Melvin Eliason Call – Life during WWII

By Melvin Eliason Call

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Box 3 Folder 2

Oral Interview conducted by Rebecca Shaw

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Brigham Young University – Idaho
MC: Hi! I’m Melvin Eliason Call, and I’m being interviewed by my granddaughter Rebecca Call, now Shaw, in connection with some questions she’s going to now ask about my earlier life. I’ll try to answer what I can when she asks them.

RS: So, Grandpa, when were you born?

MC: I was born the 18th of January in 1924 in Bancroft, Idaho. It’s a little town between Soda Springs and Pocatello.

RS: Where were you when you heard that the war, World War II, had first broken out?

MC: That was in ’39, I would’ve been a sophomore in high school in Bancroft, Idaho, North Gem High School.

RS: Did you anticipate them imposing the draft?

MC: Yes, of course, the draft was set in place at that time, and at that time, of course, I was too young to be involved, but a lot of my friends were and the older boys- no girls at that time, just boys.

RS: Why did you decide to enlist in the military?

MC: From the time that I was probably five or six years old, I wanted to be a pilot. That was always my objective all the way through. I flew model airplanes, I talked to people who flew airplanes, I tried to fly airplanes with people who owned them as much as I could. When World War II started, I wanted to go in, but I wanted to be an aviator. It seemed to me like the Navy had the best training program for pilots, and so when I graduated from high school, I immediately enlisted. Because I did not have a college education of four years college which [was] required to go into pilot training but two years would be waivered if you could pass an aptitude test with a high enough grade. However, if you were an enlisted man in the service, they would waiver all four years if you passed the aptitude test with a high enough grade. So I enlisted in the Navy as an apprentice seaman, immediately applied for the application to take the test, took the test, and passed it, and went into flight training.

RS: Cool. Let’s see, during which wars did you serve?

MC: I was in World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. I was in combat in World War II. I served in the Western Pacific, China, Japan, Iwo Jima, Philippines, Saipan, and Okinawa. During the Vietnam War [mistake –meant Korean War], I was aboard a ship off the Korean Coast, over in Korea, over in that area – most English ships company, during the Vietnam War, I was on active duty in the United States, but was not overseas in combat.

RS: I see.
MC: I had just gotten back to the States when the war started.

RS: Nice timing. Let’s see, which battles do you specifically remember?

MC: Oh, flying B24’s during World War II were the Navy’s, what we called privateers. It would be 24. There were many incidences were we would go out as one or two planes to sink what we referred to as Sugar Charlies and Sugar Dogs, which were floating gun platforms the Japanese had sent out to overt by radio any time a B29 or B24 raid was coming to fly over Jima. Our purpose was to go out and sink as many of those that we could. Probably, the time that Iwo Jima was being taken and we were flying out of Tinian, Saipan, and when at one time, for example, we had to land on Iwo Jima while it was still under partial control of the Japanese because we’d had a fire on board and they had to radio to have the military ships that were bombarding the island stop firing while we came in for a landing, and then landing and being told as we landed to turn around as quickly as possible to get back to the other end of the island because the Japanese were still in control of the far end of the strip.

RS: Whoa! Wow.

MC: I was in the third multi-engine airplane to land on the island of Iwo Jima. A small light transport plane landed ahead of the enemy, 29, and crashed just ahead.

RS: [Indistinguishable.]

MC: I remember those very well.

RS: I’m sure you do. Let’s see, what were your feelings about the war before and after Pearl Harbor?

MC: I felt that Hitler was completely wrong, that Churchill was right, that we should’ve been more supportive if anything with what was happening with Hitler’s expansion. I was very concerned over the way things were going. I was quite surprised, to be very honest, Japan attacking us at Pearl Harbor. I was surprised for two reasons: I couldn’t understand why they could get in without being – without our knowing about it. I felt they were very treacherous. During the war, I was exposed to some information which made you very willing to do all you could to destroy what Japan was trying to do. It was nice when World War II ended in Europe so that we could concentrate everything on Japan, that since I was in the Japanese area when it occurred, there was no real changing anything, except knowing we would have more concentration against Japan than we had before Europe failed – before Europe folded and Hitler was killed.

RS: I see. What rumors or news reports did you hear about Hitler at the start of the war?

MC: Well, it wasn’t so obvious that he was just very interested in expanding and killing off those that he didn’t like and implementing something which was certainly not Christian – like God – like in any sense of the word. His whole attempt was not to help
Germany, but to conquer the world. The way he went about it was in my opinion
[indiscernible, but possibly “all wrong.”]

RS: What was your reaction to the dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan?

MC: I was in favor of it. This may sound harsh. Japanese people, as we understood it,
manufacturing of parts for airplanes helped in the war against the United States. The
actions of Pearl Harbor, the determination of the Japanese people at that time not to
surrender, left us with, in my opinion, no alternative. If we’d gone in Japan with an
invasion, many more lives would’ve been lost, because of the way the Japanese people
lived and the way we’d have to approach any area of invasion. With the atomic bomb, we
got their attention. There was immediate surrender, after the second bomb of course, and
then the number of American lives, and I think even the number of Japanese lives, were
lessened, and the war ended without anymore loss of lives. We didn’t start the war. I have
no compulsions. I was very much in favor of [difficult to discern, maybe “that.”] I was in
the Philippines. We were fighting at the time. . . [For that] I was very grateful [difficult to
discern, might be “it ended]. By then I had a wife and son that I wanted to get to. (Both
laugh).

RS: Yeah. And wasn’t James born- your son James – born on –

MC: Born on the day the atomic bomb was dropped.

[Quality of recording plummeted due to technical problems. Questions were continued
with a different recorder and on a different tape.]

RS: When were you filled with the most fear?

MC: I think one of the times I was filled with the most fear was the ship had came back
into port and my family was in Idaho Falls. And I checked out a navy’s aircraft there at
Alameda (California), I believe it was, to fly to Hill Air Force Base (in Utah) and then go
up and spend a day or two with my family before coming back. The plane I took had a
little bit of problem when I first started and there was a Navy WAVE, an enlisted woman,
who wanted to go to the same place, and the TBM had a compartment where a passenger
could sit down in the bomb compartment and we watched everything else out and I
checked her out and showed her everything to use in the airplane, then taxied out for take
off. I could get no communications with her, and I was concerned. For reasons I didn’t
understand, when I checked the airplane out for take off, it just didn’t seem right. It was
by then dark and it was quite cold. This was in the middle of winter. I taxied back to the -
- chose not to take off – taxied back to the line and shut the airplane down and got out
and found out that the gal that was down in the bomb bay compartment was just freezing
cold.

Another time I was afraid of take off, if fear is a proper definition, is I’d mentioned
earlier that we’d landed on the island of Iwo Jima under adverse circumstances. Some
time later, I was taking off from the island Iwo Jima, and it was night. There were
airplanes lined up – this is some time later – there were airplanes lined up on both sides of the runway. As we started to get into position for take off, we were told to hold, that there was an airplane over head and the plane could not land, and the pilots were going to jump out of the – pilots and crew were going to parachute out of the airplane and hopefully come down on the island of Iwo Jima that we were taking off from. We watched with the air – of course we shut the engines down in case the parachute landed on the airplane and we watched in the night sky as the plane flew over and then crashed and no parachutes opened.

RS: Oh.

MC: We saw no one come out of the airplane. We started our engines again, and started our take off, and this was on a dirt runway – and as we started our take off, just as we pulled the nose wheel in the air, the tire on one side of the aircraft blew. Now, if you can envision driving down the road in a car, and having – traveling at 80 miles an hour – and having a tire blow, you can envision what would occur if you were on one wheel – two wheels in that case – and have the tire blow. I immediately cut the power and hit the brakes. As the nose wheel came back down on – we were partially slowed, but the airplane swerved so fast, the nose wheel didn’t have time to pivot, and just cut a hole as it turned sideways. The tire that had blown, that wheel sank into the runway almost up to the hub. But we were still able to control the airplane inside of the two rows of planes that were on each side. Night departure.

RS: Wow.

MC: Stopped the airplane, even though the propellers on both sides of the tire that had blown, hit the runway, bent the propellers. But we weren’t hurt.

RS: Well good.

MC: Yes, you get fear (both laugh) when all that’s going on, but the reaction was very quick, and we were very fortunate because had we swerved into the aircraft on either side, we were fully loaded with gas. There would’ve been an immediate fire and probably death to everybody in our airplane.

RS: Uh, huh. Wow.

MC: Again, I looked up and said, “Thanks.” (Both laugh.)

RS: Really. Thank you Grandpa. Well, let’s see, when was your day of greatest joy?

MC: I think, well, two—I don’t think you can limit it to one—I was very grateful to find out about when my son was born. I think it was about two days after he was born before I was notified of it, and probably when World War II ended, when Japan surrendered. That was great joy. (Both laugh.) I knew that at that time that we would not continue the
fighting and would not invade Japan and that there wouldn’t be additional deaths. For
that I was very grateful. I’ve already mentioned which war years that I served in.

RS: Yup.

MC: So, we have that down.

RS: How did your political view compare or contrast to the military’s political views. Are
they the same, are they different?

MC: I would say that they were very comparable. I was very impressed with the
presidents that we had during the times that I was in the service. For the most part I felt
they had information that I did not have, and I felt were making decisions on the best
possible information. And they were always included in my prayers every night, and still
are. I feel that I support and have tried to support the President. There’s [sic] been many,
both during the war and since, especially since, that I haven’t agreed with because of
their moral standards. But the presidents we had during the war and our military people,
for the most part, I think our views were comparable. We wanted peace. We want to do
what was best. At that time we did not attack before we were attacked by someone else.

RS: I see. What skills did you gain from your service in the military?

MC: I think the greatest skill was flying airplanes. (Rebecca laughs) I [Melvin turns away
from the desk they were sitting at (as Rebecca grabs the recorder to keep from missing
what he’s saying] thoroughly [Melvin begins to dig through a stack of papers on the
computer desk behind him and pulls out a black leather book.] enjoyed flying. [Opening
up the book he continued] And I was going to have this out before. The airplanes that I
learned to fly in the Navy was the Piper Cub, an NSN, an N2S, an SNV, an SNJ, an SNV,
PB4Y ones and twos, the SBD – which was a dive bomber, the P38, a TBM, which I
referred to earlier, the F6F, the F8F, a PBM, and R4D, an AD, a TV, an F9F, the FJs, the
F2Fs, these are all airplanes that I flew in the Navy. Where would I have received the
opportunity to do that? I started flying jets during the Korean War. Fantastic thing. Every
opportunity I had to fly airplanes, I did it. I appreciated that.

I also learned obedience to a greater degree than I probably learned as a civilian, which I
thought was good. I think I learned some skills in working with people and working for
people. I felt good about our country. I felt good about some of the dedicated leaders. I
think I learned a lot from that.

RS: That’s neat. Let’s see, what was the one greatest lesson that you learned from
serving?

MC: Probably, trying to do your best. If people opposed what you were trying to do, and
you were right, I felt that if I tried to explain it properly, I could usually get those things
that were right done the proper way. For example, we were operating off the coast of
California. It was peace time. We were doing exercises. We’d be at sea for ten days and
then back in for four. We were conducting LDS servicemen’s meetings aboard the ship each Sunday, and we were conducting air ops on Sunday. I went to the commanding officer of the ship, and I said, my understanding is from Navy regs that we try to hold church services on Sunday, where possible. And I said, Captain, it would sure be nice if at least on Sunday mornings we didn’t have air ops, so that we could have religious services. When we’re conducting air ops, it’s all hands affaire, and of course they have to be involved. And if we didn’t have services, didn’t have air operations, we could have services. He said, I think that’s a good idea. So, then on, we were able to conduct church services on Sunday.

RS: That’s cool.

MC: I felt good about that. As I say, I think I learned that if you try to explain why and do it in [a] non-argumentative type of approach, discuss without being disgusting (both laugh) you can get a lot done. I learned, I think, to try to do my best and work hard and it would be appreciated by others, and you could accomplish more by doing it that way.

RS: That’s neat. Let’s see, what was your most memorable experience?

MC: I think probably the one I mentioned, of the take off at Iwo Jima. I think I shall never forget, not the anxiety, but the control, the help, everything associated with it. My memories of Iwo Jima were probably because of two incidents. They will probably never be forgotten.

RS: What do you wish you [would] have done differently and why?

MC: I think I made a gross mistake. When World War II ended, I was given the opportunity to go to college. All of the pilots, as I mentioned earlier, were supposed to have four years of college, and I had had none. The Navy gave me the opportunity to go to the University of Washington [after the war ended] for a year and a half of college education at Navy expense. I wish I had taken more advantage of that. I could have, had I studied harder and gotten better grades, probably gotten an extension, and completed, and had a college degree, which I never had and would like very much to have gotten. That’s, that’s one thing that I’m really sorry for. I wish I’d have taken better advantage of an education opportunity and gotten my college degree.

RS: I see. Well, thank you, Grandpa I really appreciate this.

MC: Probably one other thing I should mention.

RS: Uh, huh?

MC: The opportunity to work in the Church with a full-time military career was also a real blessing. While I was in the military, I had the opportunity of being group leader aboard two different ships, a branch president on two different occasions, serving as a counselor in the bishopric, and being on the High Council on two different occasions.
while I was in the Military. Also, I was involved in public service in a couple of cases. One time I had the opportunity to serve on the anti-smoking (both laugh) council, if you will. I was commanding officer of a squadron and was on the committee in Texas, where a group of six of us went around and gave lectures on why not to smoke as a community service. I had the flight surgeon in the squadron make me up a mock heart and mock set of lungs – one that showed that of a smoker, and one that showed that of a non-smoker. My presentation, this was a six-man committee with a full time, paid secretary from the state of Texas. [Coughs] And, our secretary had been secretary of this committee for fourteen years, and she’d started smoking, she said, when she was twelve years old. She said after my first presentation on why not to smoke she quit smoking, and wasn’t smoking again when I was transferred out of Texas.

RS: That’s impressive.

MC: But I enjoyed that, and we would go around probably once or twice a month to different areas, where they could get groups together, and try to explain to people why they shouldn’t smoke. (Both laugh) And it was fun. (Both laugh) Another opportunity that I felt that was fun and showed that you can do things for other people and enjoy it.

RS: That’s cool. About what years was that?

MC: Oh, shoot. Let me think . . . in Texas . . . it would’ve probably been about ’58 to ’60 . . . sometime in there.

RS: Okay. Cool. Oh, and you also said you’d served in the Korean War. What was it that you did in relation to that?

MC: During the Korean War I was aboard the aircraft carrier, [coughs] and I did fly off the ship periodically, but my prime assignment was on board ship supporting the people who were flying. At that time I was in Combat Information Center where we controlled the flights from the time their operation started until the airplanes were all back on board. [Coughs] Aboard the ship we were on, which was the USS Ranger, we had the admiral, the “flagee,” [flag officer] who was in charge of four carriers aboard. Right up towards the end of the Korean War, typical operations, for carrier operation, our day would start at usually two o’clock in the morning, and we’d go till ten o’clock that night. While carrier operations was going on with bombing, strafing operations off Korea, our responsibility was the aircraft around the carrier until they got on the carrier. We’d give the vectors to the beach, bring them up over the beach, bring them back to the carrier. In my position at that time I would often, well, the last thirty days, we were on the line of Korea before the Korean War ended. I averaged two hours sleep a night. And, when we left Korea to head back in as another carrier came in to replace us, I laid down and I slept for twenty-four hours without getting out of my bed. (Laughs)

RS: Oh, wow! (Laughs)

MC: Didn’t know I could do it. (Laughs)
RS: Oh, yeah. (Laughs)

MC: But, aboard ship, the working hours normally were quite long, as I indicate. It didn’t matter which day of the week it was, especially in time of war.

RS: I see that being the case. Anything else you’d like to add?

MC: Just that I appreciated my wife and children during this time period. They were very supportive of everything that we did. My wife was involved in the Navy activities. My children were a super example in their schools to members who were, for the most part, not affiliated with the Church.

RS: Okay.

MC: We’ve got a good deal social life in the military. I was very grateful in the standards that I had been taught were admired by people who did not believe the same way I did. But, I admired and appreciated the fact that I was complimented on it repeatedly. The fact that I didn’t smoke, and I didn’t drink, and as one commanding officer wrote in a fitness report, “his personal habits were above reproach.” And while he was wrong perhaps in that estimate, it was appreciated that he felt that way about the standards that I’d been taught and learned.

RS: That’s neat. Well, thanks again, Grandpa.

MC: You’re sure welcome, Rebecca.