girls and we had a very nice apartment and we would share our duties and we would each take turns cooking for four days each just the main meals we would cook and did the shopping too, to share the cost.

BS: Did you all work at the same place?

BW: No we worked different places, my sister worked at the department of agriculture, another young girl, I think she worked at some place in the war department but I never
knew where and I don’t remember but we did not work the same places at all, we had lots of friends and people over and cooked dinners and so on, and do you want to know about what type of cooking we did?

BS: Sure.

BW: Do you want to know about rationing points?

BS: Sure.

BW: Alright when the war hit us I don’t remember how soon… I think very soon they started a point of rationing. You couldn’t just go buy what you wanted, the things that were rationed that I can remember were sugar, juice, meat, can goods, tires, gasoline, I don’t know what else, the cooking things if you bought fresh vegetables you did not need points but if you bought fresh meat or canned meat you had to pay points plus your money, so you couldn’t just get all that you wanted, so it was nice that with four girls that we had our points together so we had enough and we had very nice dinners, we had a lot of fresh vegetables we did not use very much cans because of the points.

BS: Was it common to use can produce back then?

BW: Yes, frozen things did not come out until after the war.

BS: What kind of foods did you eat?

BW: I wrote several menus down to my husband during the war, oh we would have roast, sometimes ham, several vegetables like acorn squash, potatoes, green beans, several vegetables for the main meal and then the meat but not always, one time I made chicken noodle you know the real good stuff not canned and that type of thing, then for breakfast and for lunch we ate at the cafeteria but breakfast we ate at home.

BS: Did you go without a lot of stuff or was it not that big of deal because there were four of you?

BW: We seemed to have enough, but when I was married and living in Boston and when I used my points to buy my husband was in the service and would come and visit me like weekends or when ever he could get off because he was in Rhode Island and I would try to cook for him and it was very hard because only one ration book that was mine he did not have one because he was in the service and I would save up my points to make things for him, like meat and things like that.

BS: So how did you meet your husband?

BW: I met him in Chicago on August 2, 1942 on the church steps a friend introduced us, a mutual friend, and on November 13, we were engaged so we had a very wonderful courtship, did lots of wonderful things in the city.
BS: So did he get shipped off and you stay home?

BW: No, he was transferred after we were engaged at the time he was going to a school, a navy school at the navy pier in downtown Chicago and then he was shipped out he had been in the service since March or maybe earlier and he finished that and they shipped him to Rhode Island, Quonset point, RI. Some of the company was shipped to Brazil and other places in the world but he was shipped to RI and so when I went to Washington DC to work, he would come down on the leave or anytime he could get off to make the trip, he would stay at a YMCA hotel and take me out in DC for dinner and so on.

BS: What kind of things did you do for entertainment?

BW: In Chicago?

BS: Yes.

BW: Oh, we went to plays, to the Naval ballroom dancing, world famous and a couple of movies and the biggest circus in the world, the Ringling Brothers Barnum combined huge one and to the 1942 escapades, still famous they kept on for years they did ice skating and you know entertainment and they took me out for dinners, one was to the Normandy house which does not exist any more, from that place you could see the, I think it was called the water tower that had survived the big Chicago fire. And we also had guests at my house together and we always entertained a lot of service people because everyone wanted to be very patriotic and wanted to do things for the military and he came to our house often with friends. Also, my sister and I gave a giant Halloween party and it was very marvelous party and at the end of it I asked him to give a ghost story, we weren’t engaged at that time but about two months later we were engaged, that was kind of fun. We had a spook house, we had a big three story house and had big carved pumpkin on the front porch lanterns and spooks and we had 35-36 people more service men than girls but we had a wonderful time and wonderful refreshments.

BS: What type of refreshments did you make with the rationing?

BW: Well my mother made pies and sandwiches you did not need for pumpkins so we made pie and candies. I don’t remember them being rationed and cider and bread and everything was very pretty.

BS: So after grandpa was in Rhode Island, did you keep in contact with him there or did he come down and visit you?

BW: Well I tell you what he did, before he left Chicago, he got an unexpected leave to go out west to see his family for the Christmas season and it was a terrible snowy winter. I believe and so he got to go to Elko on the train and there was so much snow to go to the ranch but his parents came into the town so he was able to see them you know and then he came back on the train and stopped in Chicago both times and stayed in a hotel not to
far from where I lived and I was thrilled because I did not know when I would see him after we were engaged and so I saw him twice then and then when I went to DC we wrote to each other and he wanted to make a trip when he could and he came down and visited me about 4-5 times. I have it written down but I can’t remember, and so that was a very nice thing to do. And when he came to DC one of the things we would do was go to church if possible and mutual if possible and we would go sight seeing, the capital building, the Washington monument, the art museums, and things like that I can’t remember all of them, but those I remember because they were quite outstanding memories and I would meet him at the train station and that was a very, if you seen any of those romantic pictures of World War II, why we could have [poised] for them.

BS: (Chuckles) that sounds neat. Did your father or any of your family members ever serve in the war?

BW: I had cousins in the war, my brother had three children and was married and the service people called him up to examine him and they did not take him because he had a football injury from his high school days. He played football and he injured his knee and so that’s why they did not take him even though he had three children they would have taken him otherwise, but for his wife and children sake it was a pretty good thing he did not have to go, but I think he had, the work he did which I didn’t remember was at the time, but he had to use his car to get to work, so I think he had a little more gas rationing and when I went back after my husband shipped out. I went back home, he and his wife took me to the hospital and we had our first child so he had the gas, my father got very little gas points otherwise so he just put his car in the garage and did not use it until the war was over. He had a great big Packard and it used a lot of gas so we just used public transportation.

BS: So public transportation, is that like taxis now in Chicago?

BW: No, street cars were the big thing and there was an elevator system like a subway, they have now and like a trolley car which they don’t use not like buses but they were very common then. And all the service men could go free on the street cars.

BS: Did you know any school friends that went to war?

BW: Yes, I had some school friends that went to war, and I also had some cousin who went to war who died in the Normandy invasion. And his brother paid a visit in the service and the family was quite devastated over that. Then we had a navy friend ho died in the service, but I don’t know how that happened, but it was at sea.

BS: How did their families cope with it?

BW: Well my cousin’s family, I think they took it very hard, so I don’t think they took it very well and the other one the navy friend, it was very hard on his widow, they were a young couple but after a year or so, she married again. She would write to me, we were friends and we wrote, it was very, very hard.
BS: Did the community take it well?

BW: I don’t know, Harold had lots and lots of cousins in the war he had a large family, but I don’t think any of them died.

BS: Ok, so were you nervous when Harold got shipped out?

BW: Oh very much so, but I always had confidence that he would return, but when I went home we were going to have a baby at that time, I was going to stay in the provenience area and my parents suggested that I come home and after I had the baby I could see how wise that was, I don’t know how I could have ever survived alone financially or just physically just because of how hard of a job it was, they had this big house and they wanted me to come back so I did and went back and paid room and board. I did not want to live off of them, but… and I appreciated it and Harold felt more at ease too.

BS: So did you send pictures when you had the baby to your husband.

BW: Oh yes, photographs, he sent film because it was very hard to get film but he could get film so he would send it and I would take the pictures, and I some… I had a professional photographer take them well several times and I sent them. And then his father died during the war in a ranching accident and the baby was four months old at the time and so Harold got a Red Cross leave which was kind of an emergency leave at that time and he said I did not need to come because it was too much, but I immediately made plans to meet him out there and so I left Chicago on a train to Elko and he came but he got bumped all around and he finally got to Reno and he took a bus to Elko so he wouldn’t get messed up, but we both missed the funeral, but he got there and he got to see the baby and he was there two weeks and he did get to see us and help.

BS: So in a way it was kind of a blessing.

BW: Yes, but it was very sad because it was very unexpected, it was machinery, so, he had one brother who was deferred from the war to be on the ranch to keep the ranch going, there were to be deferments for essential work and also for certain farms and so on.

BS: Did grandfather try to get deferred as well?

BW: No, as soon as Pearl Harbor hit he went to enlist in Salt Lake and they told him to go home and they would tell him when to come back, so about a month later he was told to come back and he was sent to San Diego for boot camp and he was there for whenever and there he was tested and was decided he was to go to school in Chicago for metal smith work because he knew a lot about tools and how basic things work, they had huge teaching programs to get people to do these specialized work.
BS: So what was his rank and assignment?

BW: When he started, what do you call them, he was a seaman hardly anybody and then he went up after he graduated from metal school, he became aviation metal smith 3rd class and he took more tests and studying in Rhode Island and he became 2nd class and in Puerto Rico, he became 1st class and then he kept studying to become chief, he did not know if he would make it because so many wanted to be that, but he became chief in the end which was the highest ranking non-commission officer. So he did a wonderful job.

BS: How long was he stationed in Puerto Rico?

BW: He was stationed there almost two years; he was in the service almost four years. A lot of his life.

BS: Back then what was your opinion of Hitler and the Japanese Hirohito and Mussolini during the war?

BW: Well you know they had some songs at the time, praise the Lord and pass the ammunition that was one of them and the other one was some comical ones making fun of Hirohito and Hitler, but I think generally people felt very anti-Japanese and not so much anti-German because there were so many Germans in the states.

BS: Did you have any German or Japanese friends in the states?

BW: I don’t remember having any Japanese friends and not particularly any, oh one thing I did do when I was a girl was a German tumbling society, but I did not really have any German friends. My sister and I would go and she was good at it and when I got better, I competed with the group in the city and I performed on the ringers, or that’s what I called them when I got more strength, and that was a very fun thing to do.

BW: What are your opinions of the Germans and Japanese now?

BS: Now? Well my husband is of German decent you know and I have some German in me I think, maybe Swiss. The Germans, in my opinion, are very scientific people and I think, and generally they’re very stubborn people in my opinion and they are very friendly, outgoing, cordial with my experience with the relatives, the Japanese, I don’t remember having any Japanese friends, but I have Japanese relatives.

BW: Do you remember when you first heard about the German concentration camps?

BS: I don’t exactly remember when, I did hear about it I think it was after the war, I don’t think people knew about it as much, but I had my husband’s brother who was in the war and was working in the communication department and he was one of the ones who opened or rescued the concentration camps. I can’t remember the name, maybe Dashall or something, I can’t remember and he told us personal stories about it afterwards it was horrible, just horrible.
BS: How did you feel when you heard about it?

BW: I felt it was a good thing we had the war they did terrible things from things I heard from the people who lived through that time a lot of people knew about it and that they didn’t admit it which I didn’t know.

BS: How do you say your life changed as a result of the war?

BW: Well, I consider it changed… who I married, because I would have married somebody else, because I was semi-engaged at the time and I felt like that my life would end and also it made a difference in what kind of work I went into and then of course it was really quite exciting in many ways for me to get out and work in the war effort. I’ll tell you some funny expressions you hear about the World War II people, they talk about the war effort, that they use over and over, they also talk about for the duration, I just saw these things I wrote them down, I never talked about my work at home in my apartment with my roommates because your never supposed to talk about your part or anything like that because you never knew if you would be giving a hint to somebody or someone overhear you and I never talked about it but it was kind of exciting and I went down to New Orleans part of the time and I got to go to many places that many people did not get to go. So it was very interesting and I got to go to Boston and I lived there and my husband would come and visit me, and in Boston I did not have a very nice apartment. I had a room that I rented it was a very elegant room in a former mansion on Deacon Street that I rented at first, but it cost so much $11 a week that I couldn’t afford it, I told my husband. So I got one in the upper floor, I was going to move away and I looked and looked but there was nothing any better so I moved to the third floor and I had a room up there that was simpler and I think it cost about $8 a week or something like that and I had kitchen privileges so I could go down to the kitchen and I had a little share of the ice box and a space in the pantry I could put my kitchen supplies, I only cooked occasionally, a lot of the time I would eat out at the restraints with my friends from work and you didn’t need points if you ate out.

BS: So it sounds like a lot of good things happened to you because of the war in your life.

BW: Yes, I think a lot of people feel that way it was very, very disruptive, it was dangerous and exciting, it was, it mixed the whole country up and around the world it was educational in some ways, of course some people died, I’ll tell you one sad, sad thing, one day when I was going to work, the office was down by the waterfront, and so one day I was walking and there was a lot of service men and there was a young fellow who had crutches, a navy boy, and I can still see him and one leg amputated, that just cut me to the bone and I felt so sad and so another thing my husband and I would go to military hospitals after the war because he had some health problems later and we would see a lot of people who had gone through a lot so you don’t really see all the results all the stories of what happened, its not all good some sad, sad things had happened but on the whole we saved the country and we saved the world, I firmly believe that and people were very patriotic everybody I knew. I never knew any one who was treasonous
or anti-war. There may have been some, but I never knew any, the whole country, in general, was very, very supportive and were willing to sacrifice and go without things which we did and as time went on the things were less and less available in the stores, the scarcity would show up.

BS: Do you remember any blackouts in Chicago?

BW: Yes, well I don’t remember in Chicago, but I certainly do in Boston.

BS: What was that like?

BW: Well, it's scary because there are no lights on so my practice was if possible to get to my place where I lived, directly from work or as soon as possible like if I went out to eat because I knew it would be completely black out and then its black out so you know you can’t see so its scary (chuckles) and then you have to get your windows covered you know but it was definitely spooky.

BS: Did you feel there was a fear of being bombed?

BW: No, I never felt that we would be bombed, now we know we have these terrorists against us, I have thought of it, but at that time even thought Pearl Harbor was attacked, and even though Alaska was attacked and we did hear some of these things of course Pearl Harbor we heard a lot, but and we heard what was told on the radio a lot so that was in part of everyone’s best interest, but I personally did not feel like we would be attacked however we had friends who were in the navy and they had experiences with the U-boats and they were a very great threat to the whole country and to the whole eastern sea board and I believe the west to but I did not think or hear of that much and so there were a lot of sinking of commercial ships and navy ships and so on so yes, it was a great threat and it was a very, very dangerous time, very dangerous, but we all felt a lot of confidence in President Roosevelt and I think that the war dragged on a long time, but finally it ended.

BS: What are some of the most vivid memories of World War II to you now?

BW: Now!? Oh I think of when it ended it was VE day which was May 8, 1945 and that meant victory in Europe when I heard that my mother said go to a movie because I was spending a lot of time with the baby and she said she would watch the baby and I remember the movie was “Gaslight” at the Avalon Theater in Chicago, when I came out of that movie, it must have been a matinee because it was still light, and when I came out there was all kinds of paper all over the street, and I thought what was happening, what is this and then I found out then about the war had ended and I just felt a huge load roll off my back, and that’s when I realized the amount of tension and stress that I had been under all those years, so that was a really vivid memory and then VJ say was victory over Japan and that was when the atomic bomb went off and I felt very relieved then because a lot of friends in the Pacific were going to go there, and Harold could have been shipped off there any time and of course that’s another area of danger and I thought that that wouldn’t happen so I was happy for that, and I was happy that the war ended and Harold
wrote the most beautiful letter home, oh there is peace in the world again and we can live our lives again, it was so wonderful. And another big memory I have is meeting my fiancée at the Washington station that was a big thrill.

BS: I bet it would be. Well you did a great job and I thank you Grandma.

BW: Ok, you’re welcome.