Everen G. Strassburg – Life During WWII

By Everen G. Strassburg

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Oral Interview conducted by Maxim L. Strassburg

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Brigham Young University – Idaho
Maxim Strassburg: I am here today with Everen Strassburg, my Grandfather, and we are here today just to talk about his WWII experience. Why don’t we start with a little bit of background information, such as where you were from and how old you were when Pearl Harbor was bombed?

Everen Strassburg: Alright, this is you know who. Before the introduction I was born in Sanborn New York, in a small village called Pekin, oh, about 15 miles from Niagara Falls, about 15 miles from Lockport, and about 15 miles from North Tonawanda. So we had those accesses as we grew up. I graduated from high school in 1941, had about a year and a half of my own life before the military said, “Come on, we can use you.” Before I was inducted, a friend of mine who I had grew up with through high school and the whole bit, went to the Navy Air Station in Buffalo with me to take physicals from the Naval Air Force. We both went through and we both failed our eye tests, and it didn’t seem quite right, and so we had that checked later on. We both ended up coming back home.

MS: So how did you end up flying a plane if you failed your eye exam?

ES: That’s coming later on.

MS: Okay.

ES: Later on in my experiences I will tell you about it. We were inducted the first part of ’43, my first day was in December 20th in 1920, say I guess I was 21 when I went into the military. In 1942 arrangements were made with my work; I had worked for the Carborundum Company about 8 months before I went into the military, and so I was prepared right after the first of 1943 to change my life, and so be it, that’s the way it happened. Two of my friends that I had graduated from high school with, one that went up for the Navy test with me, decided to change their date of induction by a week so they could go with me. So they did, and the draft board had no qualms about it, so they changed it so the three of us were in the same group, and the group that we went with were are from mostly western New York at that time. I can remember it, it was a cold wintry day, nasty, and my father took us down and dropped us off at a center in Newfane, New York, which is about 15 miles from home. From there, we got on a bus and went to Fort Niagara. Fort Niagara is still there, but not many of the buildings are still there. A few of the old buildings have still survived. It was pretty active during the Revolutionary War times. It was right across the river from Fort George.

MS: And Fort George is where?

ES: Fort George is on the Canadian side, right across from the Niagara River. Does that make sense?

MS: Yes it does.
ES: Ok. Grandma just gave me a glass of water incase I cough. Anyways, we spent about 2 days there and got uniforms and necessities, and from there we went to Buffalo and got on a train. Buffalo was the closest train station from there to Rochester, so we were 30 miles from the train station. So we got on a train and we were headed South. We were tickled because we had no idea where we were going, but the South sounded pretty good.

MS: Because it was winter time I bet.

ES: Yeah, it was great. So from there we kept going across some of the cities in the Carolinas, and we were still headed south, so everything was getting better, the ice and snow had left, and finally we ended up in Camp Landing in Florida. Camp Landing was right near Stark Florida, it was a small town, and we were about 8 miles further west. Camp Landing is where we took our Army basic, and the Sergeant said, “Give your heart to God because your butt belongs to me now!” We knew right away where we stood. They asked questions for people to give jobs out to, and they asked if there was ever anybody who had worked in the Post Office. And I raised my hand and said, “Yes, I did.” I had worked in the Post Office plus I had worked for a contractor, but it didn’t make any difference. I ended up being the mail man, which did give me a few privileges, I had a little less walking and a little less of this and that, but it didn’t take many of the privileges, or not so privileges I guess that you would normally have away. So, I ended up doing that. When I was in Fort Niagara, I asked to get into the Air Force Cadet Pilot Program, and the Sergeant said, “Why don’t you wait until you get where you are going and then you can ask,” so that is what I did. I took the test and it took about 6 months, and I passed the test to join the Air Force. My friends and I thought this was a new undertaking. From there we had Air Force basic at Miami Beach, which was too hard to take, only that it was the middle of summer, and it was hotter than a hobgoblin in you know where. So when you took Calisthenics on the beach, your feet kept moving because you didn’t have shoes on or anything, and it was hot, the sand was hot, so you did a little extra dancing. We didn’t stay there very long. We soon got on a train and went to the University of Syracuse.

MS: So you went back North?

ES: We went back north, which was nice since at that time it was in the summer months. We did what was called CTD, which was College Training Detachment, and it was a refresher course for stuff we had gotten out of high school and so forth. There we took Physics and Math and Geography and English, and you know, that sort of thing. It was tough because our hours were from seven in the morning to seven at night, and then you had two hours to yourself. That took about five months, and it was a very extensive program. We had our rudder programs there and we also had our first chance of flying, out on the airfields, and Piper Clubs, small planes, and had ten hours of that there, just an orientation so to speak.

MS: So how did you end up in the Air Force if you failed your eye test? Did you really fail your eye test?
ES: They said we did, but usually there is a quota, and a lot of these people that recruit have a quota for a certain day, and if that is filled, they will tell you that you failed your eye test and so forth, and I will come to that, you can ask me that again a little bit further down the line. From Syracuse I did get a chance to get home once and a while. It wasn’t too far, and I had a friend that went to school there, and I rode home with him a couple of times and got back to Sanborn and Pekin, New York. Telling you that, we had a private instructor who we fly under the bridge with in the Canal area, which wasn’t the right thing to do.

MS: How high was that bridge?

ES: Not very high.

MS: About 20 or 30 feet, right?

ES: Oh I don’t know. I was just hanging on I guess. It was exciting to a point.

MS: Oh sure!

ES: And he had a girlfriend in the Mucklands where a lot of vegetables are grown, it is very famous, and he touched down there and waved to his girlfriend who was working out there. When we got back, there was a cabbage on one of the wheels, and he told me to dispose of that in a hurry or we would be in big trouble. From there we went to Nashville, Tennessee, and we went forth to what they called a classification center where we took a lot of tests that were written and determined whether you were acceptable to the change in direction, depth perception, and all that sort of thing. And then you waited a week or two and waited for your name to come up on the board which said if you were re-classified saying if you were a pilot, bombardier or navigator, and you had three choices— you didn’t have choices, they designated that for you. If you made pilot, you could be one of the other two yet if you didn’t and made bombardier, you were a bombardier. If you made navigator, you would be a navigator, but if you were made a pilot, you usually had a choice that if one didn’t work out, you could take the other. From there we went to pre-flight, which was in Nashville field, in Montgomery, Alabama. It was what they called the Eastern Command, and there everything was like West-Point. Everything was toe-to-toe, you had to memorize a lot of words, you ate square meals; it was pretty pushy! And if you did something wrong, like cheating and so forth, they had a system for that. In white gloves and full dress, you would go down to the main street at 10pm and the don’t put any lights on when you were getting dressed, and you go stand in the dark, full attention, until the person walks out of the street and towards the gate. It was not a very pleasant situation.

MS: Did you ever have to do that?

ES: I had one night where we had to get up in the middle of the night, probably 2 or 3 o’clock, and you can’t use any lights, and you march down there in the squadron, no talking and no nothing, and it was that sort of thing. So from there we went to Columbus
Air Base as a holding area. They didn’t have any room for us to go onto the next phase, which was Primary where you flew a Steerman, do you know what that is?

MS: A Biplane?

ES: A Biplane that they use for crop dusting and things. And that’s what they call Primary. So then we went over here to Lakeland Florida, and have been over there several times since I have been down here to Florida. We used to land on grass the whole time, and we had little fields all around the main field, and they want you to land on grass so you didn’t wear the tires out. So that worked out alright, but the Steerman was a 225 horsepower radial engine and it was a great little machine and I never saw anyone work on them, and you have a different one everyday you take off.

MS: So you were always flying a different plane?

ES: Yeah, you were always flying the same type, but everyday was a different number, whether it was 325, or 322, and 215 the next day. That’s just the way it is. And they called it the Luggers School of Aeronautics. It was run by a private organization and the pilots were all private citizens, they were not in the military. So we flew those there, probably about 70 hours, dual and by yourself, and the block tower which as a ways from Lakeland, served as a landmark, so if you got lost, you could know where you were again by that tower. So those were the things that you did. If you soloed, you had to have 8 hours of instructional flying time, and 25 landings. That means that is with an instructor. As I was flying one day, I put down in a field, and the instructor got out and said, “I think I am going to stretch my legs,” and I had just gotten my 8 hours in and 25 landings, and he said, “Ah, why don’t you take it around.” It didn’t give you much time to think, you just had to do it, and that was my first solo. The first time around I bounced a little, so he waived me to go a second time around, and things got better. It was an exciting time.

MS: Do you wish you could still fly? Do you look back on those days often?

ES: Oh yeah, I would love to, but it is different when you are 20 years old or so, and you don’t have many ties, there is a lot of chances you took regardless of whatever, there are no gas stations up there, you could get lost, you know. They did allow you if you got lost to fly down on railroad tracks near a railroad station, and right across from a railroad station there would be a sign that would tell you where you were, and then you would take your map and look from there and then you would find your way home. So those were exciting times to remember. They needed a bunch of stupid people and happy-go-lucky guys to do those sorts of things. You had to be nuts. Ok, we had about 70 hours there, and then we went to what they call Basic. That is where you fly BT-17s, it was a bigger airplane and it had all the problems in the world, and they called the Valtee Vibrators, or Vengeance. About 450 horse power and the landing gear was permanent, and that was about the only difference between the AT-6, that was the next one that you went to in advance. We went to Gunner field, which was outside of Montgomery, Alabama, and there was had a prison that was right near the landing strip, or next to the field, and they didn’t want you to fly over the prison fearing that you might drop a blade
of something so they would break out, I guess that was it, and the water tower was right near by, so you had to keep your head about you when you would come in for a landing. So that was that, and then you flew under the hood, and I was thinking that I was getting the last, which they called the check ride, and then you have good things after that, so when I got the check ride, the weather had been terrible. We hadn’t flown for a week, and our instructor, who had happened to be an Army officer, he had had maybe 45 students, and he told us from the beginning how much he didn’t like the job and he didn’t care what happened to us, that was our problem. He took me up for a ride one Saturday morning which ended up being about Saturday noon, there was a parade in the parade grounds, and then we had the weekend, which was Saturday afternoon and Sunday to ourselves. Well, Saturday morning, the weather had changed a little bit and he said, “Strass, you’ve got to go up with me,” so I went up with him. The weather still wasn’t very good, and I went up under the hood. They put a hood on so you can’t see, and you just fly by your instruments. The weather was so bad that it was hard to keep your altitude, and just to stay under the hood for as long as I was there, it was more than you are supposed to have the first time around.

MS: So you couldn’t see anything?

ES: Nope, not from the ground up, you just had to fly by your instruments.

MS: That is kind of scary! Were you scared?

ES: Oh sure, I wasn’t smart enough to be scared I guess, let’s put it that way. So anyway, he got back in, and when he got back in, he kept me under the hood for about 45 minutes, which after a while gets on your nerves you know, and that was unusual, and we came back and said he was giving me a PP ride, do you know what that is?

MS: No I don’t.

ES: P. P.

MS: Oh, a bathroom break?

ES: Yeah, oh geez, so after that I went before the Captain and the Major, and I knew then that they probably didn’t need as many pilots as they did before, that was in 1945, and one of the guys that was there with me as Lole Thomas Junior, his father was a very prominent announcer in those days that was featured in the newsreels before the movies, so he was pretty popular, and lives in Alaska. He was the Attorney General of Alaska at one time and also has his own plane up there.

MS: Is he still around today?

ES: Well that is hard for me to tell. He was not too many years ago. One of our neighbors went up there and saw him and asked him if he remembered me, and he said, “Well, not off hand,” and like I’d told you before, I’d known him. Anyhow he was a nice guy, and
people that are popular don’t always remember people that are just ordinary, you know, people like me. So that is where I got washed out. I had tears in my eyes, and the only person that was happy about it was Grandma. So there I went to Camp Shelby, Mississippi near Hadesburg and waited reassignment. Reassignment came after a week or two. I kinda goofed around there, I didn’t have much going. Then I ended up in Camp Reed, Virginia in field school, and then commissioned officer school. I think I came home once when I was there, but anyway, from there I went to Cheyenne, Wyoming, and there was a Cavalry Barracks there, and we lived in the barracks, and they still had horses that time in the 40’s and they had horses downstairs in the same barracks. They had steam radiators, and it was cold. Again, I am on my own, I had no people that I really knew, and it gets lonesome after awhile. You make friends, and then all of a sudden you are out in the cold, but that’s part of the game, so I can’t complain.

MS: And you were in Cheyenne for officer training?

ES: No, Cheyenne was just normal training just like any other training in the Army. So we spent a little time there, and when we went to Camp Carson which was in Colorado. This is also where the Air Force Academy is. And we spent two weeks out in the mountains, and it was colder than a Hobs in you know where. We would break the ice to wash our face or brush our teeth occasionally. You could only walk about a mile a day or less since the air was so thin and our packs were so heavy. We spent two weeks out there in the tops of the mountains and we were so happy to get back to the barracks after it was done. From there I took a train to Fort Louis, Washington and didn’t spend much time there; we got on a ship right away. The ship was one of the ships that was going overseas. We went down along the coast and right into San Francisco Harbor, and were there for a couple of days of waiting for a convoy I guess. From there we took off and went to Hawaii. In Hawaii we got off and went to Nauthackem field and another place, and it wasn’t long until we all jumped out one morning and were out into attention, and they said, “So and so fall out,” and it was me, and I said “Is anyone else going with me?” and they said, “No, get your bag and head over to the steps by headquarters and someone will pick you up.” I waited quite awhile and went in and said, “Are you sure there is somebody that is supposed to pick me up?” and they said, “Yeah, they will pick you up.” So then there came a Staff Sergeant who came along and said, “Don’t worry; I’ll get your bags.” Then I said to myself, “What kind of outfit am I getting into here?” we headed over to the outfit and when we got there they had just finished up a little off-duty recreation, and said, “You came too late, they went over to a different island.” But, we went over to group headquarters, where there was 25 enlisted men, 11 officers, Joe Burg was the Commanding Officer, and they all came over and introduced themselves, and I said, “What kind of outfit am I in? I have never been in something like this before.” I was the last key to the number that they wanted, probably due to the fact that I had a pretty good background already, I guess that is why I was chosen than the next four on Keel. Then we got on a ship again, and went out Pearl Harbor, you could see the ships that had been bombed, the masts were showing and that sort of thing, I don’t remember a lot about it, but I know they were there. And then we got to zigzag again across the ocean, I thought I was in the Navy instead of the Army, and we stopped at Annaweka, one of the islands that was taken by the Americans earlier, for R&R, and we only stayed there about...
a day. So we got off there to stretch our legs a bit, and then we got back on the ship. We had the option of getting off or staying on, most of us took the chance to get off to stretch our legs. A lot of people on board were sick on board, it certainly wasn’t as rough as the Atlantic coming forth.

MS: So what year was this Gramp?

ES: This is 1945.

MS: So you landed in Hawaii for the first time in 1945?

ES: Yep. Oh probably in April or May, or something like that. From there we started down under, and our next stop was Okinawa, and things there were quieter there than some. We established our area in the Mares home in Naha, which was the capitol of Okinawa. There was still air-raids and stuff, but there wasn’t any intense battles. That sort of thing had happened before I got there. But there was a lot of problems. I went through two Typhoons in four days. A lot of rain, a lot of wind, and things you never think would happen, happened because of typhoons and so forth.

MS: Were a lot of people killed?

ES: Well that had happened before. They are kind of strange over there. It is mostly Coral rock, and they cut out part of the rock, and that is where they bury their dead. A year later, their next of kin goes in and takes their remains and puts them into an urn, and then they put the urn back in there. The Japanese used these holes as, ‘crow-boxes’ and so we started to use flamethrowers, I didn’t have one, but that was the only way we could get them out because the crow-boxes were all solid rock and the space only about 3 [feet] by 2 [feet], or something like that, so that’s kind of an odd way of doing that, and the owner of the island was sad because there was so many people affected. Okinawa had about 70% to 80% casualties, so many of them had been killed or maimed, or injured, so the average was about 70% or 80%, which was one of the highest in WWII.

MS: These were American casualties?

ES: Yep, the Japanese were worse because they didn’t surrender very often. There was a cliff towards the south end of the island and they would go jump off that cliff rather than get captured and so forth. So, during that time, there were a lot of people; a lot of planes still taking off and raiding Japan, all over Japan. They were like Hornets, you know, flies, like bees the way they took off, and we were still down on the airstrips and so forth on the island. I went from 1 PFC to a Master Sergeant, six stripes, in about six months. I never wore the stripes and I was the first Sergeant of our group there. We had about, at group headquarters, about 40 to 50 companies that were under our jurisdiction, and I was the First Officer in Command of about 40 to 50 companies. We were making arrangements to go into Japan, and told us on Thanksgiving Day of 1945 that this was the day we were going into Japan. We were in charge of the tenth Army, and Vinegar Joe, who was still in charge of armies of Japan, China, Burma, and thereabouts. He was our
commanding officer at that time. General Buckner was killed in Okinawa, I will think of his name in a minute. So that’s when we started to get some fresh food in, and Thanksgiving Day was a pretty good day.

MS: So that was Thanksgiving of 1945?

ES: This was in Thanksgiving of 1945. The war was ended in August of 1945.

MS: So at this point the war was over, and they had dropped the bomb already, right?

ES: Yes.

MS: How was that? Of course things were very covert, and you didn’t know they were going to do it, but how was the reaction among the soldiers when they dropped the bomb?

ES: Well one evening, we had no inkling that this was happening, we were only about 3 or 4 hundred miles from Japan. We were in part of the Ryuktus Islands, which were the tail end of the Japanese Islands, and we were one of those people who were the last to step before heading into Japan. So a lot of things were being done to enhance that. We didn’t have any idea, we were preparing for it. There were so many ships along the shores you could walk on them almost! Aircrafts and so forth that were ready to go into Japan, were readying to. Unfortunately, if we had, our outfit was booked for the second wave for Japan, and that would have been murder, I wouldn’t have made it. You wouldn’t have made it here Max. You got it?

MS: I got it, yeah.

ES: When the Japanese came in after the War ended, they came into Okinawa to make some arrangements for their surrender. They flew white twin-engine airplanes in with green crosses on them, like the red-cross, these were green crosses. I think I have some pictures of them in my file some place in my file at home. In general after this had happened, you would look for the first place to get home. When general ship came in, I figured as a first grader I would get some pretty good accommodations, well, all the Officers and nurses were waiting for them. Most of the ships to take soldiers and the Army and people like that home, passed our island and went on to the Philippines to take them home first. And the way that designated the people that got discharged and got home first was the people with the most points. For every month that you served in the service you got a point, and you got two points if you were overseas. Well, due to the fact that I spent a considerable amount of time in the States, for being a good boy in the Air Force and so forth, my accumulation of points was slower than that of other people that were overseas earlier. So I waited to get on this ship, and everyone else was getting on this ship too, maybe not with more points, but were officers and nurses and so forth. But I think when I got on the ship, I was the second to the last man to get on the ship. And that’s why a lot of people wanted the full accommodations. The Captain of the ship said
we would pass under the San Francisco Bridge at 8am on a certain day, I forget the day exactly, and when I looked up at 8am, we were under that bridge.

MS: So right on time.

ES: Yeah that’s right. But I noticed he slowed up a little, and you can tell when you are on a ship and someone slows up a little. And we didn’t want him to slow up, we were anxious to get back to the good ol’ USA and on the ol’ Terra Firma again. But we know that the chances are that he was scheduled to come in at a certain time, so he knew exactly where he was and what to do. When we got off the ship, we got right off and got onto a ferry, and went up the San Francisco River I believe it was, up to camp Pendleton, California, and got off the ship there. I think it was a 6 hour trip up the ferry. And there we got some fresh food and everybody got acclimatized to some solid ground, and everyone wanted a quart of milk, and after that we just took care of it. It wasn’t too long before I got on a train and went to camp Adderberry, Indiana. There is where I was discharged, I think they gave us a hundred dollars, and we could get home the best way we could, probably by bus or something. And to this day, I am not sure how I got home, whether I hitchhiked home from Indiana to Niagara Falls, or what, I can’t tell you for sure.

MS: You just can’t remember?

ES: I don’t remember just how I did it… I probably hitchhiked, carrying a bag. At that time, a soldier would get a ride to any place. Now-a-days, nobody gets picked up. Nobody picks anybody up. At that time there was a lot of sympathy for soldiers, now you are not sure if there sympathy for soldiers or not. Let me give you a little footnote here, would you like that?

MS: Sure!

ES: Ok, like I said, I think we got about a hundred dollars, I am not sure. I think depending on how for away you were from home, that’s how they estimated on how much to give you. I’m not sure, but I think that is how it worked, and they gave you the Ruptured Duck, or so we called it. It was a pin we put on our lapel and it says that we were honorably discharged from the military. I’ve got one. I might as well give you my serial number, the number I used all the way through the military, and I still have my dog tags on my dresser, and it was 32731988. When you went in to see the Captain, you gave him your name and you mentioned that number.

MS: You still remember that number!?

ES: Yes, I won’t forget that. I brought a Japanese rifle home, I don’t know why. It was a 25 caliber, that’s what the Japanese used. What we used was all pretty near 30 caliber.

MS: Do you still have that rifle?
ES: No, I sold that to a friend of mine that was a gun collector. It was just collecting dust, so I said to myself, “Why should I keep it?” so I sold it to him very reasonably. Ah, about your speaker here, belongs to the American Legion, 969 Sanborn, New York, charter member of the WWII memorial, attended same in May of 2004, with two brothers, there is where the significance comes up. Grandma had to write to us every week. We always got a little, each one of us I guess. Uncle Orville went to the CBI for 2½ years as a First Lieutenant. Uncle Myrl went to Europe as a Sergeant in the communications area. And I went to the Pacific as a First Sergeant, or a Master Sergeant. I went over as an infantry replacement, which wasn’t a good deal, but apparently as I got over to Hawaii, my record must have been good enough that I was picked up out of the infantry replacement. Basically, that is just about where we came from. Would you like some more information?

MS: What was that you just read Gramp?

ES: That was just my notes. And I wanted to give you a comparison of the salary of today, compared to the salary of the military at that time. I can tell you what they were because I remembered them. As a pilot I think I got $52 dollars a month, as a PFC it was $56, corporal was $66, 3 stripe Sergeant was $78, 4 stripe Sergeant, or a ‘Staff Sergeant,’ received $96 dollars a month. A Tech Sergeant got $116 dollars, and a First and Master Sergeant, as I was, got a $138 dollars. And when you were overseas you were supposed to get half again as much, but I don’t remember getting much of that. They also paid you in the money of the area you were in. Yen and Sen was the Asian money, Japanese so to speak, and as a soldier, we always got paid in cash, no checks. In other words, you got an envelope, and if there was $50 dollars in there, you got $50 and whatever the change would be. If you were a Master Sergeant, you got a $138 dollars, period. You didn’t have any checks to cash, or anything else.

MS: That’s kind of nice.

ES: Well, it was alright because there was no place to cash the checks! A lot of people gambled it away. Aboard ship, they had people gambling and playing poker and so forth. As soon as they started using greenbacks, which was American money, they were much more conservative with their betting then with their Yens and Sens, because the foreign money didn’t mean anything to them. You got it? In German they say, “Verstehst du.” “Verstehan Sie?” (Do you understand. Do you understand?)

MS: “Ich verstehan Sie gut.” (I understand well.)

ES: That’s about all I want to tell you.

MS: Ok, can I ask a few questions?

ES: You bet!
MS: Ok, probably continuing on where you left off, I heard a story, I think I had heard it from my mother growing up. I do not believe I have ever asked you about it though. It was about when you had just gotten back to Pekin. This was your first time returning home from the Pacific, and someone offered you a ride, but you refused. You said, “I just want to walk this mile.” Is that a true story Gramp?

ES: That’s a true story, but it might have been when I came home from a leave, or some place else. It might have even been the last trip, and I think it was; when I came from camp Adderberry, and I said, “Oh no, I’ll walk!” And it was the nicest walk I ever had. The dogs all liked me as I walked along the street, I don’t know, at midnight or something like that. The dogs always wanted to let you know that they were around. But they didn’t bother me at that time.

MS: So why did you decide to walk?

ES: Well, going home was a special time. You know…because there were times when you weren’t to sure if you were going to make it home again or not. Your half way around the world and things happen. Even if you don’t get shot at a lot of times, even in a little flying. I never remember anybody working on airplanes. One time I was flying out at Gunnerfield, the Red light came on from one of these Valtee’s engines, and I was quite a ways from home in the auxiliary area. I radioed back saying, “My Gas, carburetor, or something is screwed up because the lights went on and my fuel pressure is down to zip!” And every time that I raised the nose to get a little altitude the light would come on, so I didn’t know if it was a faulty light, or if there was a problem with the engine. There is a lot of bare spots, especially in Florida and Alabama, where there was no place to land except in the swamps or whatever; wild country. And there is a lot of difference between now and 1943, 60 years ago. Places have been developed with roads and all kinds of stuff, and it wasn’t there before, so I called, and they cleared the field for me to land. So I came back and made it in, but I just couldn’t get any altitude. I took off one time from the field in a Valtee, and 30% flaps is what you use to take off, and it was a crank, right next to where you sat, you cranked the flaps down or up, and I took off, and at the end of the field I think there was a quarry or something. When you take off, you put full power on all the time because if you don’t get off you are in trouble. I was half way down the field, and I was pulling back on the stick and nothing was happening! I was at the point of no return, so I thought I better keep it on, so I did, and I just got off the field when it was just at the end of the runway. I got up flying to the point where I could start rolling my flaps off, and I discovered that I had never had them on. I never forgot them after that! So that is just a look at how dangerous things can be, and I was no hero, but I did what I was asked to do, and probably a little extra.

MS: You are a hero to me Gramp.

ES: I think you have got a partial view though.
MS: Heroes aren’t always proven in combat though. Heroes are often proven in just everyday life. Raising a family of six, working a couple of jobs just to put food on the table. That’s pretty heroic to me, because I wouldn’t be here if you didn’t do those things.

ES: Yeah, that is a possibility, you never know.

MS: The ‘unsung’ hero I think is how you say it. Grandma used to tell me when I was small that, ‘Grandpa doesn’t like rice very much.’ Is that because they fed you too much in Okinawa and you just got sick of it?

ES: No, I just never liked rice very much. If you could avoid it that’s better, if I didn’t eat it, that’s great. If I had nothing else to eat, I’d eat it. It wasn’t rice that we got, we got a lot of canned spam and also those fruit cocktails; I ran out of gas on that stuff.

MS: So you ate mostly what the Army gave you, and you didn’t way very many local dishes?

ES: Well, there wasn’t anywhere to get local dishes.

MS: What there any restaurants that you could go to in Okinawa?

ES: No, no. Nothing like that no. We were all business; we didn’t have anything like that. Okinawa was flattened practically. The University of Okinawa was right not too far from where we had our headquarters. And that was, oh, maybe a half a mile away; you could see it. The windows were all knocked out of it, it was a big long building, and there were some churches that were kind of left with rubble around them. Oh, they were damaged to, but they tried to leave the churches as well as they could. And there was all kings of churches over there, even on that small island. There was Presbyterian, and Baptist and Catholic churches, surprisingly in a Asian country. Admiral Perry had been there before, and they had left a monument for him. He is in history, you can read about him.

MS: Did you ever see combat Gramp? Did you ever have to shoot at anybody?

ES: Not really. I went out of a cave one time, and I climbed down this tree, me and another guy. The Japanese had been in this hole, a big hole, a fly hole. We went down about 30 feet, and out of curiosity, you do things often that you shouldn’t do, and there was another exiting at the top of the hole, and he kept hollering and we didn’t answer because we had crawled out of this little hole. It was maybe a 100 yards; you could see the daylight at the other end, and we were quite a ways away when we cam back out on the surface again. And he was mad because we didn’t let him know where we were. In the barracks, they had a sleeping area down in this hole in a cave, and it could have been booby trapped, but I carried a Carbon, 30 caliber, and never had to shoot anyone per se. I thought I was a goner the first night I was there. I was on guard duty. It was raining and nasty, and the whole bit, and I heard this rustle, and here I thought, a lot of Japanese try to encroach in from the south in the northern part of the island. What the Americans did, is that they herded the natives up to the northern part of the island so they would [not] get
killed. What the Japanese would do, the doctors and nurses and so forth, would try to go through at night, and get up to the northern part and blend in with the natives. They looked so much alike, it isn’t very C.P. (correct politically) anymore, but it was, ‘Japs,’ and ‘Guoks,’ and that is the way it was. Nobody corrected us, and we didn’t want to hear anybody that corrected us, but we did the best we could.

MS: Do you remember where you were, and what your initial reaction was when you and your family had heard about Pearl Harbor getting bombed?

ES: Well, it was 1941. I had just gotten out of high school, and had to look for a job. I was at home, and I think I had a job at Thurear’s Plastic in North Tonawanda. I got a job there as an office boy, and I and Uncle Harlund had got a new car. I didn’t have any transportation, but I had a job, and in order to get money to buy a car, I had to get to work. So I went to work there, and my mother and father had talked Uncle Harlund into using his brand new 1940 Chevy; a 2 door sedan. He was a little hesitant in letting this young whipper snapper use his new car. But I bought a new car after I had saved a 100 dollars. I bought a 1937 Pontiac sedan, in Tonawanda. I can tell you where it was, I can tell you what I paid for it. I paid $257.50 and my dad went up with me and said, ‘You got money,’ which in German was, ‘Hast du aucht?’ and I said, ‘Some of it, I’m going to pay the rest of it on time.’ Well, I had a 100 dollars, so I was a 157 dollars short, and my dad said, ‘Well, you’ve been pretty good boy, so I’ll pay for the rest of it, and you can pay me,’ so I didn’t have to pay any time charges. So those were some of the things, we had a good life. So, you can’t ask for any more.

MS: You had a good dad.

ES: And I’ve got pretty good kids and grandkids that haven’t given me too much trouble. There is a couple out there in Idaho that I have got to keep my eye on, but other than that I am doing OK.