Gayland T. Orton – Life during WWII

By Gayland T. Orton

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Oral Interview conducted by Emily A. Orton

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Brigham Young University – Idaho
GO: That was on Sunday, Dec. 7 when I went to school everyone was all excited about it, so I didn’t really learn what had happened until December the 8 when I went back to school after the weekend. We talked about it a little bit in school, I guess quite a bit in school. We looked at the maps and we looked at Hawaii. We looked at what we knew the US had defenses in that area and had naval bases and air force bases and things like that. We got our chance to say whatever we wanted to say about it. There were some interesting things brought out. We looked at the maps it appeared that American forces were pretty well established over in that area. That was going to give the Japanese trouble and it did. Okay that was when WWII started.

EO: You were about eleven then?

GO: Yeah, I was born in 1930. Yeah, I guess I was about eleven years old then.

EO: Did you realize that it was going to be such a big thing at the time?

GO: Yeah, I think we did, because already the war was going on full scale with Germany over in Europe, and we were supporting the allies over there, we were probably supplying them with airplanes and things like that. I think that we knew that something like this was coming. I think it was a surprise though, I don’t think that we expected the Japanese to attack us like they did.

EO: Did you expect an attack at all?

GO: Not from the Japanese. I think that was quite a surprise to the people.

EO: Did you have any strong feelings towards the Japanese or Germans?

GO: Well, frankly I suppose when we first learned about the attack, it made us angry, and there were a lot of derogatory remarks made about the Japanese. When the war started, I don’t know if it started before the attack on Pearl Harbor or not. The US government established a program to relocate the Japanese families and I remember that they had a lot of nice big barns just north of town where I lived down in southern Utah. One of the relocation camps was right there, and I don’t know whether they had guards
around the area or not, but I do know that the Japanese men would go work for the farmers in that area, raising potatoes, and all kinds of things. But these guys would come and irrigate the farms and do things. A lot of young men when the war started went into the service. They didn’t even wait to be drafted, they just volunteered and went into the service. So that left the farmers with needing help, so these Japanese guys would come to work in the morning and irrigate potatoes or whatever jobs they had to do at the time. I got to know some of them quite well. Some of them were young, not much older than me, if I was only 11 these young men were 15, 16, 17 years old. They were good workers and they didn’t particularly like to talk about what happened, I think they were a little embarrassed about it. That was all back in 1942. They dropped the bomb in 1945 on Japan and that essentially ended the war with the Japanese because it was so devastating.

EO: Do you remember very much about that day?

GO: We heard about it, and we were just awe-stricken by the force that was created by one of those atomic bombs. My feeling was that I was glad that I had developed it first, because if somebody else had it they could have made it very difficult for us. We were awe-stricken that such a powerful force available and that was awesome. Then the fact that if the enemy could build a bomb like that and use it on us, that would have been terribly troubled. It was kind of mixed feelings. I was so young that I didn’t, I don’t know that I had any special feelings. I was glad that we had a big bomb that we could drop on Japan and end the war. You always feel bad, when you do that you are killing a lot of innocent people too. It was kind of an ugly situation. Glad that we got it first.

EO: When did you serve in the military?

GO: When did I serve in the military? I enlisted in the Air Force on February 16, 1949. So WWII was over with four years after Japan surrendered.

EI: Why did you choose to join the Air Force?

GO: I don’t know. I was in hopes that maybe I could maybe learn how to fly an airplane and serve as an Air Force pilot in the military, and I didn’t do that. I had those feelings. I wanted to have an important experience like that.
EO: What did you do?

GO: It turned out that it went to an aircraft and engine mechanics school. That was up in Rantoul, Illinois. I was up there for about a year, and I finally graduated from that school that I was in and I was sent back down to Texas to El Paso, Texas, Biggs Air Force Base in El Paso, Texas. Actually, this gets kind of confusing, when I went to school, the engine that I learned about was called an R-2000 engine and it was the engine that was on the DC-4, these were 4 engine transporter cargo planes. And there was a big thing going on then. The Russians had blockaded the entrances into Berlin, Germany. They had already divided Berlin up amongst the Allies, the Russians had a part of Berlin, the US had a part of Berlin, and England had a part of Berlin. I don’t know why they did that, I guess it was to control them so we knew that they were not going to be able to make any problems for us. So they divided the city up and gave all these countries a part of it to watch over it I guess. What they were doing was these C-54 airplane, another airplane, they would fly in equipment and food and everything else into our section of Berlin and it turned out that this was a real big operation and it lasted quite a while. With all these C-54 in operation, there was a lot of maintenance activity associated with them. The engine that I learned about was one of the four that was on each airplane. It looked like that I was going to go with a group that was kind of a support squadron. That had these airplanes with engines that I was trained on. By the time I got down there, they had done a big switch. They had lifted the blockade over Berlin. They could now truck, they didn’t need to fly equipment in to Berlin, and they could truck it in. The use of these C-54’s with my engine on weren’t needed as much. They put me in a bomb group. When we started, the group consisted of B-29’s; that was the Bomber that dropped the A-bomb, they had a lot of these B-29. 2 or 3 of them were involved in dropping the Atomic Bomb. That’s all it took. We had these B-29’s and maintained those keep them ready to fly in case they were needed. They never were, until the Korean War started, then they used them to bomb the Chinese who were invading North Korea.

EO: Did you serve in the Korea War at all?

GO: Yeah, the Korean War started on, I’m gonna guess, on June 20, 1950. The US government was looking for a little more powerful, more long range aircraft to have in case they needed it. So they built an airplane similar to
the B-29, they called it the B-50. And it had a different engine on it. It had R-4360, which was essentially two of these R-2000 engines. That become my engine, this bigger engine. They had them on all of these B-50’s being built by Boeing and who ever else was making them. So I got out of the Transport business and got into the strategic aircrafts. I got in with a group that might be called on to drop bombs over in China or North Korea. They still had a lot of B-29 that they could use, they continued to use these, but they never did put the B-50 into actually combat service. We just maintained them and kept them ready in case they were needed.

EO: Where did you do that?

GO: I was down in this bombing down in El Paso, Texas. That’s where I started out then two or three things happened at the beginning of the Korean War. We got orders all the Air Force bases got special orders, but our orders were to take a group to England so we did that, and while we were over there we simply maintained them and kept them flying. Kept them ready to go. I think these airplanes would take off early in the morning sometime and they would be gone all day and I would suspect that they were up in the air just waiting to see if they were needed to make any kind of retaliation missions. When they go they would be loaded with bombs, I don’t know if they had any atomic bombs but they might have, because I knew that they took some of those bombs over to England. We were there for about a year, then we were sent back to Texas to let somebody else go over and use those facilities over in England. We just kept doing, we stayed in El Paso a long season we got the orders to go again. So we went to England a second time. And we did kind of the same thing, we kept those airplanes ready to go.

EO: Did you do that throughout the whole Korean War?

GO: Well, I don’t… the Korean started on June 20, 1950 and yeah. I finally got out of the service on October the 15th 1952. So that was a couple of years that I was involved.

EO: Did you get any cool entertainments while you were there in England?

GO: I don’t remember anything big like that. I remember some entertainment that came to our Base when we were in El Paso. I remember one time when a couple of girls that were quite prominent actresses that came and entertained us, I guess. I remember going outside and it was hot
and I would have rather been somewhere else and these little girls on the stage [undecipherable word]. You might remember Margaret O’Brian a child star grew up she was a pretty little thing. She was in one of the troops. And a girl named Teresa Write. They could sing a little bit and tell stories and things like that. It was too hot to enjoy it. But as far as entertainment over in England, I don’t remember any. We would just go to town on the weekend, and we would see the sites. We would have a couple of days.

EO: Was there anything specific that you remember about going to London?

GO: Not really. Things were real still tight, as far as food and other things were concerned. These people were still recovering from the devastation over there in London. The Germans just bombed the heck out of London. And the English after the war was over they went into a mode where they were going to rebuild their city. Much of the city was just a skeleton. Things bombed out, buildings. That sort of thing. That would shake you up. The fact that you would go into a store, you couldn’t buy anything. We had plenty to eat as US Airmen. But was difficult to buy anything in the stores in London.

EO: Why was it so difficult?

GO: Because they just didn’t have it. [I suppose that they got some canned food from the US.] England got a ration of things like candy, if they wanted to use their stamps for things like that. They could have candy every once in a while. The stuff just wasn’t plentiful. I hope I’m not confusing you too much. Sometimes we would go down there and look at the sites in the areas that were not bombed out. When your Grandma and I were over there on the mission we’d go over to eastern England where there were several sites, kind of historical sites. Castles and things like that. One of the things the Germans would try and break the spirit of the Englishmen was to go and set out in their big battle ships and pound the heck out of some of these, like Scarborough Castles. But we got to see things well after that. There was a lot of damage and devastation. That was all during the Second World War years.

EO: What did you do after you were done in the Air Force?
GO: I decide that it was time to go to college. I went up and went to the technical school, the aircraft and engine school. I just noticed that I was one of the top students. I got to thinking, heck, maybe I could go to college and get a college degree. And do something like that. October 1952, I immediately started at BYU, taking some block classes. I started in; I took American History for one. That was required course, so I did that on a block course. Then the next quarter, I got into religion, then I got into math. Algebra, Trigonometry, things like that. Anyway I ended up graduated in about three years. Going to school and getting special courses.